



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

How Often and How Quickly Are Escapees Caught? Findings from 610 Prison and Jail Cases

Key Takeaways

- More than 91 percent of escapees from prisons and jails were caught within one year, and most escapees were caught within a few days.
- Escapees who walked away from low-security settings, such as work release centers or minimum-security camps, were the least likely to be caught and remained at large the longest.
- Escapees from jails were less likely to be caught and took longer to be caught than escapees from prisons.

Why This Matters

Preventing escapes is a core function of prisons and jails, and when escapes occur, they often make headlines and can frighten the public. Public worry grows further when escapees commit violence in the community, although research shows that such incidents are uncommon. However, until recently, little was known about what happens after an escape - how often escapees are caught, how long they remain free, or why some escapees are harder to locate than others. That knowledge gap left correctional leaders, policymakers, and the members of the public without clear answers about a problem that receives intense attention.

Earlier research using public records estimated that between 75 percent and 92 percent of prison escapees are eventually caught. Additional research found that escapes happen more often in warmer months. Other studies showed that jails account for about half of all escapes from custody.

No previous study had tracked whether escapees are caught, how long they remain out, and which factors speed up or slow down their capture. This study is the first to examine those questions, using 610 documented escape cases to determine how often and how quickly escapees are recaptured and what factors make a difference.

How the Study Worked

The study drew on the Correctional Incident Database, which became public in 2009 and includes 610 escape cases from prisons and jails of all security levels. Information about the cases came from news stories, correctional agency press releases, government reports, and agency websites. The study measured two outcomes for each case: whether the escapee was caught within a year and how many hours they stayed out before being caught. Time was counted in hours rather than days because most escapees are caught in the first few days and measuring time in hours captured those differences more precisely. The study also recorded facts about the escapee (age, sex, race, offense, past escapes, sentence, and whether the escape was planned), the situation (time of day, season, and the type of setting the person fled), and the facility (jail or prison, security level, crowding, private or public, and region).

To make sense of these factors, the study used a simple idea called “routine activities,” which is the notion that an outcome depends on how motivated a person is, how much opportunity the situation offers, and how well authorities are able to respond. Using that lens, the researcher compared groups of escapees to see which personal, situational, and facility features were linked to being caught and to how quickly it happened.

What Was Learned

- **Most escapees were caught quickly.** More than 91 percent of escapees were back in custody within a year, and the typical escapee who was caught stayed out only about nine days. About 60 percent of escapees were caught within two days and roughly 82 percent within a week.
- **Walkaways were the hardest to catch.** Escapees who walked away from low-security facilities were less likely to be caught than those who broke out of secure facilities or fled during transport or court and medical trips. The type of setting a person escaped from was the strongest predictor of whether they were recaptured.
- **Jail escapees remained on the lam longer.** Escapees from jails were less likely to be caught and took longer to be caught than those who fled prisons, even after accounting for the facility's security level.
- **Planning an escape backfired.** Escapees who clearly planned their breakout were more likely to be caught and were caught sooner than those who seized a sudden chance to flee. Escapees who were older, were nonwhite, or had longer sentences also tended to stay out longer.

What This Means in Practice

Escapees who stay free the longest are usually not the ones the public fears most. Most escapees are caught quickly, and those who slip through tend to be lower risk individuals who walked away from minimum-security or work release settings, such as escapees who are nearing the end of their sentence and whom authorities may not pursue with full-scale manhunts. The escapes that generate the most fear involve escapees who are more likely to be found and recaptured quickly.

Because more than half of the escapes came from jails, and jail escapees were more difficult to recover, local jail authorities should review how they prevent and respond to escapes, and security experts should consider tools and strategies designed for jails, which differ from state and federal prisons in size, budget, and location. Jails face challenges—high population turnover and serving many people experiencing homelessness, substance use, and mental illness - that may make quick recapture more difficult. The study also found that escapees from privately run facilities were recaptured more slowly than those from government-run facilities, although the author says it is hard to know why. Although these cases are from 2009, the patterns remain relevant and encourage gathering newer data to test whether they still hold true.

Source article

Peterson, B. E. (2024). Catch ‘em if you can: Examining how often and how quickly people who escape from prisons and jails are recaptured. *Security Journal*, 37(3), 1123-1143. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-023-00411-3>

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