

- The Public Record - <http://pubrecord.org> -

Guantanamo And Recidivism: The Media's Ongoing Failure To Question Official Statistics

Posted By [Andy Worthington](#) On March 15, 2012 @ 12:09 pm In [Politics](#) | [3 Comments](#)



Image: Jared Rodriguez / [truthout](#);
Adapted: art makes me smile, The U.S.
Army

Last week, the Director of National Intelligence, in consultation with the Director of the CIA and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, issued a two-page unclassified summary, entitled, "Summary of the Reengagement of Detainees Formerly Held at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba" ([PDF](#)), which provided information about the purported "recidivism" of former prisoners.

According to the summary, of the 599 prisoners released from Guantánamo, 95 (15.9%) are described as "Confirmed of Reengaging," and 72 others (12%) are described as "Suspected of Reengaging." However, in the mainstream media, little distinction was made between the "confirmed" and "suspected" figures. [Reuters' headline](#), for example, was "Recidivism rises among released Guantánamo detainees," which was typical. In seeking to justify it, Reuters' reporter stated, "The figures represent a 2.9 percent rise over a 25 percent aggregate recidivism rate reported by the intelligence czar's office in December 2010."

In terms of statistics, this was accurate, as the DNI report in December 2010 ([PDF](#)) contained an assessment that 81 former prisoners (13.5 percent) were "confirmed" and 69 (11.5 percent) "suspected" of "reengaging in terrorist or insurgent activities after transfer." However, as has been the case since "reports" like these first began to be published, under the Bush administration (see this 2009 Seton Hall Law School report – [PDF](#)), the mainstream media has persistently refused to demand that the statistics be backed up with evidence.

The last time that anything resembling evidence was provided — in a short Pentagon report in May 2009 ([PDF](#)) — the *New York Times* shamefully [published a front-page story](#) entitled, "1 In 7 Detainees Rejoined Jihad, Pentagon Finds," stating that "74 prisoners released from

Guantánamo have returned to terrorism, making for a recidivism rate of nearly 14 percent."

It took a week for the *Times* to allow other commentators — Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann of the New America Foundation — to write [an op-ed discrediting Bumiller's article](#), in which they concluded, from an examination of the report, that a more probable figure for recidivism — based on the fact that there were "only 12 former detainees who can be independently confirmed to have taken part in terrorist acts directed at American targets, and eight others suspected of such acts" — was "about 4 percent of the 534 men who have been released."

Following this latest report, the mainstream media's response was more balanced than it was in the wake of the last DNI report, when [Fox News](#), for example, ran with "25 Percent Recidivism at Gitmo." Of particular significance was the [Associated Press](#) article, "US officials: Not quite so many Gitmo re-offenders." This article made a specific point of criticizing a Republican Congressional report issued in February, by the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee ([PDF](#)), which, in dealing with the "confirmed" and "suspected" cases, "added those two figures together, coming up with a much more dramatic rate of 27 percent of the roughly 600 detainees released returning to the battlefield," and was so one-sided that the Democrats on the Congressional committee refused to sign it, issuing instead a damning minority report ([PDF](#)).

[Speaking to CNN](#), Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Todd Breasseale "took exception" to media reports "characterizing the current recidivism rate at 28%." He said that "the intelligence bar for someone confirmed of returning to terrorism is much higher," as CNN described it, and, in his own words, explained, "Someone on the 'suspected' list could very possibly not be engaged in activities that are counter to our national security interests."

This was significant, although there are still problems with the 95 former prisoners who are supposedly confirmed as "recidivists." A year ago, when the New America Foundation issued its own report challenging the 2010 DNI claims ([PDF](#)), accompanied by an article in [Foreign Policy](#), the authors concluded, based on an assessment of available public documentation, that "the true rate for those who have taken up arms or are suspected of doing so is more like 6 percent, or one in 17," with another 2.2 percent "engaged or suspected to have engaged with insurgent groups that attack or attempt to attack non-US targets"; in other words, 49 men in total, with just 36 "engaged or suspected to have engaged with insurgent groups that attack or attempt to attack the United States, US citizens, or US bases abroad."

There is a huge gulf between this analysis (of 36 men confirmed or suspected of hostile engagement with US interests) and the current claims by the DNI, in which 167 men are described as confirmed or suspected of "planning terrorist operations, conducting a terrorist or insurgent attack against Coalition or host-nation forces or civilians, conducting a suicide bombing, financing terrorist operations, recruiting others for terrorist operations, and arranging for movement of individuals involved in terrorist operations."

In addition, my own research over the last few years has provided no reason for believing the figures produced by the Director of National Intelligence. All available reports, for example, indicate that there are only a small number of problematical ex-prisoners from any countries except Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, and, according to Afghan and Saudi officials, the number of "recidivists" from these two countries is no more than 45 in total.

in June 2010, Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, the director of ideological security at the Saudi interior ministry, told reporters, "Twenty-five of the 120 former detainees at the US 'war-on-terror' prison returned to radical Islamist activities after graduation from Riyadh's lauded rehab centre," as [AFP described it](#), and in September 2011, in the [Washington Post](#), Siyamak Herawi, a spokesman for the Afghan government, said that "most former prisoners led 'normal lives' after being released," although he added that the government estimated that

"between eight and 10 percent rejoined armed groups fighting the NATO-backed government"; in other words, somewhere between 16 and 20 of the 198 Afghan prisoners released.

With figures like these, it is, I believe, entirely appropriate not to trust the claims made by the Director of National Intelligence, without some actual evidence provided to accompany the headline-grabbing statistics, which, frankly, continue to function not as meaningful analysis of a genuine threat, but as nothing more than propaganda.

Originally published on the website of the [Future of Freedom Foundation](#).

Andy Worthington, a regular contributor to [The Public Record](#), is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison](#) and the [definitive Guantánamo prisoner list](#), published in March 2009. He maintains a blog at andyworthington.co.uk.

[Tweet](#)

Article printed from The Public Record: <http://pubrecord.org>

URL to article: <http://pubrecord.org/politics/10213/guantanamo-recidivism-medias/>

Copyright © 2009 The Public Record. All rights reserved.