This analysis looked at the reoffending behaviour of 2,611 adults who participated in The Open University Programme of Higher Education in prisons. The overall results show that those who took part in the programme in England and Wales were less likely to reoffend and reoffended less frequently than those who did not.

The Open University Programme of Higher Education enabled people who were in prison for six months or more to work towards a degree by distance learning. Offenders began the course of study in prison, but could continue it after release.

The headline analysis in this report measured proven reoffences in a one-year period for a 'treatment group' of 2,611 offenders who received support some time between 1985 and 2017 and who were released from prison between 2002 and 2017, and for a much larger 'comparison group' of similar offenders who did not receive it. There may have been a different impact on participants whose details were submitted but who did not meet the criteria for analysis.

Overall measurements of the treatment and comparison groups

For **100** typical people in the **treatment** group, the equivalent of:

For **100** typical people in the **comparison** group, the equivalent of:

14 of the 100 people committed a proven reoffence within a one-year period (a rate of 14%), **4 people fewer** than in the comparison group.

18 of the 100 people committed a proven reoffence within a one-year period (a rate of 18%).

33 proven reoffences were committed by these 100 people during the year (a frequency of 0.3 offences per person), **14 offences fewer** than in the comparison group.

47 proven reoffences were committed by these 100 people during the year (a frequency of 0.5 offences per person).

174 days was the average time before a reoffender committed their first proven reoffence, **9 days later** than the comparison group.

165 days was the average time before a reoffender committed their first proven reoffence.

Overall estimates of the impact of the intervention

For **100** typical people who receive support, compared with **100** similar people who do not receive it:

👤 The number of people who commit a proven reoffence within one year after release could be **lower by between 2 and 5 people. This is a statistically significant result.**

⚖️ The number of proven reoffences committed during the year could be **lower by between 10 and 19 offences. This is a statistically significant result.**

📅 On average, the time before an offender committed their first proven reoffence could be **shorter by as many as 1 day, or longer by as many as 20 days.** More people would need to be analysed in order to determine the direction of this difference.

✅ **What you can say about the one-year reoffending rate:**

"This analysis provides evidence that support from The Open University may decrease the number of proven reoffenders during a one-year period."

❌ **What you cannot say about the one-year reoffending rate:**

"This analysis shows that support from The Open University increases/has no effect on the reoffending rate of its participants."

✅ **What you can say about the one-year reoffending frequency:**

"This analysis provides evidence that support from The Open University may decrease the number of proven reoffences during a one-year period."

❌ **What you cannot say about the one-year reoffending frequency:**

"This analysis shows that support from The Open University increases/has no effect on the number of reoffences committed by its participants."

✅ **What you can say about the time to first reoffence:**

"This analysis would need more participants in order to show whether support from The Open University shortens or lengthens the average time to first proven reoffence."
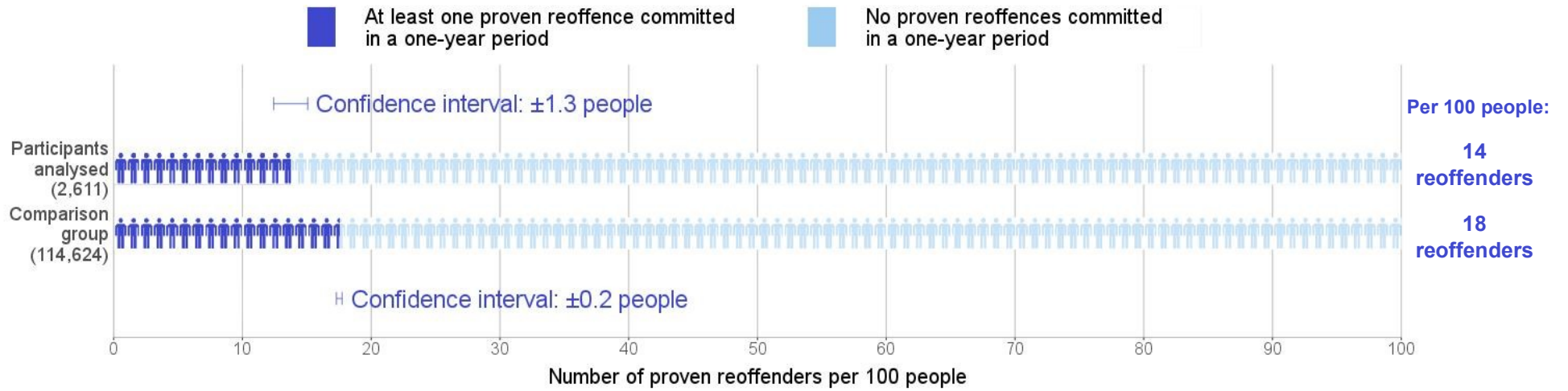
❌ **What you cannot say about the time to first reoffence:**

"This analysis shows that support from The Open University shortens/lengthens/has no effect on the average time to first reoffence for its participants."
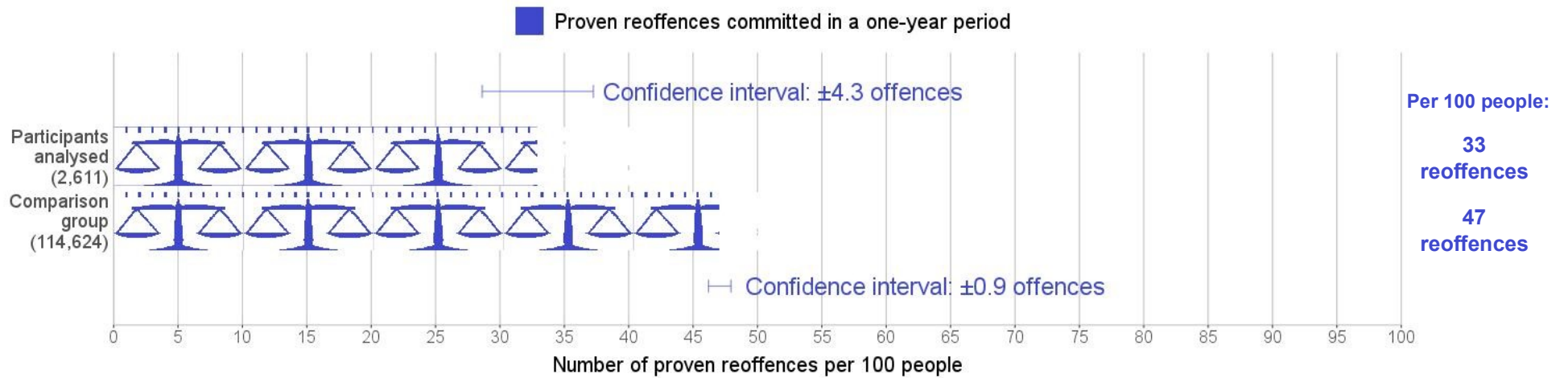
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One-year proven reoffending rate after support from The Open University

At least one proven reoffence committed in a one-year period

No proven reoffences committed in a one-year period

Confidence interval: ±1.3 people

Per 100 people:

Participants analysed (2,611)

14 reoffenders

Comparison group (114,624)

18 reoffenders

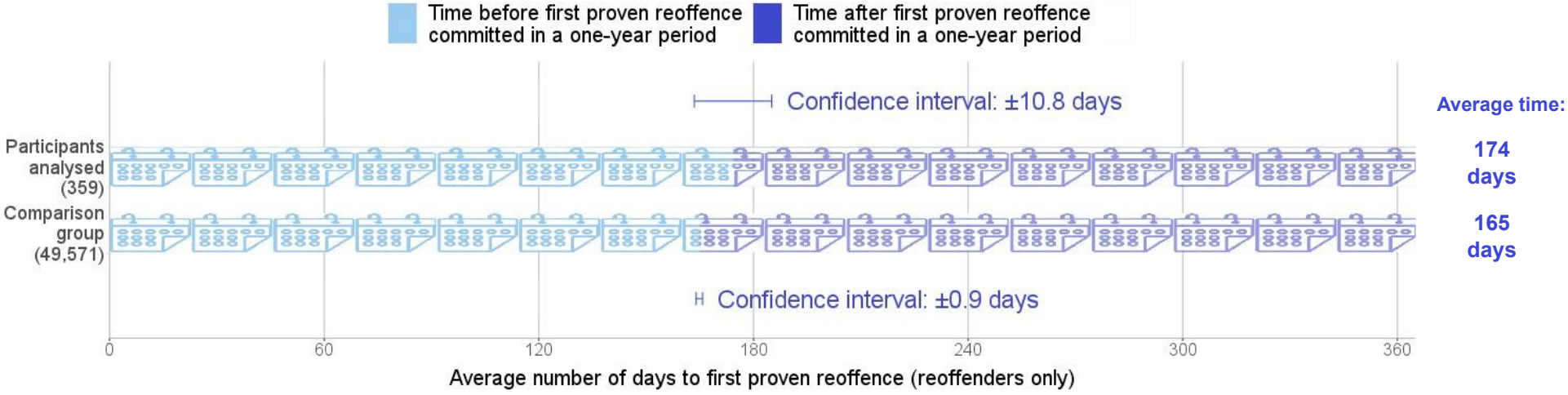Confidence interval: ±0.2 people

Number of proven reoffenders per 100 people

Significant difference between groups

One-year proven reoffending frequency after support from The Open University

Proven reoffences committed in a one-year period

Confidence interval: ±4.3 offences

Per 100 people:

Participants analysed (2,611)

33 reoffences

Comparison group (114,624)

47 reoffences

Confidence interval: ±0.9 offences

Number of proven reoffences per 100 people

Significant difference between groups

Average time to first proven reoffence after support from The Open University

Time before first proven reoffence committed in a one-year period

Time after first proven reoffence committed in a one-year period

Confidence interval: ±10.8 days

Average time:

Participants analysed (359)

174 days

Comparison group (49,571)

165 days

Confidence interval: ±0.9 days

0   60   120   180   240   300   360

Average number of days to first proven reoffence (reoffenders only)

Non-significant difference between groups

The Open University in their own words

" The Open University Programme of Higher Education focused on people who have already achieved GCSE level qualifications and who want to work towards a degree. Each module lasts about 30 weeks. People study one module at a time and it can take at least six years to complete a degree. The Open University provides printed and digital study materials, tutor support, course choice advice and guidance, assignment feedback, careers guidance, through the gate support to enable students to complete their qualification. The intervention takes place primarily in prisons, across the country. Released students will continue their studies in the community.

Engaging in higher education offers the student an opportunity to view themselves more positively and with an academic identity rather than a criminal one. Distance learning requires strong organisation skills and self discipline, so as well as students developing their critical thinking and analysis skills, they are also able to demonstrate a commitment to study, a strong motivation to succeed and a wide range of employability skills. "

Response from The Open University to the Justice Data Lab analysis

" We are really proud of our work supporting students in prison with their higher level study. We have been involved with prison education at this level since 1972 and currently have almost 2000 students studying for a degree across a wide range of subjects. We are delighted that this official report confirms what we already knew - that studying with the OU makes a life changing difference, particularly for those people leaving prison. Congratulations to all those who have already achieved great things. And welcome to those students who are just starting on their journey. The OU is here to offer all the support you need. "

Results in detail

One analysis was conducted, controlling for offender demographics and criminal history and the following risks and needs: employment, education, drug use, alcohol use, mental health, thinking and behaviour and attitude. Matching criteria included information on educational background and abilities, where available.

Analyses
1. **Open University analysis:** treatment group matched to offenders across England and Wales using demographics, criminal history and individual risks and needs.

The sizes of the treatment and comparison groups for reoffending rate and frequency analyses are provided below. To create a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the treatment group, each person within the comparison group is given a weighting proportionate to how closely they match the characteristics of individuals in the treatment group. The calculated reoffending rate uses the weighted values for each person and therefore does not necessarily correspond to the unweighted figures.

Treatment Group Size	Comparison Group Size	Reoffenders in treatment group	Reoffenders in comparison group
2,611	114,624	359	49,571

Three headline measures of one-year reoffending were analysed, as well as four additional measures (see results in Tables 1-7):

1. **Rate of reoffending**

2. **Frequency of reoffending**

3. **Time to first reoffence**

4. Rate of first reoffence by court outcome

5. Frequency of reoffences by court outcome

6. Rate of custodial sentencing for first reoffence

7. Frequency of custodial sentencing

Significant results

Two measures show a statistically significant result. These provide significant evidence that:

Nationally

- **Participants are less likely to commit a reoffence** than non-participants

- **Participants commit fewer reoffences** than non-participants

Tables 1-7 show the overall measures of reoffending. Rates are expressed as percentages and frequencies expressed per person. Tables 3 to 7 include reoffenders only. Comparison group rates are calculated using weighted population figures (see note on p8).

Table 1: Proportion of people who committed a proven reoffence in a one-year period after support from The Open University, compared with a matched comparison group

| Number in treatment group | Number in comparison group | One-year proven reoffending rate | | | | |
		Treatment group rate (%)	Comparison group rate (%)	Estimated difference (% points)	Significant difference?	p-value
2,611	114,624	14	18	-5 to -2	Yes	<0.01

Table 2: Number of proven reoffences committed in a one-year period by people who received support from The Open University, compared with a matched comparison group

| Number in treatment group | Number in comparison group | One-year proven reoffending frequency (offences per person) | | | | |
		Treatment group frequency	Comparison group frequency	Estimated difference	Significant difference?	p-value
2,611	114,624	0.33	0.47	-0.19 to -0.10	Yes	<0.01

Table 3: Average time to first proven reoffence in a one-year period for people who received support from The Open University, compared with a matched comparison group

| Number in treatment group | Number in comparison group | Average time to first proven reoffence in a one-year period, for reoffenders only (days) | | | | |
		Treatment group time	Comparison group time	Estimated difference	Significant difference?	p-value
359	49,571	174	165	-1 to 20	No	0.09

Table 4: Proportion of people supported by The Open University with first proven reoffence in a one-year period by court outcome, compared with similar non-participants (reoffenders only)

Number in treatment group	Number in comparison group	One-year proven reoffending rate by court outcome of first reoffence, for reoffenders only					
		Court outcome	Treatment group rate (%)	Comparison group rate (%)	Estimated difference (% points)	Significant difference?	p-value
356	49,472	Indictable	6	6	-2 to 3	No	0.79
		Either way	62	62	-5 to 5	No	0.92
		Summary	32	32	-5 to 4	No	0.83

Note, each court outcome is only shown if the number of offenders in both the treatment and comparison groups is greater than 10 for that outcome.

Table 5: Number of proven reoffences in a one-year period by court outcome for people supported by The Open University, compared with similar non-participants (reoffenders only)

Number in treatment group	Number in comparison group	One-year proven reoffending frequency by court outcome, for reoffenders only					
		Court outcome	Treatment group frequency	Comparison group frequency	Estimated difference	Significant difference?	p-value
356	49,472	Indictable	0.10	0.13	-0.07 to 0.01	No	0.10
		Either way	1.49	1.65	-0.35 to 0.04	No	0.12
		Summary	0.81	0.89	-0.21 to 0.05	No	0.25

Note, each court outcome is only shown if the number of offenders in both the treatment and comparison groups is greater than 10 for that outcome.

Table 6: Proportion of people who received a custodial sentence for their first proven reoffence after support from The Open University compared with similar non-participants (reoffenders only)

Number in treatment group	Number in comparison group	One-year rate of custodial sentencing, for reoffenders only				
		Treatment group rate (%)	Comparison group rate (%)	Estimated difference (% points)	Significant difference?	p-value
356	49,472	46	46	-6 to 5	No	0.88

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Table 7: Number of custodial sentences received in a one-year period by people who received support from The Open University, compared to similar non-participants (reoffenders only)

Number in treatment group	Number in comparison group	One-year frequency of custodial sentencing, for reoffenders only (sentences per person)				
		Treatment group frequency	Comparison group frequency	Estimated difference	Significant difference?	p-value
356	49,472	1.24	1.30	-0.25 to 0.14	No	0.57

Profile of the treatment group

The Open University (OU) work with offenders currently serving a prison sentence of at least six months, who have already achieved levels 1 and 2 and who want to work towards a degree. The OU have a range of marketing materials and a prospectus to promote OU study. Prospective students go through a sift to determine their suitability, and are then offered a choice of courses. They complete an application and also apply for their funding (scholarship, student loan or self funding).

Participants included in analysis (2,611 offenders)	**Participants not included in analysis (3,734 offenders with available data)**
- Female 9%, Male 91% - White 66%, Black 22%, Asian 8%, Other ethnicity 1%, Unknown ethnicity 3% - UK national 89%, Non-UK nationality 5%, Unknown nationality 6% - Aged 18 to 83 years at the beginning of their one-year period (average age 34)	- Female 6%, Male 94% - White 65%, Black 25%, Asian 6%, Other or unknown ethnicity 3% - UK nationality 87%, Non-UK or unknown nationality 13%

Participants included in analysis (2,611 offenders) continued:

- Sentence length:
  - Less than 4 years — 20%
  - 4 to 10 years — 50%
  - More than 10 years — 11%
  - Indeterminate or life sentence — 18%

Participants not included in analysis continued:

Information on index offences is not available for this group, as they could not be linked to a suitable sentence.

For **3,978 people** without any records in the reoffending database, no personal information is available.

Please note totals may not appear to equal the sum of the component parts due to rounding.

Information on individual risks and needs was available for 1,340 people in the overall treatment group (51%), recorded near to the time of their original conviction. Of those for whom information is available:

- 77% had limited problem-solving skills
- 67% had misused drugs
- 65% were unemployed

Matching the treatment and comparison groups

The analysis matched a comparison group to the treatment group. A summary of the matching quality is as follows:

- All variables in the national model were well matched.

Further details of group characteristics and matching quality, including risks and needs recorded by the Offender Assessment System (OASys), can be found in the Excel annex accompanying this report.

This report is also supplemented by a general annex, which answers frequently asked questions about Justice Data Lab analyses and explains the caveats associated with them.

Numbers of people in the treatment and comparison groups

10,328 people were submitted for analysis by The Open University

10,328

980 people (9%) were excluded because they could not be identified
on the Police National Computer

9,348

2,998 people (29%) were excluded because they could not be
identified in the reoffending database

6,350

3,734 people (36%) were excluded because they did not have a
record in the reoffending database that corresponded to their period of
participation with The Open University

2,616

5 people (<1%) were excluded because they did not match at the
Propensity Score Matching stage

2,611

Open University treatment group: 25% of the participants submitted
(Comparison group: 114,624 records)