INDIANA UNIVERSITY
PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE
Center for Health and Justice Research

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INDIANA PRISON WRITERS WORKSHOP
Recidivism outcomes among participants

BACKGROUND

Between the 1970s and 2000s, the United States saw a sharp rise in incarceration rates. The prison population increased from 93 per 100,000 residents in 1972 to a peak of 767 per 100,000 in 2007.[1] [2] Since 2010, the trend has shifted toward reducing incarceration and supporting successful reentry into the community.[3] The number of incarcerated individuals declined for a decade, reaching its lowest point during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] However, in 2022, the prison population rose by 2%—the first increase in 10 years.[5]

One key strategy for reducing incarceration and improving outcomes has been educational and personal development programs inside correctional facilities. These programs—ranging from college courses and life skills training to creative arts initiatives[6]—help individuals prepare for life after release. They are currently active in over 30 states[7] and operated by a mix of state departments of corrections, universities, and nonprofit organizations.[8] These programs aim to support rehabilitation, personal growth, and successful reintegration into society.

SPOTLIGHT: IMPACT OF THE INDIANA PRISON WRITERS WORKSHOP (IPWW)

Despite the popularity of arts-based programming in prisons, few have been studied rigorously.[9] To address this, researchers from the Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) at the Indiana University Public Policy Institute (PPI) partnered with one such program, the Indiana Prison Writers Workshop (IPWW) to investigate its impact on recidivism, defined as the return to prison for violating parole or probation rules or committing a new offense after serving a sentence in the Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC).

KEY FINDINGS

- Indiana Prison Writers Workshop (IPWW) data shows that technical violations—not new crimes—drive most returns to incarcerations: 20% of individuals return to the IDOC within one year of release and one-third within three years.
- Far fewer individuals return to incarceration due to new convictions: 4% of IPWW participants compared with 11% of nonparticipants in the first year, rising to 8% and 16% by the third year.
- IPWW has not yet demonstrated a measurable, statistically significant impact on recidivism, underscoring the need for ongoing evaluations as enrollment grows.
- Agencies and policymakers can improve program evaluation efforts through better-coordinated data systems, more complete participant records, and clear, standardized data-sharing guidelines.
- Adding measures of programming participation, conduct, well-being, and prosocial post-release outcomes will give agencies a more complete picture of reentry progress.

Founded in 2017, IPWW began with just 10 participants at the Plainfield Correctional Facility in Plainfield, Indiana, and has since expanded into a multistate initiative.[10] IPWW operates in four prisons in Indiana, three facilities in Alabama, one in Ohio, and in the Cook County Jail in Chicago.[10] The nonprofit

relies on private donations, grants, and partnerships with the IDOC and other community organizations.

For this study, CJHR and IPWW estimated recidivism rates for IPWW participants and compared them to a matched sample of nonparticipants with similar demographic and case characteristics. This brief summarizes the study's key findings and their implications, offering practical recommendations for strengthening and expanding IPWW's impact on rehabilitation and successful reentry.

FINDINGS

WHO PARTICIPATES IN IPWW?

This analysis examined who participates in IPWW and whether their outcomes differ from those of similar individuals who did not participate. Overall, IPWW participants and the comparison group were similar across demographics, criminal history, and case characteristics, which strengthens the validity of outcome comparisons.

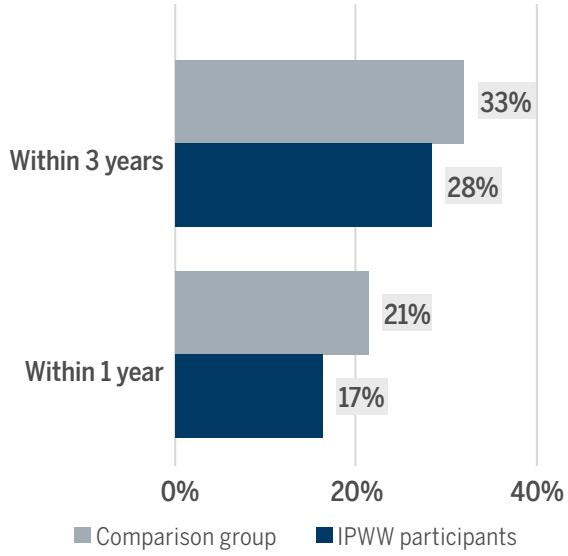
Participants were, on average, 37 years old, about half white and half Black, and mostly assessed as moderate or high risk. Nearly half of them held a high school diploma or GED. The criminal histories and offense types closely matched those of the comparison group.

About half of the participants had prior incarcerations, typically with multiple prior cases and an average of just over two years served for their governing offense (i.e., the highest-level offense leading to IDOC incarceration). Offenses ranged widely—from murder to Level 6 felonies[A]—drug-related charges and robbery/burglary were the most common.

HOW OFTEN ARE INDIVIDUALS RE-INCARCERATED DUE TO VIOLATION OF PROBATION OR PAROLE?

About one third of both groups experienced at least one return to IDOC incarceration due to violation within three years of release. Statistical analyses showed that IPWW participation did not increase or decrease the likelihood of violations. Instead, individuals with assault offenses or prior IDOC incarcerations within three years were more likely to violate supervision conditions.

Figure 1. Violation rates by participants and comparison group

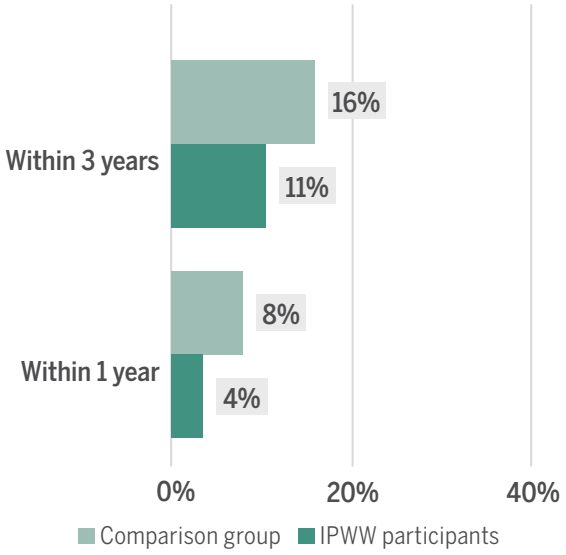


[A] Indiana classifies felonies by seriousness, creating a clear scale from the most severe crimes to the least severe crimes. Murder stands alone as the most serious offense. Level 1 felonies are extremely serious crimes that involve significant harm. Levels 2, 3, 4, and 5 felonies represent decreasing levels of severity. Level 6 felonies are lower-level offenses such as theft between $750 and $50,000, possession of small amounts of certain drugs, battery causing moderate injury, or resisting law enforcement causing injury.

HOW OFTEN ARE INDIVIDUALS RE-INCARCERATED DUE TO NEW CONVICTIONS?

Similarly, recidivism based on new criminal convictions leading to a return to prison was slightly lower for IPWW participants (11% within three years, compared to 16% of the comparison group), but these differences also were not statistically significant. Most new convictions were mid-level felonies, commonly drug related. Statistical analysis found that IPWW participation did not affect recidivism likelihood. Age, offense severity, educational attainment, and recent prior incarceration were more influential predictors.

Figure 2. Recidivism rates by participants and comparison group



WHAT THE FINDINGS MEAN

Overall, the findings show that IPWW serves a population comparable to others in IDOC, with early but not statistically significant trends suggesting slightly better outcomes for participants. Larger samples and more detailed data will help determine the program's long-term impact.

WHY THE FINDINGS MATTER

Even with these limitations, the study provides meaningful, real-world evidence, using rigorous methods. It offers an important early look at how prison programming, such as IPWW, may support successful transitions and reduce recidivism.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While IPWW did not yet demonstrate measurable reductions in reincarceration, the program operates within a system where technical violations—not new crimes—drive most returns to prison. Strengthening data quality, broadening outcome metrics, enhancing screening, and expanding reentry tracking will greatly improve the ability to detect program impacts and support more effective rehabilitation strategies.

PROMISING BUT PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

IPWW's early results show writing-based, prosocial programming supporting healthy, positive relationships and emotional well-being has small but encouraging reductions in violations and recidivism. However, the sample for this study was too small to confirm any long-term, statistically significant impact.

Recommendations:

- IPWW, with policymaker support, should continue expanding the program and commit to regular recidivism analyses as participation grows.
- IPWW and policymakers should ensure evaluations are designed to detect modest changes.
- IPWW and IDOC should track additional indicators, such as conduct violations and program engagement, to better understand program effects.

DATA LIMITATIONS AFFECT EVALUATION QUALITY

IPWW participation data was often reported in broad terms (e.g., "Spring 2021"), and a small number of listed participants did not appear in IDOC records. These incomplete or inconsistent records made it difficult to assess program effectiveness, identify the effects of differing program exposure, and understand when or how participants engage with IPWW.

Recommendations:

- IPWW should improve recordkeeping by documenting exact participation dates and class schedules.
- Policymakers and IDOC should strengthen data-sharing systems to ensure accurate, consistent information.
- With higher-quality data, IPWW and researchers can build more reliable comparison groups for future analyses.

CLARIFYING THE TARGET POPULATION

External factors, including decisions made by correctional staff, shape the selection process for inclusion in IPWW. Therefore, some individuals who might benefit most from IPWW may not be identified or enrolled consistently.

Recommendations:

- IPWW and IDOC should co-develop screening tools to identify appropriate participants.
- IPWW should track who is excluded from the program or declines to participate and why.
- IPWW and policymakers can support prioritizing individuals at higher risk to maximize program impact.

PRIORITIZING PROSOCIAL, PERSON-CENTERED OUTCOMES

Recidivism alone does not capture the full value of creative, healing-based programming. IPWW aims to build confidence, emotional well-being, and prosocial skills, which are all factors that contribute to long-term integration and stability.

Recommendations:

- IPWW should continue administering and analyzing pre- and post-program surveys to monitor growth in confidence, well-being, and prosocial skills.
- Policymakers and parole agencies should facilitate access to reentry data to measure broader outcomes such as employment, housing, and sobriety.
- IPWW should share these findings with stakeholders to highlight benefits beyond recidivism.

METHODOLOGY

THE DATA

The authors analyzed IDOC data to study the IPWW program. The study included 167 IPWW participants and a comparison group of 250 similar individuals who were released from prison but did not participate in the program. The analysis focused on outcomes at one year and three years after release.

ANALYSIS APPROACH

The study examined whether participants returned to prison for violating parole or probation rules or being convicted of a new offense and compared them to the comparison group. CHJR researchers used statistical modeling to estimate the impact of IPWW participation while accounting for such factors as race, offense level, and offense category. They aimed to determine whether IPWW participation makes returning to prison more or less likely and to provide reliable evidence to inform decisions on reentry programs such as IPWW.

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FURTHER READING

To read more, see the IPWW webpage and the results of an initial process and outcome evaluation

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The Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) works with public safety agencies, social service organizations, and residents to conduct impartial applied research on public and justice system policy choices. CHJR is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute (PPI), a multidisciplinary institute within the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs. PPI also supports the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment (CUPE), the Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy (CRISP), and the Manufacturing Policy Initiative (MPI).

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