

## Recidivism: How Inmates See It

*Most criminological literature deals with recidivism as an indicator of the failure or success of correctional institutions, or as a predictor of further criminal behaviour. Both approaches may be incomplete because they fail to acknowledge that institutional treatment is not a one-way causal process but rather the outcome of interaction between the correctional system and offenders.<sup>(2)</sup>*

*Emile,<sup>(3)</sup> a young man sentenced for theft and robbery, told us: "We are here to be tamed, to avoid coming back. But they can't tame people this way. They won't tame me.... They can do what they want, I don't care. It just strengthens my morale."<sup>(4)</sup>*

*Comments like this suggest that recidivism should be examined as part of a communication process. Following this approach, we interviewed 25 first-time offenders<sup>(5)</sup> in a medium-security institution who were to be released after serving sentences of between two and five years. We asked the inmates about their perception of corrections and of the meaning of imprisonment, and about their reaction to both. Our goal was to better understand the context which may influence their postrelease behaviour. The main results are summarized and briefly commented on in this article.<sup>(6)</sup>*

Recidivism is an important issue for inmates. They often see offenders returning to prison shortly after release. Stories of recidivism are part of the inmate subculture. They are faced with the predictions of correctional staff. They think about their own lives after release and worry about returning to prison. To cope, inmates have developed their own theories to explain why "they always come back." The Correctional System On a more superficial level, the inmates believed that the correctional system itself is the most important cause of recidivism. Some offenders<sup>(7)</sup> saw recidivism as the result of a perversion of the formal aims of imprisonment and said the everyday actions of prison staff are intended not to resocialize and help them, but to make them come back. Some inmates said the system is trying to reproduce and to legitimize itself. Pierre, a 28-year-old professional thief, said: "They follow you, they let you go, they harass you and harass you again...they push you to the limit. If they were able to rehabilitate us, we wouldn't come back anymore, and they would lose their job."

Every device designed to help inmates contains, in their minds, the causes of their failure. Parole was also believed to contribute to recidivism. The inmates told us that the offenders most likely to commit further offences are generally released on parole earlier than those who probably will not reoffend. Furthermore, the release conditions that offenders are supposed to abide by do not reflect the reality of everyday life. Pierre can't understand it: "They want me to integrate into society, but they don't allow me to behave like ordinary people in society. You wouldn't set up such conditions for a child.... It's crazy!"

Transfer to a halfway house was seen in a similar light. Most inmates did not think they could cope with the freedom of a halfway house without taking advantage of it. They said they would soon return to prison for breaking regulations or for committing further offences.

Being released "onto the street" (after serving their full sentence) is not much better, according to the inmates. They have no money, no job and a lot of needs, and inmates said they get no help preparing for

release. They said programs do not help because they are not taken seriously by staff or offenders. Participation in programs was seen as a way to get out sooner, not as a way to improve the odds of success on the outside. The Inmate Culture The inmates' accounts of everyday life in prison also emphasized that their fellow inmates help pervert the formal objectives of corrections. This occurs directly, through lack of participation in activities aimed at rehabilitating inmates, and indirectly, through the values and attitudes of the inmate subculture.

Inmates described other offenders as not interested in changing their beliefs, attitudes or behavioural patterns. They do not care about their future, and have nothing to lose but their status in the prison. Prison games<sup>(8)</sup> - the power struggles that go on among inmates and between inmates and staff - are their main concern.

Most offenders we interviewed emphasized the pervasive presence of criminal patterns of behaviour in everyday prison conversation. They had no doubt that prison conforms to the old-fashioned image of a "school of crime." This belief supports the myth of the correctional institution creating, maintaining and reinforcing criminal patterns of behaviour by housing first-time offenders and recidivists together, and petty offenders with dangerous ones. "It's a school here! They have nothing to do but talk about the crimes they committed, how they did it and about connections for further crimes," said Marc. "True" Criminals, *Petits Gars* and Institutionalized Inmates Inmates correlated recidivism with a specific pattern of criminal behaviour. Rape, sexual assault and other forms of sexually deviant behaviour (especially involving children) was seen by inmates as automatically reproducing itself in a compulsive way. The recidivistic behaviour of drug addicts was perceived similarly.

There were also many references to inmates who simply like committing offences and return to prison as soon as they are released. They steal some corn because it tastes better when it is stolen. Jules called them the *petits gars*, the "little guys."

Finally, the inmates also described the institutionalized inmates, those who are used to doing time and like being in prison. Benoît, a 33-year-old transsexual, said: "I'm not like the guy that comes in and has nothing to lose; he comes in [and] goes out, he doesn't care about being in prison, he gets shelter and some food, he goes out again and then comes back."

These explanations for recidivism based on individual factors are founded on the perhaps naive assumption of individual choice. The most popular statement among the interviewed offenders was something like "If you really want to, you can do well." Inmates viewed everyday life outside prison as a series of opportunities for relapse. Strong motivation is needed to resist committing further offences, and most inmates seemed to lack the necessary willpower. Explanation of Past Behaviour: Models of Crime The inmates we interviewed generally avoided talking about their offences. When they did, they redefined them as not very dangerous, not violent, not really criminal or distanced themselves from their past behaviour.

The inmates who believed they would not commit further offences after release saw their offence as a unique failure, as something mysterious that happened to them. Their offences were not indicators of a criminal pattern, they were "accidents," failures lacking any rational explanation. That was the case for

Jim, 22, who said: "For me, it's not at all the pattern of my life. I made a mistake. I don't do such things usually.... My life outside was a very normal one, just like everybody's life, but I made a mistake..."

Some inmates used a similar approach to create a moral distance between themselves and their actions. They still considered what they did to be a unique failure but rationalized their behaviour with external, situational factors, such as getting in with a bad crowd, getting divorced or having economic problems. They said they would not commit further offences because they would avoid such situations.

When inmates perceived themselves as potential recidivists, they were likely to explain their past (and future) behaviour in terms of an "illness. The classic example is drug addiction. Inmates with drug addictions talked about recidivism as a characteristic of their addiction. Emile, an alcohol and drug abuser, said: "I won't come back, I won't...but I know that I'm going to come back if I'm not able to manage my problem. That's for sure...I'm not crazy, but...it's like an illness."

Property crimes were often committed to maintain an expensive lifestyle. If these needs and values survive the prison experience, then the offenders will likely commit the same offences after release. "If you commit some offences to get money to satisfy extravagant tastes and habits, that's like a drug.... I just like to wear expensive clothes and drive smart cars. That will not change because I served a two-year sentence," explained Jean.

Other inmates blamed an aspect of their personality or behaviour pattern for their criminal actions. They didn't think they could behave differently, even though some inmates said they wanted to. Others just accepted their behaviour as part of who they are. Luc's life consisted of committing offences and being punished. His explanation was: "It runs in my blood. Doing bad things simply runs in my blood." Changing in Prison, Reacting to Imprisonment Most inmates we interviewed stated that imprisonment hasn't changed or modified anything. Prison has not helped them solve the problems related to recidivism or change their attitudes, values or lifestyle.

Some inmates did not perceive a need to change because they saw themselves and their lifestyle as "normal." Other inmates felt no need to change because they saw themselves as criminals. The difference between living in prison and living outside shaped their lives, and they were comfortable with that.

Other inmates viewed change as the outcome of a struggle between themselves and staff. To change means they have been "tamed"; to not change means they have resisted the pressures of staff.

Some inmates emphasized the negative changes caused by imprisonment. The hardships they suffered in prison and the perceived unfairness of staff have produced violent feelings. Olivier said: "I think I will be more aggressive than before, when I get out. Oh yes, that's for sure, because you experience a lot of unfairness here." Aldo shared this belief: "Being in prison, you become savage, rough, selfish, you pick up all the faults you can, you become more aggressive and impulsive."

A fourth group of offenders said they have changed or are going to change. However, they did (or will do) so on their own and not because of pressure from staff. Most of these offenders isolated themselves from other inmates and thought about their situation and their life after release. To inmates like Emile,

prison is a positive environment for change because it allows them to take a break from the stress of everyday life and to question values and attitudes previously taken for granted. Emile said: "I'm glad to be here because I had the opportunity to think a lot. You are alone and you learn about yourself. When I'm outside, I haven't the time for that. I'm too busy."

The strongest criticisms of the correctional system came from inmates who knew they needed to change, went to prison hoping for some qualified help and think they didn't receive it. They needed psychological counselling, therapy for violent behaviour, drug and alcohol addiction programs or just an opportunity to talk about their problems. But, they found case managers too busy or too inexperienced to do their job properly and good programs improperly managed. There are few psychologists, said Olivier, and when you have the chance to talk to one, they don't have time for you. "You are speaking to him and he is looking at his watch." These inmates said they were ready to change, to use their time in prison to improve their life skills, but found closed doors.<sup>(9)</sup>

Most inmates we spoke to were somewhat uncertain about having changed in prison. They seemed to be aware that any change(s) would not be proven until after release and were extremely evasive about the issue. *Staying In or Going Out: The Fear of the Outside* At the beginning of the interview, most inmates uttered statements like "Prison is awful. I don't want to come back anymore." Some of them declared that the prison experience would deter them from reoffending. Then, they immediately began diluting the statement. During the interview, the correctional institution became less awful and the determination not to reoffend became less resolute. The deterrent effect of prison seemed to vanish.

For inmates approaching release, the fear of life outside prison seemed to counteract the frustrations and hardships they undergo inside the walls.<sup>(10)</sup> They began to remember that freedom is not just fun. Pierre feared life outside prison: "Out of here, that's tough isn't it? You are under pressure the whole time. You have no time at all for yourself for stopping and thinking a little bit.... I'm going to be released and it scares me. You look at what is going on out there, it's awful. The unemployment rate is rising, a lot of firms got closed and people have to sleep outdoors. That's a fucking life! In a certain sense, we are living more comfortably in here. Some people outside don't get what we have.

Prison began to appear more like a refuge, the "mother who provides and protects." Francois said: "If I won't have some good friends outside, why should I stay outside? Here, I have better friends than I could ever meet outside."

The inmates' statements also displayed feelings of insecurity about their own reactions, which is a scenario for potential recidivism. Most seemed to anticipate a plausible explanation for their reincarceration. They would try to do well, to conform as much as possible to the norms of society, but they might be pushed by unfavourable conditions to commit further offences. Some inmates had no money or job, no home or furniture, no car, no help from relatives, nothing but the determination to do well. Others had a little, but not enough to support the lifestyle they desire.

Some offenders worried about relationships with relatives that may have broken down. They also feared they were not ready to live outside without breaking the law, and they didn't know if what they learned inside would be useful. "When you serve a long sentence, you will come out and have nothing. You will go out and you will ask yourself what the hell you are going to do, naked on the street, without a cent. I

will have nothing when I leave. I don't know what I'm going to do," explained Alex.

Another concern for inmates was the fear of being returned to prison for breaking parole conditions. "I'm afraid to come back," said Andre', "I won't come back. But, when you go out on parole, they bring you back to the pen for damned stupid things. If they catch me with some hashish in my pockets, I have to come back."

Many inmates tried to postpone their release by demanding a transfer to a halfway house or to an institutional treatment centre. They saw staying in prison as the best prevention against coming back.

Their insecurity about facing the world outside became apparent when we examined their plans for the future. Inmate release plans were usually either trivial (look for a job, continue attending school) or extravagant (become an underwater diver).

Often, the inmates were not able to formulate what they were going to do. In this context, "I don't know" meant they might commit further offences. "I don't know what I'm going to do after release," Francois said. "I'll try to do what I would like to do, but if it doesn't work, I don't know what I'm going to do." That meant he would probably continue his criminal career. Jean had the same attitude: "I'm not saying that I'm going to do it, but if I don't make money legally, it will be very enticing to do some deal."

There were, of course, a few inmates who knew exactly what they would do after release. Marc, who described prison as a temporary death, said he would return to his usual lifestyle: "My life will go on. I'm just going to take out my golf clubs and polish my bowling shoes...." Listening to the Inmates At the beginning of this paper, we argued that recidivism should be considered as an element of the communication process between inmates and the correctional system. What message are the inmates sending?

A few inmates had a well-defined identity and knew whether they belonged to the non-criminal or the criminal world. Their expectations regarding their recidivistic or law-abiding behaviour revealed that the system didn't change anything in their identity. They didn't listen to the correctional message because it didn't concern them; it was unnecessary for some and ineffective for others.

Most inmates we interviewed had ambiguous attitudes toward their prospects after release. They would like to change, but would change on their own. They refused the aid proposed by the correctional institution, but sought help.

This reflects two aspects of their specific situation. First, most inmates did not yet have a well-defined identity. They vacillated between seeing themselves as law-abiding citizens who made a mistake and seeing themselves as criminals. Second, according to the inmates, their uncertainty was caused by the apparent indecision in the aims of the correctional system. Confused and frustrated by contradictions between the formal objectives of the correctional system and what they experience every day in prison, the inmates were asking with increasing anger, "What do you really want?"

At the beginning of this paper, the relationship between inmates and the correctional system was described as a communication process. It may also be a dialogue of the deaf.

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(2) E. Zamble and F. Porporino, *Coping, Behaviour and Adaptation in Prison Inmates* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988), pp.4-7.

(3) *The names of inmates have been changed.*

(4) *All quotations are translated from French.*

(5) *We interviewed inmates serving their first sentence in a federal institution. Most of them had previous criminal records and had served sentences in juvenile or provincial institutions.*

(6) *For a more complete presentation of this study, see C. Besozzi and N. Soulliere. Les détenus et leur prison : La perception de la prison chez les détenus d'un pénitencier à moyenne sécurité, Rapports de recherche 11 et 2 (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993). An extended version of this paper is also available from the author.*

(7) *The use of adjectives such as "some" and "many" do not have a quantitative connotation. They should be interpreted as existential statements: there is at least one inmate for which the statement is true.*

(8) *For a description of the "mind games" see K. McDermott and R.D. King, "Where the Action Is in Prisons," British Journal of Criminology, 28.3 (1988): 357-375.*

(9) *Zamble and Porporino (footnote 2) draw the conclusion that the correctional system failed to take advantage of the window of opening at the beginning of a sentence. It seems that some staff are closing the windows that some inmates forgot to close.*

(10) *This theme appears in most of the novels written by former convicts. See, for example, E. Bunker, No Beast So Fierce (New York: Norton, 1973):*

*I was more nervous in facing release on parole than I had been on entering so long ago. It helped slightly to know that such apprehensiveness was common, though often denied, by men to whom the world outside was increasingly vague as the years passed away." (p. 11)*

*However, the fear the interviewees referred to was not so much the fear of a changed outside world, but the fear of going out into a world that hadn't changed since their admission.*

(11) *M.G. Duncan, "Cradled on the Sea: Positive Images of Prison and Theories of Punishment," California Law Review, 76, 6 (1988): 1202-1247.*