

# Criminal Recidivism

Most Incarcerated Offenders do not Return to Prison

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# Overview: Prisons and Churning

- A common perception: Once released from prison, offenders return to prison repeatedly – they “churn”. Therefore hiring offenders for sensitive job (health care) is risky.
- My argument:
  - When thinking about employability, the perception is wrong: Most offenders – perhaps 2 of 3 – will never return to prison.
  - Although prediction of recidivism is imprecise, prediction instruments are fairly good at identifying a large proportion of offenders with low probability of recidivism.
  - A question: Hiring a low-risk offenders is probably no more risky than hiring a new worker from the street, so can health care providers adequately supervise?

# Why the Misperception? A Conjecture

- When criminologists examine prison populations, and when they examine release cohorts, they see a concentration of repeat offenders, most of whom will recidivate.
- The perceptual difficulty is that high-risk offenders concentrate in prisons leading to an impression that, once incarcerated, most offenders will recidivate.
- However, low-risk offenders enter and exit prison once, so in any survey of a prison stock or a release cohort, low-risk offenders are underrepresented as a proportion of the offender population.
- An analogy – next slide – is helpful.

# A Mall Exit Survey

- Survey researchers sometimes use mall exit surveys to estimate shoppers' purchasing habits.
- Suppose that:
  - 25% of mall visitors go to the mall once per day.
  - 25% go once per week.
  - 25% go once per month.
  - 25% go once per year.
- A naïve one week exit survey of visitors exiting the mall will find that:
  - 85% of mall visitors go to the mall once per day.
  - 12% go once per week.
  - 3% go once per month.
  - Fewer than 1% go once per year.
- The problem is that high-rate mall visitors churn, leaving an impression that most shoppers are frequent visitors.

# Fixing the Perception: Weight the Sample

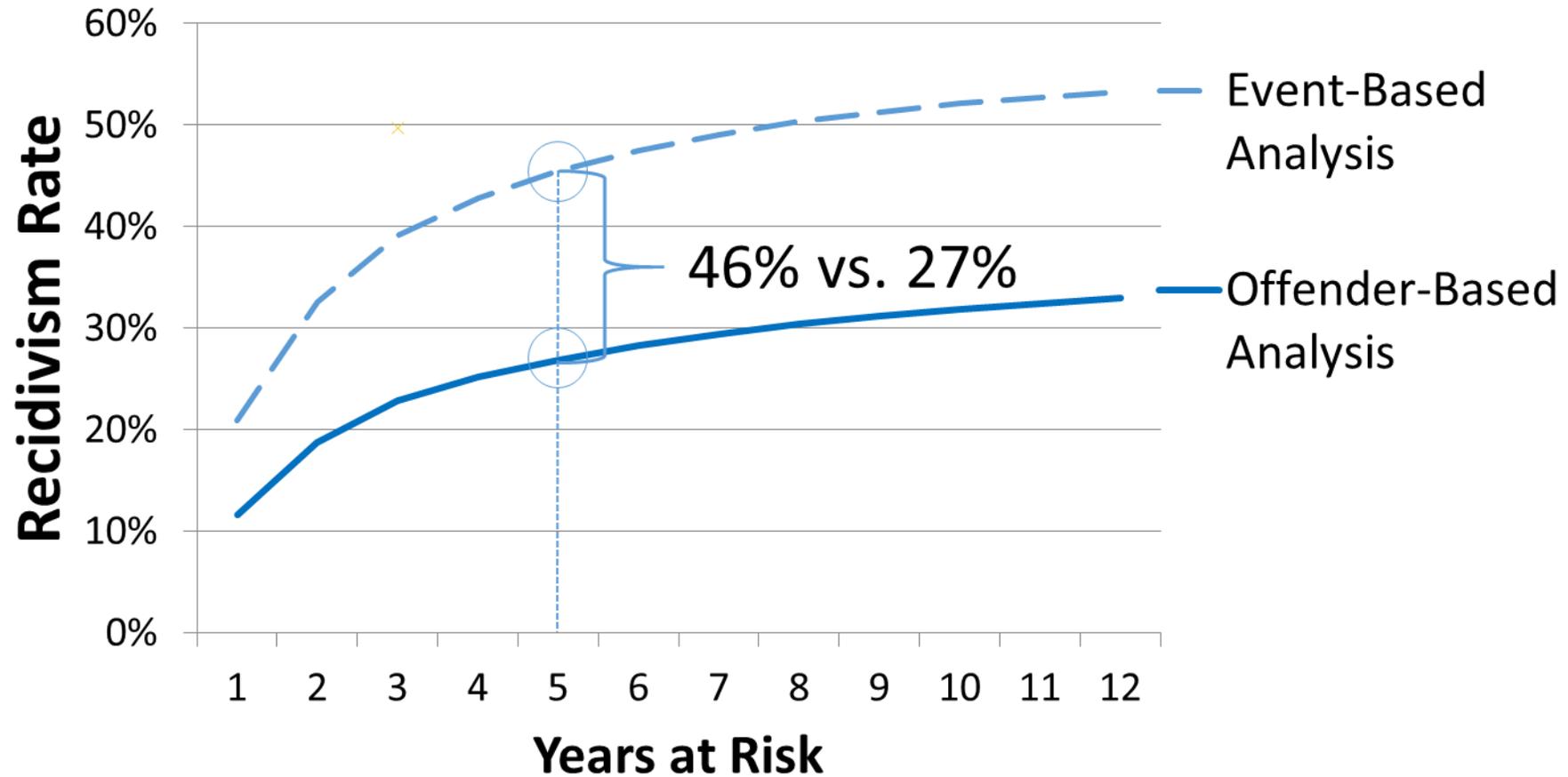
- Survey sampling statisticians fix this overrepresentation of frequent mall visitors by using poststratification sampling weights.
- In the exit interview, ask the respondent how many days per year he or she visits the mall and weight appropriately:
- Assign weights proportions to:
  - 1 to respondents who say “every day”
  - 7 to respondents who say “every week”
  - 30 to respondents who say “every month”
  - 365 to respondents who say “once per year”

# To Weight or not to Weight?

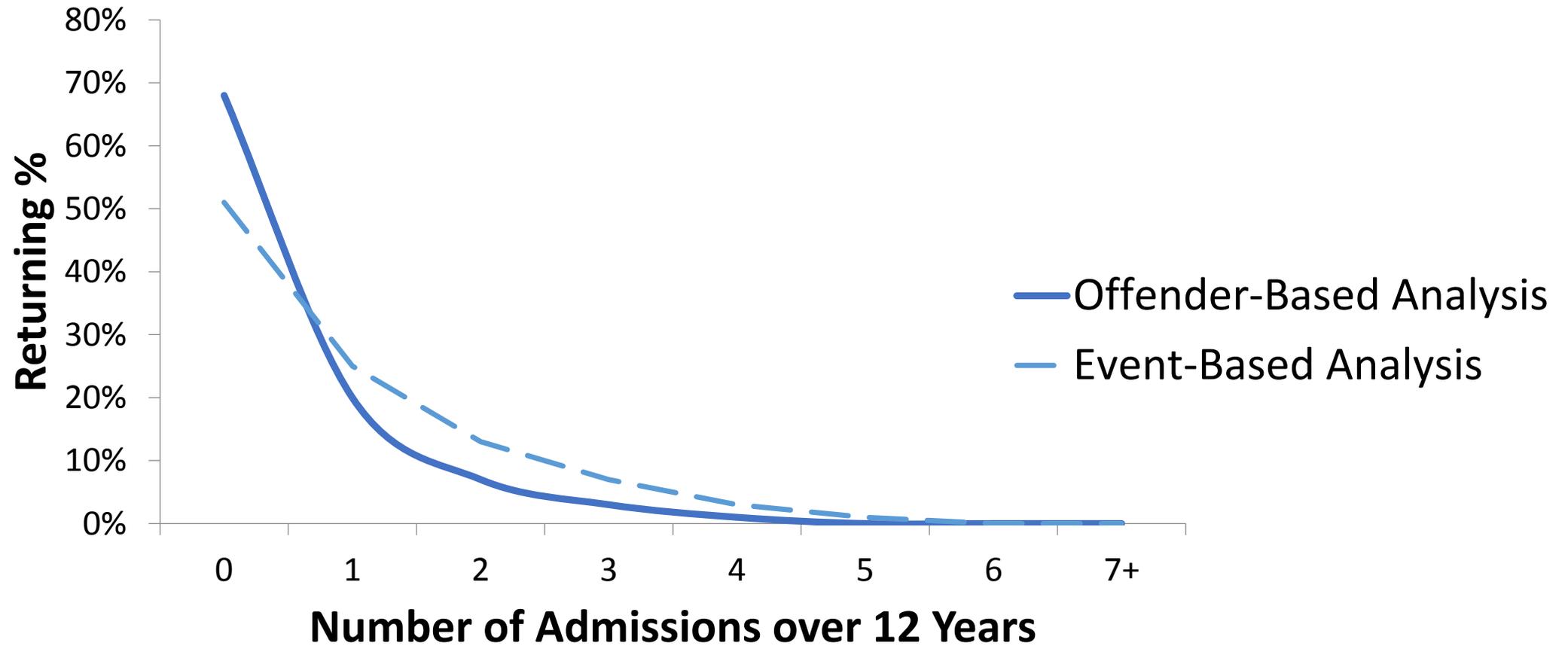
- Before leaving the mall interception analogy, note that the choice to weight depends on the research question:
  - If the survey researchers were interested in ice cream sales, he or she would not weight the data because each visit is the unit of analysis.
  - If the survey researcher were interested in the sale of durable goods, however, he or she would weight the data because individuals are the unit of analysis.
- The analogy with prison release cohorts is similar:
  - When studying prison and post-release programming, the release is the unit of analysis. This leads to *event-based* estimates.
  - But when studying social problems, such as whether offenders might be employed in health care, the individual should be the unit of analysis. This leads to *offender-based* estimates.

# Some Estimates using the Event- Based and Offender-Based Weighting Schemes

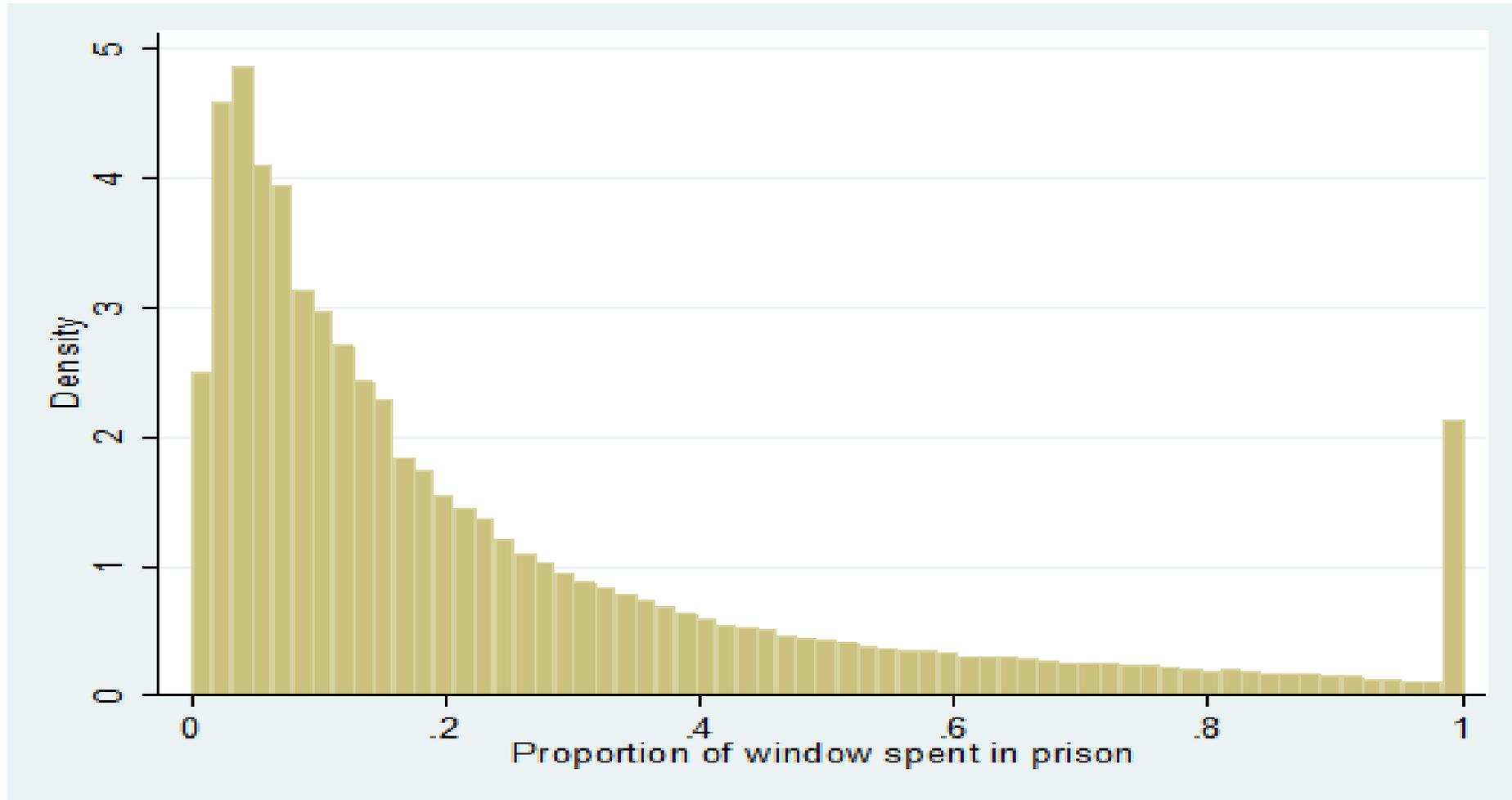
# Returning to Prison: Two Estimation Methods



# Number of Returns to Prison over a 12-Year Period



# Proportion of 13 Year Window Spent in Prison



When they are released, how do we know that an individual will offend in the future?

The practice and art of risk assessment

# Predictions and Realizations of Failure while under Community Supervision

Risk Categories	Proportion of Offenders (Actual)		
	Arrested	Revoked	Overall Failure
10% (highest risk)	39.10%	35.30%	74.40%
20%	28.10%	29.30%	57.50%
30%	22.00%	24.70%	46.70%
80%	6.20%	6.70%	12.90%
90%	4.70%	4.20%	8.90%
100% (lowest risk)	2.50%	2.00%	4.50%

# Comments on Returning to Prison

- Offenders can be placed into risk categories using standard statistical estimation procedures.
- High-risk offenders are probably not a good risk for working in sensitive jobs.
- Even low risk offenders have a perceptible probability of recidivism, but:
  - Offenders under community supervision have a special status that puts them at risk for returning to prison for minor criminal matters.
  - Once the offender has demonstrated acceptable behavior for two or three years, the risk falls precipitously.

# Conclusions

- Offenders are at lower risk of recidivism than is commonly perceived by the revolving door characterization of criminal justice.
- Offenders are heterogeneous: The better risks can be distinguished from the poor risks using standard statistical procedures.
- Over time, the lower risk and high risk offenders self-reveal so that a criminal history becomes less important as an indicator of future behavior.
- Question: Is supervision at a health care facility sufficient to protect against the remaining risks of hiring low-risk offenders?