4 Inter-Cohort Comparisons of Reincarceration Rates

The specific question addressed in this chapter is, “How did the transformation of Texas criminal justice in the 1980s, a period when the burgeoning prison population led to a dramatically expanded use of parole, affect recidivism patterns of successive yearly cohorts of parolees released between 1984 and 1987?” The primary analytic strategy is once again analysis of survival patterns and hazard rates.

At least four mechanisms have been suggested for how the increasing use of parole to regulate the prison population might affect reincarceration rates. The first will be labeled the composition explanation. As the number of parole releases increases, the composition of the parole-eligible population changes. For example, the pool of parolees may become increasingly high-risk. This change alone might account for any noted shift in the pattern or probability of returning to prison. The second explanation will be referred to as the strained resources argument. The shear volume of parole releases might affect the ability of parole officers to monitor releasees. For example, in 1982, the average case load per parole officer was sixty-seven. By 1986, it had risen to ninety-three parolees per officer. It then declined to ninety in 1987, seventy-two in 1989, and then rose back up to eighty-two in 1990. The third explanation concerns the increasing use of parole, along with related changes in the processing of criminal cases, that may alter the deterrent effect of punishment. Fear of punishment, the central variable in deterrence theory, has been found to be linked to the perceived certainty and severity of punishment (Gibbs 1975; Ekland-Olson, et al. 1984). As prisons become crowded, prison officials become more liberal in awarding good-time credits, and as parole boards become increasingly likely to release inmates, the perception of the severity and certainty of imprisonment may decline and with it the deterrent effect of punishment.

The fourth explanation is what will be called the administrative discretion influence. Reincarceration rates may reflect changing practices on the part of the parole board and parole officers. Revocation of parole for a technical violation is the decision for which parole officers have the widest
discretion. It is reasonable to assume that technical parole violation revocations are most likely to be used on releases with the most serious criminal records, providing a means for keeping high-risk offenders off the streets without a large investment in court time. Pressure from the media, the legislature, or both may have altered the revocation practices of parole officers by providing a quick and procedurally simpler means for controlling the parole population. As a result, as the proportion of high-risk parolees increases, we might expect to observe increases in technical violation revocations.

Trends in Reincarceration

Figure 4.1 presents the monthly survival probabilities for the thirty-six month follow-up periods for the four cohorts. Two parallel trends are evident. First, as discovered in chapter 3, the 1984 and 1985 cohorts are virtually identical. Second, the trends in the survival probabilities for the 1986 and 1987 cohorts also track one another, although there are some important differences between these latter two groups. Approximately

![Figure 4.1](image_url)