




Rethinking Recidivism


PROFESSOR MICHAEL C. CAMPBELL, PH.D.
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF DENVER



The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, defines recidivism as “***a person’s relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person receives sanctions or undergoes intervention for previous crime***” (National Institute of Justice, 2021)

Why rethink recidivism?

- ▶ Definition is exclusively negative
- ▶ Often misses the role of legal authorities (arrest, revocation, etc...)
- ▶ Binary measures omit frequency, seriousness and length of time to new offenses
- ▶ Growing consensus among policymakers, practitioners and academics that this is inadequate



”The historical emphasis on recidivism among policy analysts, practitioners, and scholars reflects, in part, a desire by researchers and institutions to establish a common “success rate” indicator. ***But it is quickly apparent that success and failure are relative concepts—and that crude dichotomies fail to capture the real changes that people returning from incarceration experience.*** Recidivism is therefore limited as a performance measure or metric for success.” (National Academy of Sciences, 2022)

Key themes emerge from research

1. Link recidivism measures to known behavioral trends in desistance
2. Incorporate positive measures of outcomes across multiple domains

1. Link recidivism to the realities of desistance from crime

- ▶ “Recidivist” vs. “non-Recidivist” dichotomy obscures reality of crime
- ▶ Desistance is gradual, involves relapses and failures like addiction

FACTORS SHAPING DESISTANCE

- ▶ Receiving communities are a key factor in desistance
- ▶ Adult roles and behaviors: family bonds, employment, education
- ▶ Cognitive change: shifts in identity, worthiness, addressing trauma, substance addiction
- ▶ Self-efficacy, attitudes and civic engagement

2. Incorporate positive measures of outcomes across multiple interrelated domains

- ▶ Housing
 - ▶ Formerly incarcerated 10 times more likely to be homeless
 - ▶ Homelessness and instability undermine public safety, life outcomes
- ▶ Employment
 - ▶ Reduces financial stress
 - ▶ Associated with reduced offending (desistance)
- ▶ Family and social relationships
 - ▶ Key factor, especially for those returning from prison
 - ▶ Strong bonds support desistance

Positive measure domains (continued)

- ▶ Physical and mental health
 - ▶ Necessary to sustain housing, employment
 - ▶ Depression a key factor in desistance
- ▶ Peer support
- ▶ Civic engagement
- ▶ Education

Implications: promises and challenges of recidivism data

PROMISES

- ▶ Data linked to realities of desistance
 - ▶ Improve public safety
 - ▶ Improve outcomes for individuals and communities
 - ▶ Provide guidance for practitioners
- ▶ Positive measures of recidivism
 - ▶ Acknowledge complexity of desistance and reentry
 - ▶ Capture magnitude and severity of offending

CHALLENGES

- ▶ Can be wielded against agencies, programs and justice-involved individuals
- ▶ Requires careful context that public may not consider

RESOURCES

- ▶ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2022. “The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison.” Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26459>.
- ▶ National Institute of Justice. 2021. Lila Kazemian, “Pathways to Desistance From Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice,” NCJ 301503, in Desistance From Crime: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2021), NCJ 301497.