

## RESEARCH REPORT

# EVALUATION STUDY OF NEW JERSEY'S RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY RELEASE PROGRAMS

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## INTRODUCTION

Halfway houses serve as an intermediate sanction between the community and penal system, by providing alternatives to incarceration or staged reentry into society (Caputo, 2004). Their primary aim is to help individuals gradually reintegrate into society and to reduce recidivism. Besides programmatic benefits, halfway houses are also perceived as a cost-effective alternative to reduce prison crowding (Allen et al., 1978; White et al., 2011).

Halfway houses operating under the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) are referred to as Residential Community Release Programs (RCRP). RCRPs provide services, in a residential setting, to those considered to be at a medium- and a high-risk for reoffending and who need a temporary period of structured and supportive living prior to being discharged to the community.

The following report presents the findings of an evaluation study of RCRPs in New Jersey. This evaluation study aimed to explore the following research questions:

**RQ1.** Do RCRP participants experience lower rates of recidivism than a comparable NJDOC comparison group who do not participate in these programs?

**RQ2.** Does RCRP delay return to the system?

## DATA

Official data were obtained through a partnership with New Jersey Department of Corrections. The inclusion criteria for the sample were the following:

- RCRP participants who were in residence or entered the program between December 31, 2018 and December 31, 2020; and
- Offenders released from NJDOC between January 1, 2019 and December 31, 2020 who were eligible for RCRP, but did not participate in the program

This resulted in an initial sample of 1,000 individuals including 500 RCRP participants, and 500 non-participants. Of this original sample, 444 RCRP participants, and 431 non-participants had complete data for the proceeding analyses.

To understand the impact of participation in RCRPs on individuals, it is important to determine what would have happened to these individuals if they had not participated in the program. This is approximated by making comparisons between people who do and do not participate in a program.

Outcome data were obtained on April 25, 2023, allowing for the analysis of three-year follow-up data of recidivism rates measured as readmission for a new offense. This date was also used as a

cut-off point within survival analyses for those who were not admitted for a new offense<sup>1</sup>. Official release dates and admission dates for new bookings were used to calculate the time-to-event variable used for survival analysis.

## METHODS

The first phase of the evaluation involved constructing two comparable groups. Propensity score matching has been used in several studies to evaluate the effectiveness of various programs including drug treatment and work release programs (e.g. Gifford et al., 2014; Routh & Hamilton, 2015). This quasi-experimental approach is commonly used in program evaluation to minimize the effects of selection bias and confounding variables. The technique involves matching individuals in the treatment group with comparable individuals in a control group based on their probability of being assigned to the treatment group, estimated from their demographic characteristics and criminal justice background factors.

By balancing the covariates, propensity score matching helps to isolate the causal effect of the treatment or program being evaluated. This allows us to compare the recidivism outcomes of individuals who participated in RCRPs to individuals with similar characteristics who did not participate in the program.

In propensity score matching, matching variables are included if they may influence the treatment or independent variable, or may influence any of the outcomes, and if they are not themselves a consequence of the treatment variable. For the present evaluation, matching variables were selected based on whether, in existing literature or empirically in the sample, they influenced participation in RCRPs. RCRP and non-participants were matched on the following variables:

- **Demographics**, including race and ethnicity category, gender, age, marital status, and high school education or equivalence
- **Criminogenic risk factors**, including mental health diagnosis, diagnosis of a substance use disorder, and LSI-R score
- **Correctional characteristics**, including classification score, number of incidents, and participation in a program
- **Conviction history**, including prior violent convictions, prior nonviolent convictions, prior drug convictions, maximum sentence for current offense, current violent conviction, and prior bookings

Propensity score matching was conducted using the *matchit* function in the statistical software program, R.

<sup>1</sup> Survival analysis is a statistical method used to analyze the expected time until an event (recidivism) happens. For those who were not reconvicted, the cut-off period (censor) allows us to take into account that we have data for these individuals up until this point, and that the event (recidivism) has not happened but we do not know exactly when it will occur.

RCRP participants and non-participants were matched using the nearest neighbor approach without replacement with a caliper distance set to 0.25. This ensures that the propensity score of each individual RCRP participant was matched to an appropriate non-participant within a distance of  $\pm 0.25$ . Additionally, once a match was achieved, the comparison case could not be matched to any other treatment cases (i.e., matches were one-to-one).

After propensity scores were calculated and matching occurred, 248 RCRP participants were matched to an equal number of non-participants, resulting in a total sample size of 496.

Bivariate statistics were used to examine differences between matched groups regarding a new admission, including *t*-tests and chi-square analyses, as well as Kaplan-Meier survival analyses to explore group differences in outcomes over time.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the matched sample ( $n = 496$ )

	RCRP	Non-RCRP	Difference
	M(SD)/%		
<u>Demographics</u>			
Age	40.76 (10.09)	40.19 (10.32)	0.57
% Male	89.1	89.9	-0.8
% Nonwhite	81.4	79.4	2
% Hispanic	12.9	13.3	-0.4
%Married	8.9	8.9	0
%High school education	75.8	77.0	-1.2
<u>Risk factors</u>			
% Mental health diagnosis	30.2	33.5	-3.3
%Substance use disorder	36.7	41.1	-4.4
LSIR	26.15 (6.18)	26.39 (6.57)	-0.25
Classification score	1.06 (2.37)	1.13 (0.95)	-0.07
Age at first admission	34.97 (10.18)	34.41 (10.43)	0.56
<u>Criminal history</u>			
Current violent conviction	36.3	36.7	-0.4
Maximum term for current conviction (days)	1792.23 (1334.60)	1705.56 (1341.94)	86.67
Prior bookings	1.08 (1.24)	1.11 (1.31)	-0.03
Prior violent conviction	0.46 (0.68)	0.49 (0.71)	-0.03
Prior non-violent conviction	0.62 (0.91)	0.62 (1.00)	
Prior drug conviction	0.73 (1.05)	0.72 (1.06)	0.01
Number of incidents	1.19(1.93)	1.00 (2.10)	0.19
%Programs	83.5	88.3	-4.8
<i>N</i>	248	248	
Follow-up period (days)	1106.76 (275.30)	1203.02 (227.82)	-96.26**** <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>  $t(477.29) = 4.242, p < 0.001$

## FINDINGS

Prior to matching, there were significant differences between RCRP and non-RCRP participants across several of the matching variables. Non-participants were significantly more likely to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder and to have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder. On average, non-participants had higher LSI-R scores, lower correctional classification scores, and had a lower proportion of nonwhite individuals as compared to RCRP participants. Non-participants were also significantly more likely to have been convicted of a violent conviction as their current offense, but had a lower average maximum term for the current conviction. RCRP participants had a significantly higher number of incidents while incarcerated, and a greater proportion of non-participants were enrolled in any type of programming while incarcerated.

**Table 2.** Average treatment effect of RCRPs on recidivism on matched sample ( $n = 496$ )

Model	ATE (S.E)
No covariates	-0.081 (0.022)***
Doubly robust (covariates included)	-0.063 (0.023)**

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

After the matching procedure, participants and non-participants were similar across both demographic and prior criminal history characteristics, with no significant differences across groups for demographic or risk factors (see

Table 1). However, the mean follow-up period for non-participants was significantly higher. The average follow-up period for individuals in the sample following release was just over three years (1,154.89 days).

A logistic regression analysis using the matched sample showed that participation in New Jersey's RCRP was associated with a significant reduction in the risk of recidivism or at the very least, delaying the onset of recidivism (see Figure 1). Both models presented in Table 2 suggest that participation in RCRP is associated with a significant reduction in recidivism rates. This holds true, even after controlling for demographic factors, criminogenic risk factors, and length of follow-up period, as demonstrated in the doubly robust model.

Among the matched sample, 2.8% of RCRP participants were admitted for a new offense during the study period, while 10.9% of non-participants were admitted for a new offense (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Proportion of sample with new admission by group

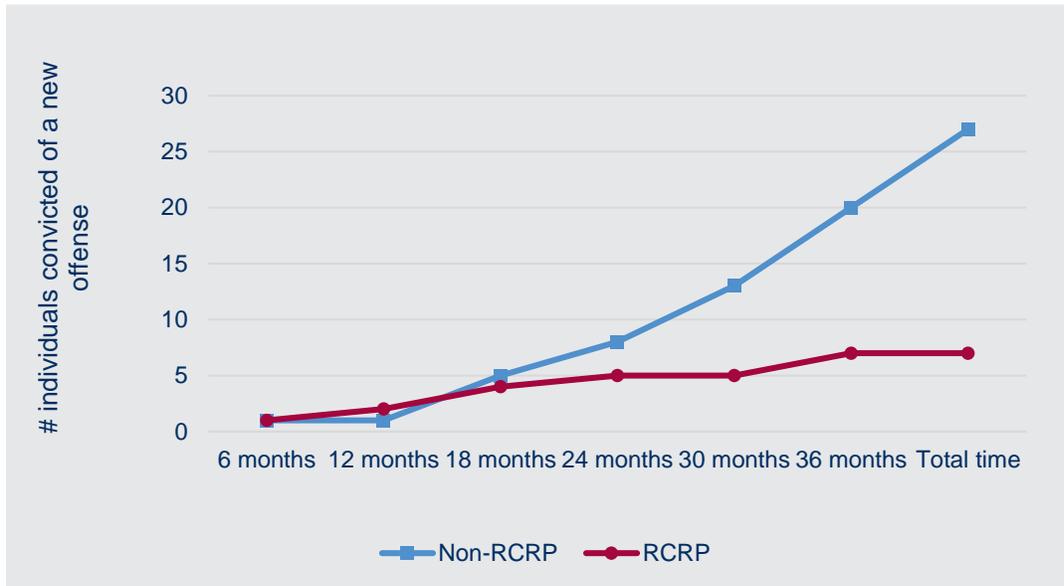
	No new booking	New booking	% of group
RCRP	241	7	2.8
Non-RCRP	221	27	10.9

$\chi^2 = 12.63, p < 0.001$

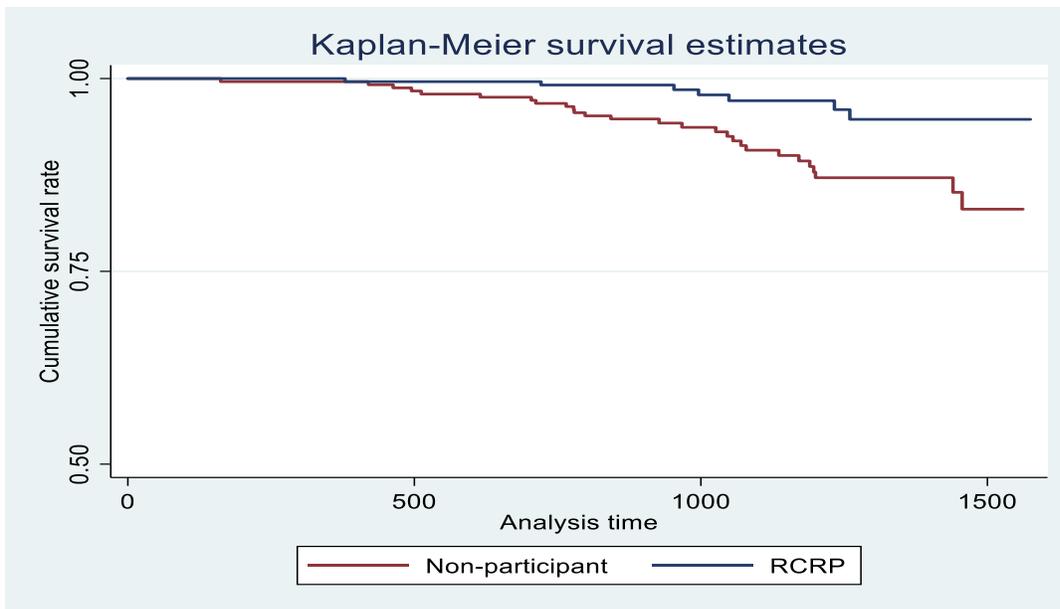
The second phase of the evaluation involved estimating a Kaplan-Meier survival model with the time to readmission for a new offense (see

Figure 2). These differences in survival time were statically significant (log rank = 9.36;  $p = .002$ ).

**Figure 1.** Rates of recidivism over time



**Figure 2.** Survival rates between RCRP participants and matched non-participants



## CONCLUSION

This study evaluated New Jersey's Residential Community Release Programs, using a rigorous retrospective, matched groups design. The results suggest that RCRP participants compared to their matched counterparts experienced significantly lower rates of recidivism, measured as a readmission for a new offense. This significant differences in re-offending favoring the RCRP participants emerged and persisted from 32 months after release, suggesting that the RCRPs appear to have a long-term positive impact on participant behavior. This reduction in recidivism, when combined with the significant cost savings of housing individuals in RCRPs compared to prisons, provide strong support for the efficacy of New Jersey's Residential Community Release Programs. Further research is needed to explore the specific programmatic factors as well as characteristics associated with successful participation in RCRPs that are related to these reduced rates of recidivism.

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