



**Recidivist offenders in Iceland:  
What type of crimes do they commit  
and what are the distinctive features  
of their offences?**

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## Abstract

Tilgangur rannsóknarinnar var að greina síbrotamenn á Íslandi, fjölda fangelsisdóma sem þeir afplánuðu, aldur þeirra og við fyrsta, og þriðja fangelsisdóm ásamt því að greina hvaða tegund brots leiddi til fangelsisvistar í hverri afplánun. Gögn rannsóknarinnar voru byggð á gagnagrunnum Fangelsismálastofnunnar ríkisins. Í rannsókninni var síbrotamaður skilgreindur sem einstaklingur sem hafði afplánað óskilorðsbundinn fangelsisdóm þrisvar sinnum eða oftár á tímabilinu 1995-2012. Samkvæmt skilgreiningunni voru 185 karlmenn og þrjár konur í rannsóknargögnunum sem voru skilgreindir síbrotamenn og voru þeir á aldursbilinu 15-76 ára en einungis voru upplýsingar um karlkyns afbrotamenn greindar í rannsókninni. Niðurstöður sýndu að meirihluti síbrotamannanna hlutu fyrsta fangelsisdóminn á aldursbilinu 15-24 ára og meirihluti síbrotamannanna hlutu aftur fangelsisdóma eftir þriðju afplánun. Niðurstöður gáfu einnig til kynna að marktækur munur var á milli tegunda brota eftir aldri síbrotamanna við fyrsta dóm. Þá gáfu niðurstöðurnar til kynna að meirihluti brota síbrotamanna töldust til vægari brota þegar brot voru flokkuð eftir alvarleika. Af niðurstöðum má álykta að nauðsynlegt er að skoða betur hegðun síbrotamanna og félagslegt umhverfi þeirra til að reyna að sporna við afbrotum á Íslandi.

The aim of the study was to analyze recidivist offenders in Iceland, number of prison sentence they served, age at first and third prison sentence and what was the main type of offence that lead to each prison sentence. The research data was based on The Prison and Probation Administration databases. A recidivist offender was defined in the research as an individual who had served an unconditioned prison sentence three times or more within the time period 1995-2012. A total of 185 males, aged 15-76 years, matched the definition of a recidivist in the study. Three women were defined as recidivist offenders in Iceland but they are excluded from the study. The results indicated that majority of recidivist offenders in Iceland were first imprisoned at the age of 15-24 years. The findings also indicated that there was a significant difference between type of offence by the age at first prison sentence. Finally, the results indicated that the majority of the recidivists' offences were within the category of lower severe offences. In conclusion, the results indicate that it is of great importance to study the behaviour and social environment of recidivist offenders in Iceland more thoroughly to design prevention and intervention strategies.

*Keywords: recidivism, recidivist offenders, type of crime, severity of offences*

*Foreword and Acknowledgements*

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BSc Psychology degree, Reykjavík University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

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Recidivist offenders in Iceland: What type of crimes do they commit and what are the distinctive features of their offences?

More than four decades ago Wolfgang, Figlio, Tracey and Sellin (1985) reported that only a small group of recidivist offenders were responsible for the majority of crimes. The impact of their findings reverberates to this day (Langan & Levin, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Nijhof, Kemp, Engels, & Wientjes, 2008). To reduce crime rates it is important to understand which developmental progressions in criminal careers are necessary to analyse the offender's behaviour (Ramchand, MacDonald, Haviland, & Morral, 2009). The recidivism of offenders is of interest to all societies and an important factor of the impact of criminal justice system. According to Bonta Rugge, and Dauvergne (2003) it is important for the police, the courts, crime preventions and corrections, to know the offenders' recidivism and the distinctive offenses this group of offenders commits to be able to design appropriate interventions. According to Andrews, and Bonta (2003) recidivism, often defined as a future criminal offence followed by a previous offense, is what the scientific society is focusing on when trying to predict why some offenders return to prison while others do not (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).

Although recidivism is considered to be a key aspect in understanding offenders and their offending behaviour there is limited information available concerning recidivist offenders and the distinctive feature of their offences. Prior studies almost exclusively focused on finding the predictive factors of the recidivist's 'criminal path such as the offenders' lifestyle, substance abuse, prior history of mental health problems and marital status (Murray, Irving, Farrington, Colman, & Bloxsom, 2010).

There is a convergence when analyzing recidivist offenders and the age distribution of their crimes. The "age factor", defined as when future recidivist offenders start to commit crimes, is an interesting piece of the big criminal puzzle. In a longitudinal study Nijhof et al.

(2008) the authors investigated criminal pathways of children and early adolescents, starting under the age of fourteen years old, and the extent to which characteristics of the first crime influenced criminal pathways. The result showed that after only two years from the first contact with the police, 53.5% of the participants had already become recidivists. These findings support prior studies that younger first offenders are more likely to become recidivist offenders as adults than older first offenders. The literature also agrees that the majority of recidivists' offenders change their criminal behaviour as according to statics their crimes drop drastically around the age of forty (Blokland, Nagin, & Nieuwebeerta, 2005; Harer, 1995; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Kazemian, LeBlanc, Farrington, & Pease, 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2003). There is a strong indication that the youngest offenders are much more likely to lead to the recidivism path of crimes than the older offenders (Jones, Hua, Donnelly, McHutchison, & Heggie, 2006; Makkai & Ratcliffe, 2004; Ross & Guarnieri, 1996; Thompson, 1995). For example the database of New Zealand's department of corrections reported that 71 % of offenders aged twenty and younger were reimprisoned within sixty months, while only 35 % of those aged over forty were reimprisoned (Nadesu, 2009).

In analyzing the offender's recidivistic pathway it is important to examine the offence type they commit. Recidivism is considered to be subject to type of offence but researchers have not yet been able to conclude if types and seriousness of committed crimes can predict types and frequency of further offenses (Blumstein, Cohen, Piquero, & Visser, 2010; Nagin & Pogarsky, 2004; Nieuwebeerta, Nagin, & Blokland, 2009). Nadesu (2009) did a sixty months follow-up analysis of reconviction patterns among released prisoners in New Zealand. The result showed that reimprisonment rate of acquisitive offenders, those convicted of theft, car conversion and burglary was very high (Nadesu, 2009). Studies from United States resembles the findings from New Zealand and according to Song and Lieb (1995) Washington State correctional database showed that 50% of recidivists, sentenced for drug

offenses, had criminal history for other prior drug offenses. Property offenders were the next most likely to have repeated the same type of offense. Murder, robbery and sex offenders were the least likely to have current criminal behaviour that was the same type as that committed in the past (Song & Lieb, 1995). These findings show a trend in the recidivists' criminal pathway but nevertheless the recidivism phenomena is far from being clearly understood and further studies are needed to approach the criminal path of recidivism.

There is a widespread accord in all societies that some crimes are more severe than others (Liu, Francis, & Soothill, 2011; Ramchand et al., 2009). According to the literature (Langan & Levin, 2002) the majority of recidivist offenders generally commit the least severe offences such as property offences (e.g. theft, burglary, fraud), all of which are defined as acquisitive offences in Icelandic criminal laws. Those crimes are generally thought of as crimes for money and the offenders often named high rates offenders due to the offence high frequency rate (Langan & Levin, 2002). Unfortunately, the literature does not supply comprehensive information on measured definition of severity of the types of crimes the recidivist's offenders commit. The limited information available on recidivism and the recidivist offenders focuses primarily on the different categories of crimes their offences fall under but lack greatly when it comes to the severity of the offenses.

The reduction of recidivism can be considered as the fundamental goal of the correctional system. Understanding recidivism can provide information that has value for all facets of the criminal justice system. Similar to other countries the Icelandic justice system deals with individuals who repeatedly return to prison from early age and thereby start their recidivistic criminal carrier (The Prison and Probation Administration, 2011).

Comprehensive information about recidivist offenders and the distinctive features of crimes they commit is lacking in the Icelandic correctional system. According to the Prison and Probation Administration (PPA) (2011) Iceland is well behind in developing national

recidivism datasets that are widely accessible for research purposes. Part of the reason might be related to the legislation of privacy and the ethical constraint in working with individuals and their criminal history. Other factors that contribute to limited data on the subject are problem of linking different databases across the justice sector and the risk of accidental publication of those documents (The Prison and Probation Administration, 2011). It is important to study recidivist offenders as a group to be able to understand the leading factors of recidivism. The annual reports from the Prison and Probation Administration (2011) provide a brief general overview of different categorizations between type of offences committed, overview of sentences and the frequency of crimes. The current study provides an insight to the distinctive feature of recidivism in Iceland. In particular, the aim was to analyze number of prison sentences recidivist's offenders served, the age when the recidivists were first sentenced to prison and the main type of crime of each sentence.

Based on the literature, the following hypothesis were put forward in this study; 1) the majority of recidivist offenders served their first prison sentence within the age range of 15-24 years, 2) majority of the recidivist offenders were first imprisoned for acquisitive offence act and younger recidivist offenders (15-24 of age) were more likely to have been sentenced to prison for such crimes than older offenders 3) majority of the offences that recidivist offenders committed were of lowest severity offence acts (lowest severity rate from 1-3).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 185 male individuals matched the definition of a recidivist offender according to the analyzed database at the Prison and Probation Administration (PPA). A recidivist offender was defined as an individual who had served an unconditional prison sentence three times or more in Icelandic prisons. Women were excluded from the analyses since they were only 3% of total recidivist offenders according to the PPA database. The

mean age when the recidivist offenders were sentenced to prison for the first time was  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.07$  years, ( $SD = 7.9$ , ranging from 15 – 63 years). The mean age when the recidivist offenders were sentenced to prison for the third time was  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.12$  years, ( $SD = 9.2$ , ranging from 18 – 76 years). Pre-existing information on the individuals in Iceland who matched the definition of a recidivist offender were analysed and no direct contact was needed with the offenders.

## **Procedure**

A formal application was filed to The Data Protection Authority for a legal permission to collect data for the current study and the application was accepted in February 2012. Data collection was conducted at the Prison and Probation Administration (PPA) at Borgartún 6 in Reykjavík, from beginning of March to end of April 2012. Two computerized data bases (Lotus notes and FMS) were used to collect data but in cases where information was missing the offenders' verdict files were used which were placed in a special file room at the PPA.

First the PPA office manager listed the 185 individuals who met the criteria for being a recidivist offender and served prison sentence for the third time within the time period January 1995 to December 2005 according to the PPA database. All additional prison sentences after 2005 until 2012 were available from the verdict files. The data collection was transferred to SPSS computer program statistics. To prevent any personal tracing while conducting the study each offender were given an ID number ranging from 1-185. The PPA had exclusive access to total research data information.

## **Measure**

The measured variables used in the study were as following: 1. Age at first sentence, ranging from 15-76. 2. Age at third sentence, ranging from 18-76. 3. Age was divided into two categories, 1, ranging from 15-24 years of age, 2, ranging from 25-76 years of age, 4.



Age divided into three categories, 1, ranging from 15-24 years of age, 2, ranging from 25-34 years of age and 3, ranging from 35 years of age and older. 5. Total sentences after the third sentence. 6. Total sentences. 7. Type of offence when first sentenced to prison. 8. Type of offence when sentenced to prison for the third time. 9. Type of offence when sentenced to prison for the fourth time. 10. Type of offence when sentenced to prison for the fifth time. 11. Type of offence when sentenced to prison for the sixth time. 12. The recidivists' offenders' age range varied from 15-76 years. Severity and type of offence was replicated from the Prison and Probation Administration (PPA) taxonomy and the Icelandic criminal law due to low or high severity of offences (e.g. 1-3 = lowest severity offence, 4 = medium severity offence, 5-7 = highest severity offence). The severity and type of offence categorize were as follows: 1 = Traffic act offence, 2 = other offences, 3 = Acquisitive offences, 4 = Drug offence, 5 = Violent offence, 6 = Sexual offence, and 7 = Homicide. Arson was the one category that was excluded from the displayed tables because, according to the data, none of the recidivist offenders had committed arson offence act within the time period 1995-2012.

A total of 5-15% of data information was listed as missing in the dataset, with the value of 99; in cases where no information was available (e.g. information was missing in Table 2 for 26 individuals when first sentenced to prison).

### **Statistical analysis**

First descriptive statistics was examined for all variables (e.g. frequency of type of offences, age and sentences). Second, the difference between type of offence by age groups, number of prison sentences and severity of offences was assessed by cross-tabulation. The statistical significance of difference was evaluated using the chi-square test of independence.

## Results

Table 1 reports total number of recidivist offenders in Iceland and how often they returned to prison. Of the 185 individuals who were defined as recidivists, a total of 58.9% (119) did return to prison after the third sentence. However, the offenders who did not return to prison after serving the third sentence were 41.1% (76).

Table 1

Total Prison sentences after the third sentence

Total sentences after third sentence	<i>n</i>	%
0	76	41.1
1	57	30.8
2	20	10.8
3	16	8.6
4	10	5.4
5	2	1.1
6-9	4	3.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the recidivist's age group and type of offences when the offenders were sentenced to prison for the first and the third time. Total of 66% (105) offences were committed by the youngest age group (15-24) when first sentenced to prison while 24.5% (39) offences were committed by the offenders aged 25-34. At third sentence a total of 66% (122) offences were committed by the youngest age group, 15-24 while 25-34 years were responsible for 25.4% (47) offenses. Total of 31 offences were committed by the oldest age group, 35 and older.

Table 2

*Descriptive statistics for the age group and offence type when the offenders were sentenced to prison for the first time and the third time*

Sentences	15-24 years							25-34 years							35 years and older							Total (%)	Total (%)
	T	O	A	D	V	S	Total (%)	T	O	A	D	V	S	Total (%)	T	O	A	D	V	S	Total (%)		
First sentence	30	1	58	2	13	1	105 (66)	18	1	13	6	0	1	39 (24.5)	9	1	3	2	0	0	15 (9.5)		159(100)
Third sentence	28	9	43	26	13	3	122 (66)	16	3	17	10	1	0	47 (25.4)	6	1	7	2	0	0	16 (8.6)		185 (100)

*Note.* T = traffic offence, O = other offences, A = acquisitive offence, D = drug offence, V = violent offence, S = sex offence.

Table 3 shows percentage within age groups when they were first imprisoned for their offences. The table reports that of those aged 15-24 were responsible for the majority of offences (105 offences) while the offenders aged 25-34 committed a total of 39 offences. Of those aged 35 older were responsible for 15 offences. To test the hypothesis that the majority of the offences that the age group 15-24 committed were of acquisitive offence, a chi-square test was conducted. The results indicated a significant difference between two age groups (15-24 and 25 and older) and type of offence (i.e. acquisitive offence versus other offence) ( $\chi^2(1, N=105) = 9.39, p < .05$ ). Hence, those who were young when they were first sentenced to prison were more likely to have committed an acquisitive offence than those who were older at first sentence.

Table 3

*Descriptive statistics for the age group and type of offence when the recidivist offenders were first sentenced to prison*

Age group	<u>Type of offence</u>							Total
	Traffic act offence	Other offence	Acquisitive offence	Drug offence	Violent offence	Sexual offence	Homicide offence	
15 – 24 years	28.6%(30)	1.0%(1)	55.2%(58)	1.9%(2)	12.4%(13)	1.0%(1)	0.0%	100%(105)
25 – 34 years	46.2%(18)	2.6%(1)	33.3%(13)	15.4%(6)	0.0%	2.6%(1)	0.0%	100%(39)
35 years and older	60.0%(9)	6.7%(1)	20.0%(3)	13.3%(2)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%(15)
Total	35.8%(57)	1.9%(3)	46.5%(74)	6.3%(10)	8.2%(13)	1.3%(2)	0.0%	100%(159)

Table 4 shows that acquisitive offence was relatively the most common offence type (46.5%) when the recidivist offenders were first imprisoned and traffic act was the second most common offence 35.8% . Table 4 also reports frequency rates of the sentence offence group categorized by severity of the offence ranging from 1-7. The main reason for the recidivist offender's first prison sentence was acquisitive offence 46.5% (74) which was defined as one of three lowest severity offences. Acquisitive offence was also the main offence type from the third sentence to the fifth and at sixth sentence the main two reasons for sentencing was acquisitive offence 37.5% (12) and drug offence 35.5% (12) defined in the study as medium severity offence. Within the time period of the research there was one offender (0.9%) who committed highest severity offence that lead to his fourth prison sentence. Of all recidivist offenders sentences a total of 9.6% (9) served prison sentence for sexual violence whereas violent offences were total of 39.3% (43) of all sentences both of defined in the research as highest severity offences. Traffic act offence was the reason for imprisonment in 35.8% (57) cases; violent offence was the main reason for sentencing in 8.2% (13) and 1.3% (2) for sexual offence act.

Table 4

*Frequency and percentage rates of each prison sentence and the offence group categorized by severity of the offences, ranging from 1-7*

	Traffic act offence 1	Other offence 2	Acquisitive offence 3	Drug offence 4	Violent offence 5	Sexual offence 6	Homicide offence 7	<i>n</i>
First sentence	35.8% (57)	1.9% (2)	46.5% (74)	6.3% (10)	8.2% (13)	1.3% (2)	0.0%	159
Third sentence	27.0% (50)	7.0% (13)	36.2% (67)	20.5% (38)	7.6% (14)	1.6% (3)	0.0%	185
Fourth sentence	18.9% (21)	3.6% (4)	39.6% (44)	27.0% (30)	8.1% (9)	1.8% (2)	0.9% (1)	111
Fifth sentence	18.2% (10)	1.8% (1)	36.4% (20)	32.7% (18)	9.1% (5)	1.8% (1)	0.0%	55
Sixth sentence	12.5% (4)	3.1% (1)	37.5% (12)	37.5% (12)	6.3% (2)	3.1% (1)	0.0%	32

*Note.* First – sixth sentence = unconditioned prison sentence, 1-7 = severity of offences (1 - 3 = lowest severity offence, 4 = medium severity offence, 5 - 7 = highest severity offence)

Traffic act offence 27% and drug offence 20.5% were second most common committed offence that led to the recidivist offender's third sentence. When the seriousness of offence types was analyzed through all served sentences the result showed (see Table 4) that the recidivist offenders committed 380 acts defined as lowest severity offences (1-3), 108 of the offences were of medium severity offence (4) and 53 offences were defined as the highest severity offences (5-7).

## Discussion

The current findings suggest that recidivist offenders were young when they served their first prison sentence which match prior studies (Blokland, et al., 2005; Harer, 1995; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Kazemian et al., 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2003). The fact that young offenders are more likely to become recidivist offenders than older offenders emphasises the importance of either separate young offenders from the older offenders in prisons or find other options for them to serve their sentences. Although prisons nowadays are generally much more a correctional facility for offenders than a place for punishment the inmates come from different backgrounds, serving different prison sentences for different

severity of offences and thereby the young first time offenders should not be intermingled with older and more severe offenders.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that 41% of the offenders who had served three prison sentences did not return to prison. Hence, 59% of the offenders did return to prison, most of them once but approximately 29% two up to nine times (ranging from one sentence up to nine sentences after the third sentence). According to the literature (Blokland et al., 2005; Harer, 1995; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Kazemian et al., 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2003) those offenders who did not return to prison often stopped offending or changed their criminal behaviour around the age of forty.

The current results matched the research hypothesis that the majority of recidivist offenders in the youngest age group committed crimes within the acquisitive offence category. It was also hypothesized that the majority of the offences committed by the recidivist offenders were within the lower severity offence category. The current results confirm the research hypothesis that majority of offenders served their first prison sentence ranged from 16-24 years of age and also confirmed that majority of the recidivists offenders in Iceland were first imprisoned for acquisitive offences act. According to Langan and Levin (2002) the majority of recidivist offenders generally committed the least severe offences such as acquisitive offences (e.g. theft, burglary, fraud) and the offenders who committed that type of offence act were often seeking for ways to finance their livings whereas the majority of the recidivist offenders did not have any stable employment (Langan & Levin, 2002). Traffic act offence, other offences and acquisitive offences were all considered to be lowest rates offences whereas those types of offences were most common in the correctional system. This indicates that recidivist offenders are in general “small criminals” who return to prison regularly but the sentences are often short term prison sentences. The current study resembled Langan and Levin study (2002) whereas majority of offences that recidivist offenders

committed in Iceland within the time period 1995-2012 were defined as of lowest severity offences acts.

The findings indicate that it is possible to define recidivist offenders as high rate offenders; they commit less severe crimes and serve shorter prison sentences, thus they are more inclined to offend more often than those who commit more serious crimes and therefore serve longer imprisonments.

The study has some limitations which need to be addressed. The main limitation of the current study is that behind one prison sentence there can be more than one offence and the severity of the offence decides the sentencing. Furthermore, no official criteria were available on severity of crimes and the offences types can vary in severity escalations between countries. Thereby the findings of severity of offences in current study did not report valid criteria of severity. Although the results confirmed the hypothesis, it was difficult to put forward whereas the taxonomy of the type of offence severity was designed with accordance to the Prison and Probation Administration (PPA) and the Icelandic criminal laws, and not in accordance to national measure of offence severity. Other limitation of the study is when offenders are released from prison on parole and offend again the offence registration can be confusing when collecting data information.

Future studies should focus on comparing recidivist offenders to other offenders groups and thereby give an even better understanding of the nature of recidivism. Future studies should also focus on separating the mentally ill recidivist offenders from those who are not mentally ill. Finally, a study that analyses the predictive factors of the Icelandic recidivist offender (e.g. marital status, drug abuse etc.) would be an important piece of the recidivism puzzle.

In conclusion, the current results indicate that the majority of offences that recidivist offenders in Iceland commit are defined as low severe offences and thereby can be identified

as small criminals. The findings reported that majority of recidivist offenders began their imprisonment in the beginning of their adulthood. It is therefore necessary to strengthen social support for the young offenders and do the utmost to prevent them from committing crimes and being imprisoned among older and more persistent offenders. The results suggest that it is of great importance to find ways to better understand recidivism and its criminal nature as it is imperative for all responsible societies to find ways to decrease crime rates and increase social well-being.



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