

Understanding Recidivism: Contributing Factors and Pathways to Reform

Understanding Recidivism: Contributing Factors and Pathways to Reform

Crime is a tremendous problem that affects every part of the world, particularly America, but even more worrisome is habitual offending, referred to as *recidivism*. America has astronomical recidivism rates; it is a multifaceted issue that affects a large portion of the offender population (Flores, 2018, p.57). There is not a singular reason why this issue is so prevalent in America, but instead, there are a myriad of factors that play into recidivism. A considerable amount of research has been conducted to discover why recidivism occurs. These factors are often complex and frequently overlap with one another, which can make it significantly more difficult to study, but several pressing factors have been highlighted as huge contributors to this issue, including an offender's environment, the quality and amount of education they receive in prison, and their incarceration experience. These factors are crucial because they significantly impact the majority of offenders in various ways. Due to the high rate of recidivism in America, it is imperative that the underlying issues of recidivism be discovered so that the criminal justice system can work toward reducing this issue. There have been a multitude of proposed solutions implemented through policies, laws, and programs, but two noteworthy solutions offered in this paper to alleviate this issue are a greater emphasis on inmate education and inmate mental health assistance. It is unlikely that recidivism will be completely eradicated; despite this, it is crucial that more emphasis be placed on discovering recidivism's contributing factors and implementing solutions for this problem, considering that recidivism is responsible for a huge portion of the crime rate in America.

Recidivism is a term that is widely recognized among professionals and scholars in criminal justice and criminology. However, for those outside this field, it may not be as familiar. The term *recidivism* applies to individuals who have a tendency to relapse into a previous

condition or mode, particularly when referring to criminal behavior (Merriam-Webster). For this paper, the term *recidivism* will solely mean a relapse into criminal behavior. This term was borrowed from the French *récidivisme*, which ultimately derives from Medieval Latin *recidivāre*, meaning to relapse into sin or crime (Merriam-Webster). The earliest translation of recidivism, first known to be used in 1884, directly relates to the way it is applied to the field of criminology today. Although in the field of criminology, recidivism is only used to describe habitual crime, there is a wealth of complexities and problems that contribute to this troubling issue.

America has the highest rates of recidivism in the world, estimated to be around 80% of released prisoners being rearrested (Flores, 2018, p.57). In addition to this, America also contains the highest number of incarcerated individuals, estimated to be 2.3 million. These numbers alone point to an extremely prevalent problem of crime, particularly the number of already convicted individuals repeatedly engaging in crime once released from prison. Despite this, the number of incarcerated individuals in America does not directly correlate to why recidivism rates continue to thrive. Of course, there will always be individuals who engage in habitual crime, but it does not account for four-fifths of the once-incarcerated individuals for habitual offending. To discover why America has astronomical recidivism rates, one must look below the surface and explore the various complex problems that contribute to recidivism rates, such as a lack of emphasis on prisoner reintegration and a lack of education for individuals in and out of the correctional system.

One major problem that contributes to the recidivism rates in America pertains to the lack of education that is provided to offenders while incarcerated. The quality and material of the education that inmates receive heavily rely on an institution's access to programs, resources, and funding. Still, typically, inmate education provides education in areas of literacy and life skills.

The longer an offender is incarcerated, the harder it is for them to both learn and retain important educational skills, which is why inmate education is especially important when they are incarcerated at a young age or have been in custody for a long period of time. For inmates, these skills greatly enhance a positive outcome in life. According to Mohammed & Mohamed, they found the following:

Offender's lack of educational attainment negatively has impacts on their employment prospect which also negatively has effect on their physical and mental issues. Providing motivated offenders the opportunity to educate themselves, the offender's life can improve through the experiences of discipline, instilling confidence and stability (2015, p.273).

Their research indicates that the chance of an offender's success outside of prison, including not engaging in criminal activity, relies heavily on their education. Without proper knowledge of skills and training in educational areas, offenders have very little chance of success in society, particularly in areas of employment. Employment provides inmates with support and structure; without this, their chances of engaging in criminal activity can severely skyrocket.

Inmates' experiences in incarceration can vary significantly, but overall, incarceration is nothing short of difficult, which ultimately can lead to habitual offending. Facility overcrowding, violence from fellow inmates and staff, lack of resources, lack of mental/medical health treatment, and feelings of hopelessness are a few aspects that impact inmates daily (Prison conditions, 2025). Prison life is not designed to be comforting or agreeable, yet the incredible hardships prisoners experience make it all the more difficult for them to navigate life in and outside of prison. In a study conducted in 2022 by Loeffler & Nagin, they examined how prisoners' experience affects post-incarceration behavior, particularly criminal behavior, and

found that, “The negative, recidivism-reducing effects are most often observed in settings in which rehabilitative programming is emphasized; the positive, criminogenic effects, are generally found in settings where such programming is not emphasized” (p. 147). Their findings assert that an inmate's experience of incarceration does impact the likelihood of engaging in recidivism positively and negatively. The more manageable life inside prison is for inmates, the smoother their reintegration transition is. The deprivations and difficulties that inmates experience daily make success outside of prison less accessible, and the harder life outside of prison is for an offender, the easier it is to relapse into their old lifestyle of criminality.

The factors that play into recidivism are complex and difficult to pinpoint. Fortunately, an aspect that has been studied significantly is the effects of an offender's environment outside of incarceration and how it plays into the likelihood of engaging in crime post-release. In most cases, when an offender is released, they return home or to a community they are familiar with. This process is important because reintegration is incredibly difficult, regardless of how much time an offender spends inside prison; returning to an environment in which they are comfortable or familiar with negates a portion of their difficulties. When in need, people often return to what they are familiar with. However, for convicted individuals dealing with reentry, returning to their community can be detrimental; their environment may have been the very reason they initially decided to engage in criminal activity. Additionally, Chamberlain & Wallace found that, “the concentration of ex-offenders in particular areas limits their access to pro-social ties and increases the likelihood that they will associate with other ex-offenders, a factor known to contribute to recidivism and consequently, neighborhood crime (2016, p. 913). Furthermore, inmates typically return with just the clothes on their back and little to no money, causing them to look to their community for support, but when their community cannot provide the resources

they need to successfully reintegrate back into society, the probability of them going back into the criminal justice system increases significantly (Flores, 2018, p.8). These problems are especially prevalent when offenders come from lower-income neighborhoods with high poverty and crime rates.

Labelling and stigmatization also play a role in increasing. In the early days of the criminal justice system, retributive justice was the primary type of justice, which meant that individuals who engaged in criminal activity were not viewed as individual people, but instead only for the crime they committed. This has changed significantly since the ideas, views, and forms of justice have slowly adapted to include rehabilitative and restorative aspects, but it is almost impossible for an individual's perception of a person not to change when they commit a crime. Today, both society and the criminal justice system still battle with negative perceptions concerning convicted individuals, which can potentially cause harm to an offender recidivism (Tegeng & Abadi, 2018, P. 7). This harm can occur when an offender is applying for a job; for many employers, particularly those that offer above minimum wage, the risk of hiring an offender is too high in their eyes. Additionally, when a person is labeled as a criminal, it can be difficult for them to acquire resources to help them succeed in society. Faced with the possibility of unemployment, no help from the community, and the constant feeling of being viewed as solely the crime they committed, it is no surprise that offenders often return to what they know. People are resourceful, and offenders are no exception to this; to them, going back into the life they once had is the only possibility of surviving another day.

Recidivism is one of the most fundamental concepts in criminal justice because it serves as an indicator of how incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation affect offenders. (Tegeng & Abadi, 2018, p. 1). Additionally, access to recidivism rates allows both society and individuals

working in the field of criminal justice to see and examine the number of offenders who continue to engage in criminal acts despite their previous punishments. Crime in itself is incredibly difficult to address and prevent, but habitual offending can be significantly more difficult to address because once an individual engages in criminal activity, it becomes easier to continue to do so. It also poses the question of how effective criminal justice punitive punishments are if they are doing nothing to deter individuals. Because recidivism holds a prominent role in criminal justice, it is vital to understand contributing factors, how they emerge, and the frequency of each factor to emphasize, enforce, and establish policies, regulations, programs, and resources designed to reduce the frequency of recidivism.

Emphasizing the importance of reentry and correctional programs can greatly affect the outcome of an offender's success outside of prison walls, including the likelihood that they will participate in habitual crime. These programs can either be correctional or community-based, or both. Depending on the type of program, they can target one aspect of reentry or combat several aspects of reentry (Berghuis, 2018, paragraph 2). Areas the programs target include employment, housing, substance abuse, and social support. A correlation between offending and unemployment is a well-established fact, which is why vocational and educational programs are a worthy solution to reducing recidivism (Newton et al., 2018, abstract). These programs typically provide a range of in-depth services that are designed to target inmates' specific needs in these areas. A significant emphasis is placed on prisoner education, which includes literacy and numeracy courses and a chance to receive higher-level qualifications like certificates (p.274). Additionally, these types of programs provide inmates with skills vital to finding employment and remaining employed, such as work readiness and job placements to help improve poor work history and improve skill sets (Newton et al., 2018, p.188).

Two noteworthy aspects of educational and vocational programs are human capital and certification (Mohammed & Mohamed, 2015, p.274). Human capital is one of the most common reasons cited for assigning inmates to vocational education training. Theorists who study human capital claim that the better trained and equipped a worker is, the more they will appeal to potential employers. The concept of human capital is incorporated in training curricula through the implementation of general education, employable skills, literacy, and hands-on technical skills. The emphasis on its use in these types of programs lies in the idea that inmates who have acquired such skills and knowledge will have a better chance of being hired and being successful at their job. The majority of inmates emerge from incarceration with very little money, which is why being desirable to employers is vastly important, because having a job that provides ample financial support could be the difference between the decision to engage or not engage in crime. Jobs also provide inmates with structure, which can help them stay focused and on track with their goals and needs. Certification, another important aspect of educational vocational programs, lies in the belief that employers use individuals' criminal records, licenses, certificates, and other documents as a signal or indicator of their character (p. 274). When prison programs offer opportunities for certificates, they provide inmates with greater chances for success in employment because possessing physical documents that can attest to their knowledge and reliability as a person is a very important factor for employers. As a convicted offender's chance of employment increases, so can their chance of recidivism decrease.

Another solution to reduce recidivism in offenders is to enforce the use of mental health assistance programs for offenders serving sentences in institutional and community-based corrections. A total shift upwards in the way mental health is viewed in society has occurred over the past couple of decades. Despite this, the significance of mental health has not been

considered nearly as much when offenders are considered. Numerous factors contribute to this, but in 2017, Butorac et al. noted that, “the central problem is that treatment and rehabilitation are seemingly incompatible with a larger philosophy of punishment through incapacitation” (p.124). No matter how punitive a sentence an offender is serving, nor the magnitude of the crime they committed, the idea of rehabilitating them is never deemed as important as the sentence itself. Unfortunately, when mental health is put on the wayside, there are very few positive outcomes that derive from it for both society and offenders. It is for this reason that mental health assistance should be considered a probable solution to reducing recidivism because, in contrast to the general population, offenders are 2 to 4 times more likely to have major mental health problems such as depressive and psychotic disorders (p. 124). Poor mental health in offenders could be an indicator of why they initially engaged in crime, and if offenders who are already dealing with mental health issues are placed in a rigid, sometimes violent environment like prison without any or little mental health assistance, they will have extreme difficulties navigating those issues while incarcerated, which can then exacerbate those problems post-release

A crucial function of the criminal justice system in America is to correct and deter future offenders, yet habitual crime continues to surge. Recidivism is a fundamental concept in the criminal justice system because it serves as an indicator of the effectiveness of sentencing and rehabilitative programs. Recidivism affects a large portion of the offender population, creating cause for concern when looking at how effective the criminal justice system is when it comes to deterring individuals from continuing to engage in criminal activity. The causes of habitual offending do not solely rest on one factor but instead on many complex ones, such as inmate education and inmate prison experience. A plethora of research exists surrounding the causes of

recidivism, but it has not been successfully translated as well as it could be into valuable solutions. For this reason, more emphasis needs to be placed on exploring the causes of recidivism, particularly the factors that affect the vast majority of offenders, to create more programs that are better designed to address and reduce recidivism. The criminal justice system has many functions, and reducing crime is one of those, yet America's recidivism rates continue to surge. Reforms, especially in the areas of rehabilitative programs for inmates, must be implemented if there is ever to be a positive reduction in recidivism rates. Although society has a part in reducing recidivism, this problem is largely up to the criminal justice system and legislators to solve, which is why changes need to be made in how sentencing and rehabilitation are utilized for offenders.

References

- Berghuis, M. (2018). Reentry programs for adult male offender recidivism and reintegration: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 62(14), 4655-4676.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18778448>
- Chamberlain, A. W., & Wallace, D. (2016). Mass reentry, neighborhood context and recidivism: Examining how the distribution of parolees within and across neighborhoods impacts recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 33(5), 912-941.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2015.1012095>
- Equal Justice Initiative (2025). *Prison Conditions*. <https://eji.org/issues/prison-conditions/>
- Esparza Flores, N. (2018). Contributing factors to mass incarceration and recidivism. *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science*, 6(1), 4.
<https://doi.org/10.31979/THEMIS.2018.0604>
- Lin, T., Chen, H., & Wu, J. (2023). Research on the impact of restorative justice implementation on the social reintegration of offenders and the reduction of recidivism rates. *Law and Economy*, 2(11), 25-36. <https://www.paradigmpress.org/le/article/view/864>
- Loeffler, C. E., & Nagin, D. S. (2022). The impact of incarceration on recidivism. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 5(1), 133-152. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-030920-112506>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d). Recidivism. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved September 29, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/recidivism>

- Mohammed, H., & Mohamed, W. A. W. (2015). Reducing recidivism rates through vocational education and training. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 204, 272-276.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.08.151>
- Newton, D., Day, A., Giles, M., Wodak, J., Graffam, J., & Baldry, E. (2018). The impact of vocational education and training programs on recidivism: A systematic review of current experimental evidence. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 62(1), 187-207. journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0306624X16645083
- Tegeng, G., & Abadi, H. (2018). Exploring factors contributing to recidivism: The case of Dessie and Woldiya correctional centers. *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*, 9(4), 1-12.
<https://sci-hub.se/10.4172/2151-6200.1000384>