Recidivism among Icelandic Prison Inmates
Released in 2009-2011
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Countries that expect inmates to return to the community after serving their sentence in prison aim to reduce recidivism. The purpose of this study is to evaluate recidivism rates among inmates who are released from security prisons compared to prisoners released from halfway houses. The study consisted of 322 Icelandic male prisoners that were released back to the community in 2009-2011 after serving a sentence in Iceland and their progress followed up for a two year period. The results show that those who finished their sentence at a halfway house had lower recidivism rates than those who served all their sentence in prison. The mean age was lower among those who recidivated and there was a difference in recidivism rates between offence categories. There were no significant differences in recidivism rates with regard to the number of prior incarcerations. These results could therefore have implications for the Icelandic prison system and future research in the field of forensic psychology.

Keywords: Recidivism, prison, age, offence categories, halfway house, criminal history

Lykilhugtök: Endurkomutíðni, fangelsi, aldur, brotaflokkur, athvarf, afbrotasaga
Foreword and Acknowledgements

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BSc degree in psychology at Reykjavík University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.
Recidivism among Icelandic Prison Inmates Released in 2009-2011

The main goal of incarceration, in most countries, is to reduce recidivism rates. Rising incarceration rates over the past decades in Iceland have not just meant that more people are being locked up, it also means a growing number of prisoners are being released back into the community. In 2009, 128 inmates were serving sentences in prisons in Iceland. This number rose to 160 inmates in 2013 (“Tölfræðilegur upplýsingar um fullnustu refsinga fyrir árin 2009-2013,” n.d.). During the same time period (2009-2013), the number of those waiting to serve their sentence increased from 213 to 388 (“Tölfræðilegur upplýsingar um fullnustu refsinga fyrir árin 2009-2013,” n.d.). Following this rise in incarceration rates the following questions need to be asked: How many of these inmates will return to prison and which factors predict recidivism the most? Does a prior criminal record affect the likelihood of a successful return to society, for instance in regard to living a non-criminal life style? Does a young age when the first crime is committed or the age of incarceration increase the probability that an individual will reoffend? Do different crimes or how an offender is released back to the community have an impact on how a person will fair in the community outside the prison walls?

**Different Offending Groups**

Not all groups of offenders have the same recidivism rate. A meta-analysis by Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2005) verified a low recidivism rate among sexual offenders especially when it comes to committing comparable offences. Hanson et al., (2005) found that from analysing 82 recidivism studies that only 13.7% of the sexual offenders were convicted for another sexual crime and that they were more likely to recidivate with a nonsexual crime or 36.2% Hanson et al., (2005). Study by Langan & Levin (2002) that used profiles of prisoners released from 15 different states in the US showed that 46.9% of the inmates were reconvicted within 3 years. The same study showed a lower recurrence among offenders
imprisoned for rape or other sexual assault, or between 22-27% (Langan & Levin, 2002). A Drug offenders tend to have higher recidivism compared to sexual offenders (Spohn & Holleran, 2002). The same study showed that drug offenders were five to six times more likely to have a new charge brought against them again compared to others groups in the study. Other offences comparable to property offences (i.e. burglary, larceny theft and so on) had an even higher recidivism rate than drug offences or 53.4% over a three year period.

Age

Age has been associated with recidivism and prior studies have shown that the younger an individual is when starting their criminal behaviour, the more likely they are to recidivate later on. Thus an early age of committing a crime seems often to be followed by an extended criminal career (Farrington, 1986). Statistics from the Icelandic Prison and Probation Administration suggest that a large proportion of crimes perpetrated are committed by young people ("Tölfræðilegar upplýsingar um fullnustu refsinga fyrir árin 2009-2013," n.d.). A quarter of all inmates serving in Icelandic prisons during the years 2009-2013 were 25 years old or younger. A meta-analysis by Hanson (2002) showed that young offenders (18-24 years old), had the highest recidivism rate of 31% compared to older offenders, 50 years or older, who recidivated at a rate of less than 10%. A study by Helmus, Thornton, Hanson, & Babchishin (2012) found that age was more strongly related to nonsexual violent recidivism than to sexual crimes. However it has been pointed out by Farrington (1986) that different types of crimes peak at various ages.

Criminal History

The age at first offence and the number of prior offences are the factors that are most associated with recidivism (Ross & Guarnieri, 1996; Phillips et al., 2005). An interesting study was conducted by Eke, Seto, & Williams (2011) where the progress of 541 male offenders was followed for an average of 4.1 years. Nearly half of the offenders, or 253 of
them, had prior offence charges. The overall recidivism rate for the sample in the study was 32% but for those who had prior offences the recidivism rate went up to 45%. It is not within the scope of this paper to evaluate what affects this relationship, be it genetic factors, problems getting a job due to prior criminal history or other social factors. However, it cannot be ignored that a criminal history plays a part in how individuals get on after serving a sentence.

Re-entry Program

Various treatments and interventions are applied to minimize the odds of offenders re-offending. One of the means that is available for some offenders is a re-entry programme. Petersilia defined re-entry as “all activities and programming conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law abiding citizens” (as cited in Wikoff, Linhorst, & Morani, 2012, p. 3). Wikoff et al., (2012) studied whether involvement in a re-entry program was associated with reduced recidivism rates among offenders who were no longer under the supervision of the prison system. Former prisoners were invited to take part in a program called Project Re-Connect (PRC) for six months. Survival analysis was used to compare recidivism rates between 158 non-participants and 122 PRC participants. The results showed that 7.4% of those who went through PRC had been convicted of new charges by the end of the observation period compared to 20.3% of non-participants. The results suggest that re-entry assistance may reduce recidivism among offenders (Wikoff et al., 2012). A study by Lovins, Lowenkamp, & Latessa (2009) examined whether reintegration of sex offenders through a halfway house would decrease recidivism amongst sex offenders. The results showed that high risk sexual offenders who were released directly from prisons into society were two times more likely to reoffend compared to other high risk offenders, who went through halfway a house by (Lovins et al., 2009).
On the basis of the extensive research in the field of recidivism four hypotheses were presented regarding Icelandic prisoners that re-entered society during the years 2009-2011. The first hypothesis proposes that recidivism is lower when individuals finished their sentence in halfway houses compared to inmates released from a security prisons. The second hypothesis proposes that there is an association between offence categories and later recidivism. The third hypothesis proposes that the mean number of prior offences is higher among those who recidivate compared to those who do not. The fourth and last hypothesis proposes that mean age of first prison sentence is lower among those who recidivate compare to those who do not.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in this study were 322 Icelandic male prisoners who were released from prison or a halfway house during the years of 2009-2011. The original number of participants in the study was 331. Nine participants were eliminated from the study as they were deceased. The participants were drawn from a population of Icelandic inmates in The Prison and Probation Administration databases and studied with regard to the aforementioned hypothesis. The average age of the participants was 33.8 years (SD =11).

**Design and Data Analysis**

This was a retrospective study where events that already had taken place were examined. The independent variables were four. Age at first prison sentence was on an *(interval scale)* (min: 16 years old; max: 75 years old) and number of prior sentences was on a *(ratio scale)* (minimum: 0; maximum: 16). Type of major crime committed was on a *(nominal scale)* and had eight levels (i.e., property offences, sexual crime, sexual crime against children, homicide or attempted homicide, crime related to drugs, traffic offence, violent offence and other). The place where the prisoner was released from had two levels: Vernd
(halfway house) and prison. The dependent variable was recidivism and had two levels: recidivism and non-recidivism.

A chi-square test of independence was used to examine the association between the variables. Leven’s test was used to assess the equality of variances for two variables. Lastly, a t-test was used to determine whether the difference between groups was significant at a 0.05 level.

**Procedure**

All offenders who were released from the prison or the halfway house during 2009-2011 were identified through archival data from the Prison and Probation Administration in Iceland. The Prison and Probation Administration keeps track of all sentences served in Iceland both past and present. Recidivism has been defined in a number of ways and measured with a variety of indicators. In this study recidivism was defined as a new sentence within two years from being released from prison or halfway house. Recidivism of prisoners that completed their sentence in prison on the one hand and in a halfway house on the other hand were compared. Vernd (halfway house) is an independent organisation where a prisoner can finish his sentence following good behaviour in prison. Prisoners need to meet certain conditions to be eligible for Vernd and have to be without disciplinary violations six months prior to applying for a place at Vernd. Prisoners either have to work or study and cannot under any circumstances use alcohol or drugs whilst at the half way house. If a prisoner does not follow these rules he will have to complete his sentence in prison (Winkel, 2009). Vernd also has the policy that prisoners who are serving a sentenced for sexual offences against children under at the age of 15 are not allowed to Vernd (P. BJ. Farestveit verbal reference, 11. April 2015).

The study involved the processing of personal data about a sensitive group of people within the community. Therefore all necessary measures were taken to protect the data and
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the identity of the subjects. The procedure was approved by the Ethics Board at Reykjavík University and declared to the Data Protection Authority.

Results

Of 322 participants, 122 were released from the halfway house compared to 200 who were released from prison. The overall two year recidivism rate in the cohort released from prison or Vernd during the years 2009-2011 was 27%. Figure 1 shows that there was an association between prisoners who were released from prison compared to those who were released from a halfway house $\chi^2(1, N = 322) = 17.05, p < 0.001$. Those who got released from a halfway house were less likely to offend again compared to those who finished their penalty in prison.

Figure 1. Recidivism rates in prison compared to Vernd.

Inmates were divided into eight categories depending on what offence they had committed. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the number of groups and the section of prisoners in each category. The largest group of offenders were those who had committed a drug related crime, or 98 offenders. While the smallest group, or eight individuals, were those who had been found guilty for homicide or attempted homicide.
There was association between types of offence and recidivism $\chi^2(7, N = 322) = 22.39, p < 0.002 < 0.01$. Figure 3 shows that recidivism was highest among those who had committed a crime related to property offences where 41.7% of offenders in this category got a new sentence within a two year period. While offenders who committed violent offences recidivated at a rate of 31.5% within two years. Those who committed sex related crimes, whether it was related to children or adults, were the least likely group of offenders to commit another crime during the timeframe. None of the 38 participants that committed any kind of sexually related crime recidivated.
The mean age at first imprisonment was 28.23 years (SD=10.38) with the lowest age of 16 and the highest of 75 years. For the recidivism group the mean age was 23.66 years (SD=6.22) and 29.98 years (SD=11.07) for the non-recidivating group. According to Levene’s test there was a significant difference of variance between the groups (p=<0.001). According to the t-test there was a significant difference in age between those who offended during the time measured and those who did not offend again t(269.6) = 6.44, p< 0.001.

The mean of prior incarcerations was 1.34 (SD=2.50) times with the lowest of zero and the highest of 16 prior incarcerations. For the non-recidivism group the mean of prior imprisonments was 1.25 (SD=2.52) times. For the recidivism group the mean was 1.6 (SD=2.44) prior imprisonments. According to Levene’s test there was a non-significant difference variance between the groups p=0.68. According to the t-test there was not a significant difference in prior imprisonments between the recidivism group and those who did not offend again t(320) = -1.27, p=0.21.
Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine predictors of recidivism among Icelandic male offenders. Results showed that recidivism rates were different for different types of crimes. Those who committed property offenses had the highest recidivism rate. These results are in accordance with prior studies that have shown higher recidivism rates among offenders who are committing crime in order to benefit financially. In research by Langan & Levin (2002), 53.4% of those who committed property offenses had been reconvicted in 3 years follow-up.

The most interesting findings of this study are that those who committed sexual offenses did not receive new sentences within a two-year follow-up. In light of this fact, it is interesting to note that those who commit sexual crimes against children under the age of 15 are generally not allowed to finish their sentences at Vernd due to the opposition of residence living near the facility (P. BJ. Farestveit verbal reference, 11. April 2015). The findings are in cohesion with prior researches in terms of sexual related crimes as was among other things the conclusion of (Langan & Levin, 2002). According to this study, and the ones which have been discussed here, it is not sensible to exclude one type of offenders from having the same opportunity to adapt to the community if it can reduce the odds of them committing a new crime, although there was no recidivism among these offenders in this particular study.

The present study also focused on prior incarcerations as it has been shown to be one of the predictors that is most associated with recidivism (Ross & Guarnieri, 1996; Phillips et al., 2005). The results show a small difference between the groups. The recidivism group had a slightly higher mean but it was not significant. This could have been affected by a short follow-up time. Prior studies that found significant difference where using a longer follow-up time or up to 8.8 years (Phillips et al., 2005; Eke et al., 2011).
This study has examined the association between the age of first offence and recidivism. It is in line with Farringtons (1986) study who found a significant association between an early age of committing a crime and higher recidivism rates later on in life the results in this study follow the same trend. The study showed a significant decrease in mean age among those who recidivated compared to those who did not. The mean age for the recidivism group was 23.66 years compared to 29.98 for those who did not get a new sentence in the two year follow-up period. These are the same results as prior studies have reached that there is an association between low offence age and recidivism (Farrington, 1986). According to this it must be examined by those who work in the field of prison systems and academics to see if there is some effective way to prevent young offenders from committing crimes after being released from prison.

One of the objectives of the study was to examine whether there would be association between time spent in a halfway house and a reduction in recidivism compared to those who completed their sentence in prison. Previous studies have shown reduced recidivism rates when inmates are given an opportunity to adapt to the community again through a halfway house. That was shown in research (Lovins et al., 2009) where sexual offenders who did not go through a halfway house were twice as likely to be sentenced again compared to those who had the chance to finish at a re-entry program. Overall recidivism in this study among Icelandic offenders was 27%, which is probably very high in light of the relatively short follow-up period. The study found different recidivism rates among those who finished their sentence in a halfway house compared to those who finished their sentence in prison. Only 13.9% of those who were released into the community after being at Vernd committed a new crime in two years compared to 35% of those who were released directly from prison. This is in line with prior studies that have shown the importance of interventions like halfway houses to reduce future recidivism.
Halfway houses give offenders the opportunity to take small steps into the community again after being deprived of freedom in prison. It should be a policy to let all prisoners finish sentences at a halfway house, regardless of the type of crime, as long as the offender does not pose a risk to himself or others. However, it must be considered that those given the opportunity to finish their sentence at Vernd have been selected first and foremost on the basis of good behaviour. Moreover, according to the data analysis it could not be ruled out that other factors had an effect on the difference in recidivism between the groups. Perhaps the Prison and Probation Administration should aim at providing measures and interventions similar to Vernd or even establish another institution like Vernd that would have less rigid acceptance procedure.

Selection bias was one of the major flaws of the study. For example there were no women in the study, however that is understandable as female prison inmates are a lot fewer than male inmates. Also it is clear that inmates that are allowed to go to Vernd are hand-picked by prison authorities and a have to be accepted by Vernd. That could lead to inmates being sent there that are less likely to recidivate no matter where they finished their sentence. Also the two groups, inmates released from prison on the one hand and inmates released from Vernd on the other hand, where not even in number, as there where 122 released from Vernd and 200 released from prison. Likewise inmates were not evenly split in groups by type of offences. Both of these issues could have an impact on the study’s findings. Additionally it would have been better if the dependent variable would have had more than two levels so it would have been possible to measure the number of sentences after the respective time period. If so it would be possible to use different kinds of data analytical tools (such as ANOVA and ANCOVA) that could have made it possible to draw better conclusions from the results.

Processing cases through the criminal justice system in Iceland can be a lengthy process. This in turn might have affected the outcomes in the study as the follow up period of
two years might have been too short. The biggest advantage of the study is that it was a population study that reviewed all the male inmates in Iceland over the respective time period.

In terms of future studies on this subject it would be beneficial to randomly select two groups that contained both men and women and all types of offenders. Whereas one group would be sent to a halfway house before it would be released and the other one would be released directly from prison. This would be a better way to predict how effect Vernd is. These two groups would then be monitored for eight years and all recidivism would be recorded. However, this would impose major ethical considerations, as it would interfere in significant ways with peoples’ fundamental right to freedom. Another idea for a future study that could be made would be to look at inmate behaviour in prison in light of disciplinary violations and whether it is connected to recidivism. Therefore we could see whether behaviour behind bars can predict how offenders behave post release.

An idea that comes to mind is whether the Prison and Probation Administration should define inmates that are more likely to recidivate, such as young inmates and those who already are repeat offenders. The Administration should then put more emphasis on providing them with special attention for the purpose of trying to change their bad habits. It is clear that the field of forensic psychology in Iceland is lacking a lot of research in terms of recidivism. It is therefore in the hands of future researchers to study this and follow the behaviour of offenders while they are incarcerated and after they have been released into the community. It would be very beneficial for society as a whole to keep better track of the behaviour of offenders and recidivism and that could be used to reduce crime rate.
References


