Evaluating Success Among People Released from Prison:
Lessons from Abroad

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Introduction: Beyond a recidivism-focused approach

This paper examines some of the practices that are adopted in other nations to assess success among people released from prison, and their relevance for American criminal justice policies. This NASEM initiative understands the importance of measuring reintegration success beyond the absence of recidivism. We know that the complete abandonment of criminal activities is unlikely to occur suddenly, especially among individuals who have been highly active in offending from a young age. Criminologists generally agree that desistance is best perceived as a process rather than a discrete event, but this perspective has not yet been integrated in U.S. policies and practices (Kazemian, 2021). Our interventions favor a result-oriented approach and fixate on recidivism as an indicator of success and failure, which may overlook changes and progress exhibited in other behavioral, cognitive, and social outcomes (Kazemian, 2015). Our risk assessment tools are largely deficient in indicators reflecting positive outcomes (Barnes-Lee, 2020). Importantly, the factors that may encourage offending in the first place may be distinct from the reasons that prompt the decision to give up crime. Whilst we largely continue to regard recidivism as an inverse measure of desistance, most likely due to the convenience and availability of recidivism data, this remains incomplete at best. The assessment of desistance should ideally expand beyond offending outcomes and account for improvements in mental health, cognitive patterns and emotional regulation, social bonds, and (re)integration efforts (Kazemian, 2021).

The key distinction between recidivism-focused and desistance-promoting approaches is that the former predominantly focuses on a negative outcome (i.e., crime at a discrete point in time), whereas the latter seeks to track positive outcomes that may result in reduced involvement in offending over time, ultimately leading to the complete cessation of criminal behavior. Because progress and positive change are seldom acknowledged, many individuals involved in the criminal
justice system find little incentive to engage in efforts to make progress toward desistance. For practitioners and policymakers, a paradigm shift from recidivism to desistance entails a willingness to: (1) make assessments that extend beyond behavioral outcomes and include other known correlates of desistance, (2) track progress as well as failures, and (3) recognize that setbacks are part of the process of change (Kazemian, 2021). This paper draws on examples from other nations to inform reintegration policies that seek to be more aligned with principles of the desistance paradigm.

**How do American criminal justice policies differ from other nations?**

It is a well-established fact that the United States’ criminal justice policies are highly distinctive (National Research Council, 2014); these discrepancies are especially staggering when we compare American trends with those of countries with comparable levels of development. These differences pose some challenges for the application of European paradigms to the American context. The U.S. remains one of the very few developed nations that continues to resort to capital punishment, and the imprisonment rate in the United States is about seven times higher than in European countries. Of special relevance to the issue of successful reintegration, the U.S. has a notably higher population under correctional control (van Zyl Smit & Corda, 2018, Figure 10.1). The rate of community supervision is more than eight times higher than in Europe (Bradner et al., 2020). van Zyl Smit and Corda (2018, p. 457) discussed key distinctions in the philosophy of parole in the United States versus Europe, noting that “while in Europe it is mostly structured as a rehabilitative tool aimed at facilitating the re-entry and resettlement of the offender in the community, in the United States parole tilts more heavily toward a punitive and managerial intervention, weakening or supplanting a commitment to the ideal of reintegrating parolees into
society.” The authors concluded that “European parole, unlike its American counterparts, is dominated by a discourse that stresses human dignity and procedural justice rather than public safety.” (p. 411). These differences are also intertwined with the reality that European nations tend to have much stronger social welfare systems when compared with the United States, another key feature of ‘American exceptionalism’ (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2012).

Official standards for accountability: The United States versus other nations

The United Nations adopted the Nelson Mandela Rules in 2015, which are standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners. These rules stress that “the duty of society does not end with a prisoner’s release” (rule 90). The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) encourage member states to use alternatives to incarceration and stress the importance of reintegration, rehabilitation, social justice, and the compliance with human rights standards. However, both the Mandela Rules and the Tokyo Rules are regarded as “soft laws” and are therefore not legally enforceable.¹

The United States and Europe have developed some official guidance for accountability in prison and supervision practices. In 2006, the Council of Europe revised the European Prison Rules, originally developed in 1973. These rules provide guidelines on the humane and just treatment of prisoners. European correctional administrations and their independent oversight agencies often refer to these rules in their assessments of prison conditions. Inspired by the European Prison Rules, the Council of Europe also created the European Probation Rules in 2010, which set out basic principles for community supervision in Europe.² In addition to recommending ongoing assessments at various stages of the supervision process and periodical reviews of these

evaluations (rules 69 and 70), the European Probation Rules also acknowledge the importance of considering both risk and positive factors (rule 66) as well as taking into account the individual’s perspective in formal assessments, including their “views […], personal aspirations, as well as their own personal strengths and responsibility for avoiding further offending” (rule 67). While the European Prison Rules and Probation Rules are not legally binding, they have been cited by the European Court of Human Rights to support rulings (Canton, 2019).

In the UK, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation developed a series of guides for effective practices in supervision to support frontline staff in their work. These include guides for effective case management for individuals with substance abuse issues, as well as separate guidance for juveniles and adults. The guides demonstrate an understanding of some of the salient facts about desistance from crime emerging from the research literature. They highlight an essential empirical fact: desistance from crime is a process that may involve relapses before offending ceases permanently. The guides also refer to some of the positive outcomes that increase the likelihood of desistance, such as strong family/community ties, fulfilling employment, hope/self-efficacy, and a sense of meaning and purpose to one’s life. The guide that focuses specifically on desistance notes that the following factors are expected for “effectiveness in desistance:”

- assessment practice that focuses on the factors linked to the service user’s offending, together with an analysis of their strengths and protective factors
- planning that focuses on the factors relating to offending and incorporates and builds on the individual’s strengths and protective factors
- implementation and delivery of services that effectively support the service user’s desistance
- reviews of progress that actively support a reduction in the likelihood of reoffending.

3 https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/effective-practice/
Importantly, these guides acknowledge that assessments in supervision need to expand their focus beyond concerns with public safety and consider individual needs, risk, and desistance. The effective practice guide for substance abuse highlights the importance of trauma-informed interventions and the wellbeing of individuals, which is language that is seldom used in official documents issued by governmental agencies. The guide even provides case summaries and underlines the key takeaways for desistance-promoting practices. This is a valuable template that can be used for replication in other countries, with relevant modifications to adapt the guides to different cultural settings.

In the United States, there have been several initiatives to develop standards for prisons and jails. The American Bar Association (2011) developed *Standards on the Treatment of Prisoners*. The American Correctional Association and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care have also promulgated standards for prisons and jails. None of these standards are federally mandated or legally binding. There does not appear to be an equivalent of the European Probation Rules in the U.S., although some individual states have enforceable rules in place. In short, there are no binding accountability standards for populations under correctional control in the United States, mandated by either national or international law.

*Agencies responsible for reintegration efforts in other countries*

In many nations, preparation for release endeavors to be a multi-agency effort, though these partnerships come with many challenges (Padfield, 2019; Pruin, 2019; Storgaard, 2019). In Denmark, a program was adopted in 2010 to better coordinate services between the prison, probation, and social services agencies to improve preparation for release (*Schedule for a good...*)

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release; Storgaard, 2019). In Japan, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare have worked together since 2006 to provide employment support to returning citizens, utilizing partnerships with major private corporations such as Toyota and Sony (Kato, 2018). In some countries, such as France and Sweden, prison, probation, and parole services operate through the same organizational unit and joint leadership (Pruin, 2019). In the Netherlands, continuity of support during and after detention is achieved through collaborative work between the Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI) (part of the Ministry of Justice and Security) and the Dutch Probation Service. These alliances are especially crucial given that no single criminal justice agency can promote desistance from crime on its own (Kazemian, 2021). Partnerships across state and federal agencies, along with the support of family and community resources, are instrumental in supporting the process of desistance from crime and reducing recidivism. Circles of support and accountability, which were originally developed in Canada, are an example of cooperative efforts between law enforcement, community groups, survivors of crime and service providers. In the United States, inter-agency collaborations vary considerably across states and facilities. Continuity of care in the transition between prison and the community remains inconsistent and often absent (National Research Council, 2014).

Differences in correctional staff training

There are significant differences in correctional staff training between the United States and other nations. Kazemian and Andersson (2012) noted some of these differences between the United States and France. Unlike in the U.S., staff training is centralized in France. The National School for Correctional Administration (École nationale d’administration pénitentiaire, or Énap), a division of the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for training all correctional staff in the country.
All training includes theoretical and practical components, the former taking place at Énap and the latter inside correctional facilities. Prison officers undergo eighteen months of training, and probation/parole officers need to complete two years of training. Some French prisoners have suggested that their relationship with prison officers may be more positive if their training included some psychological/criminological component, as is the case for probation and parole officers in France (Kazemian, 2020). Administrative and managerial staff members (i.e., prison directors) are subject to two years of training. This is an important distinction between the French and American correctional systems. Unlike the United States, where wardens are often politically appointed or promoted, prison directors in France may not necessarily have knowledge or prior experience in the correctional field or even in management. In the United States, correctional training varies tremendously across jurisdictions, from a few weeks to several months. Training statutes in many states are vague and because there is a great deal of variability in training requirements across states, “someone who is unfit to serve as a CO in one state may be judged sufficient in another state because he or she does not, for instance, have to pass psychological testing in the latter state.” (Kowalski, 2020, p. 119). There are no national standards in the United States for the training of correctional staff.

The measurement of crime and recidivism in a comparative perspective

Despite validity issues in cross-national comparisons of recidivism rates (Fazel & Wolf, 2015), a recent study compared official reoffending rates across twenty-three nations (Yukhnenko, Sridhar and Fazel, 2020). When looking at two-year reconviction rates (the most reported outcome across nations), Norway (20%), Austria (26%) and Iceland (27%) reported the lowest recidivism.

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7 https://www.enap.justice.fr/la-formation
rates. While Scandinavian countries are typically reputable for their reintegrative prisons and lower recidivism rates, Sweden (61%) and Denmark (63%) reported the two highest reconviction rates in this analysis.

When data were available on more than one of the three measures of recidivism (i.e., rearrest, reconviction, and imprisonment), there were notable differences between the prevalence rates across the different measures. Unsurprisingly, rearrests tend to have the highest prevalence rates. This is consistent with Anderson and Skardhamar’s (2014) analysis of Norwegian recidivism rates. Their study concluded that the operationalization of recidivism can result in great variations in reported rates and may impact policy in a significant way. The authors provided both low and high recidivism rates for Norway, “… all of them relevant and accurate—and while the lowest figures might be taken to validate the notion of Norwegian (or Nordic) penal exceptionalism, the highest figures might be taken as debunking it” (p. 16). This is an important observation because Norway is often regarded as a model nation with low recidivism rates. It is also important to note that few countries outside of the United States use rearrests as a measure of recidivism. Other countries tend to use convictions or incarceration as a measure of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Kazemian (2021) argues that because most initial contacts with law enforcement do not result in further criminal justice processing and given that police contacts are heavily skewed toward racial and ethnic minorities, arrests that do not lead to a conviction are a poor indicator of criminal behavior and may also create undue stigma based on incidents that do not necessarily reflect offending risk. Measuring recidivism based on rearrests may create the illusion that reoffending rates are higher than they actually are. Notwithstanding the widespread use of plea bargaining in the United States, which creates discrepancies between arrest and conviction charges, convictions or incarcerations may be more valid indicators of official crime. If we continue to use rearrests as
a measure of recidivism, we should at the very least expunge arrest records that do not result in a conviction.

It is also critical to the circumstances surrounding new offenses. In the context of imprisonment, Kazemian (2020) noted the importance of looking beyond behavioral outcomes to assess desistance from crime, highlighting that rule-breaking behavior in prison is not always an accurate indicator of risk. Although some research has found that prison misconduct is a significant predictor of post-release recidivism (e.g., Cochran et al., 2014), these studies do not consider the level of involvement in misconduct or the reasons for engaging in these behaviors. Given the restrictive nature of the prison environment, rule violations may not provide the best basis for capturing desistance efforts. Individuals can engage in rule-breaking behaviors in prison and, at the same time, maintain a narrative that is consistent with the desistance framework (Kazemian, 2020). Rule violations are not always indicative of an intention to persist in crime. Ghandnoosh (2018) highlighted the paradox between the importance granted by parole boards to maintaining social ties during periods of incarceration and the intolerance to behaviors aiming to sustain these ties (e.g., possession of contraband mobile phones and excessive physical contact with family members during visitations). In short, the circumstances of rule-breaking behaviors should not be overlooked; this observation also bears relevance for parole violations and underlines the importance of considering the context that may lead to a breach of the conditions of parole. Kazemian (2020) argued that recidivism and other rule-breaking behaviors are often a visible symptom of a deeper issue, and that the root cause of sustained violence is unresolved trauma and suffering.

Despite Anderson and Skardhamar’s (2014) cautions about the interpretation of official recidivism figures, Norway’s 20% reconviction rate remains one of the lowest in the world
(Yukhnenko et al., 2020). There are many positive takeaways from the Norwegian system (Johnsen and Fridhov, 2019). In Norway, prison and probation services have been operating as a single agency since 1980 and are governed by the same regulations since 2002. Because of universal access to public services, prisoners are never fully excluded from society, and “the laws regulating these services outside prison, apply equally in prison” (Johnsen and Fridhov, 2019, p. 258). The Norwegian system is governed by principles of transparency and continuity, allowing outside professionals to have regular access to prisons and ensuring that welfare services are maintained throughout the prison sentence and upon release. NGOs also play a key role in connecting former prisoners to appropriate services, and in “helping prisoners establish a private network that can aid the transition to a life without crime” (Johnsen and Fridhov, 2019, p. 258). It is worth mentioning that prisoners often serve time in several facilities and progress to less restrictive facilities over the course of their sentence, which explains the highly praised conditions in the renowned low-security Bastøy prison.\(^8\)

**How do other countries evaluate successful reintegration?**

The process of reintegration poses challenges in all cultural contexts, including welfare states (Todd-Kvam, 2020). Even in European nations with smaller populations, stronger social welfare systems, and lower crime rates, scholars note relatively few positive prisoner reintegration practices in their respective countries relative to the substantial challenges and shortcomings (Dünkel et al., 2019). Reintegration is particularly challenging for individuals belonging to socially marginalized groups, who often face the double stigma of their ethnic/racial identity in addition to

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\(^8\) [https://www.cnn.com/2012/05/24/world/europe/norway-prison-bastoy-nicest/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2012/05/24/world/europe/norway-prison-bastoy-nicest/index.html)  
their status as a returning citizen (Kazemian, 2020). The repercussions of historical marginalization have enduring effects. The desistance and reintegration challenges of racial and ethnic minorities (and corresponding recidivism rates) have been noted in the United States (Fader & Traylor, 2015), in the UK (Glynn, 2014), in France (Kazemian, 2020), and in Singapore (Narayanan & Fee, 2016), among many others. It has even been suggested that “such disproportionate racial representation in re-offending reflects that rehabilitation programs and reintegration efforts have been far less effective for such minorities” (Narayanan & Fee, 2016, p. 17).

Reducing recidivism remains the focal concern of reintegration policies across the globe, even in Europe (for an overview, see Dünkel et al., 2019) and Asian countries (e.g., Japan; Kato, 2018; Ibusuki, 2019). For instance, in Switzerland, although probation services seek to both prevent recidivism and foster social integration, the latter objective is mainly prioritized in relation to the prevention of reoffending (Weber, 2019). Similarly, although Scandinavian countries are often regarded as model correctional systems, politicians and correctional officials continue to prioritize recidivism as a measure of success.

While the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) paradigm remains dominant in many countries, some scholars have suggested the benefits of integrating elements of the RNR and strengths-based paradigms (Horan, 2015). In the UK, various assessment tools integrate aspects of the RNR and desistance paradigms; these include AssetPlus, Active Risk Management System (ARMS), and Enablers of Change (EOC) (Horan, Wong and Szifris, 2019; Wong and Horan, 2021). In Asia, Singapore adopted several reforms that promoted wider social acceptance of former prisoners as they return to the community. These initiatives were inspired by the RNR paradigm, but also focused on rehabilitation, cognitive behavioral programming, and elements of strengths-based
approaches, such as the Good Lives Model (GLM) and the desistance paradigm (e.g., focus on identity transformation). This shift in approach, particularly the focus on primary goods emphasized in the GLM, sought to look beyond the traditional risk reduction framework and consider strengths (for an overview of reforms in Singapore, see Leo, 2017).

Issues of reintegration and desistance from crime are primarily a concern of developed countries. Unsurprisingly, developing nations that grapple with high rates of violent crime tend to focus on immediate solutions to quell the violence rather than invest efforts in reintegrating those who have caused serious harm to their communities. For instance, Latin American countries have spent billions of dollars in trying to control organized crime and drug trafficking activities that have resulted in a great deal of violence and deaths, creating quasi war zones in some parts (Rosen, 2021). High levels of violence need to be addressed before nations can shift the focus to the long-term prevention of reoffending and the wellbeing of those who have offended. For these reasons, it is difficult to provide examples from developing nations that would bear relevance for comparisons with the United States.

Examples of governmental efforts to track and promote positive changes

There have been many theoretical formulations about how to integrate positive outcomes in assessments of reintegration success, but very few practical applications of these recommendations. Governments may track and publish data on outcomes other than recidivism, but these data are often spread out across various agencies rather than consolidated in one source. In one notable exception, the Dutch government has published a report that includes information on various outcomes in addition to recidivism. These include obtaining a valid ID, income, employment, education, housing, debts, and continuity of care in the community. This type of
effort is possible through collaborative work between the Custodial Institutions Agency of the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Dutch Probation Service. The full report is only available in Dutch (with a summary in English on pp. 75-79) but offers promising insights for concerted governmental efforts seeking to document outcomes beyond recidivism.\(^9\)

With an understanding of the important role of employment in the desistance and reintegration processes, a recent initiative in Sweden aims to offer training to incarcerated individuals to make them more attractive to potential employers upon release. This collaborative effort between the Swedish Prison and Probation Service and the Public Employment Service examines whether labor market training improves the likelihood of securing employment and reducing recidivism.\(^10\) This initiative is under way and has not yet been evaluated. Related efforts have been adopted in Asia, where the Japanese government provides incentives to employers who hire individuals under supervision (Kato, 2018).

In Belgium, the court’s decision to revoke parole when there is a violation of the conditions of release is not only based on legal factors and the severity of the infraction, but also on an assessment of the reintegration process of the individual up to that point, their efforts and motivation to succeed in this process, and their willingness to work collaboratively with the supervision officer. The basic philosophy is this: “the revocation process should not be regarded as a retributive process following non-compliance with conditions; this process is part of sentencing practices focused on reintegration” (Breuls et al., 2020, p. 17).

In Singapore, the significant drop observed in recidivism rates since the late 1990s (from 44% in 1998 to 28% for those released in 2012) has been attributed to the development of evidence-

\(^10\) https://www.kriminalvarden.se/forskning-och-statistik/kriminalvardens-forskning/
based offender rehabilitation and a psychology-based model of rehabilitation (Leo, 2017; Singapore Prison Service, 2015). In 2004, the country launched the Yellow Ribbon Project, which sought to raise public awareness about returning citizens and increase public support for hiring former prisoners. Ultimately, the goal of this initiative is to reduce recidivism rates, but it also focuses on other positive outcomes that are likely to have a desirable impact on the desistance process:

[...] successful reintegration does not stop at stable employment, financial independence, having a healthy lifestyle, and having a pro-social support group. These are essential, but successful reintegration should go one step further and consider the ways that ex-offenders can be empowered to give back to their society. Ex-offenders deserve a chance to leave unique and bright legacies (Ling, 2021, p. 126).

Yellow Ribbon Singapore (YRSG, formerly known as the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises) was responsible for the original launch of the Yellow Ribbon Project in collaboration with the Singapore Prison Service. YRSG has prioritized the shift from basic vocational training in prison to long-term skills development, and from finding a job to investing in a long-term career to keep up with rapid changes in the economy (Ling, 2021). This initiative invests efforts in better understanding the career ambitions of individuals “as well as the gaps in their skillsets that require training to reach their target careers” (Ling, 2021, p. 126). YRSG invests in continuing training upon release from prison so that individuals may continue to expand their skillset in the community. Finally, drawing on the notion of generativity from the desistance literature, it recognizes the importance of giving back in the reintegration process:

YRSG recognises that besides volunteering for good causes, successful desistors are in an excellent position to motivate other ex-offenders, especially since they have braved through the same arduous journey. YRSG aims to identify and empower successful desistors to be mentors for struggling ex-offenders, in hope of motivating the latter group through challenging times (Ling, 2021, p. 128).
Agarwal (2021) examined the impact of YRSG’s employment assistance program on various success outcomes. The analysis concluded that the program resulted in lower recidivism rates (reduced by 3.2% overall; 8.3% for high-risk individuals), a longer period of desistance from crime and drugs (increased by about 2 months; 2.3 months for high-risk individuals), shorter subsequent sentences (reduced by about 10.42 months; 11.76 months for high-risk individuals), improved employment rates (increase of 7.2%; 4.5% for high-risk individuals), shorter time to secure a job (reduced by about 0.64 months; 0.35 months for high-risk individuals), higher average monthly earnings (increased by about $135; $104 for high-risk individuals), and a longer job retention period (increased by about 0.95 months; 0.57 months for high-risk individuals). One of the fundamental components of the Yellow Ribbon Project pertains to educating the public about returning citizens and the challenges of their reintegration, which is an important lesson for other nations seeking to adopt similar initiatives.

**Parallels between reintegration practices and the mental health/addiction knowledge base**

While many of the core concepts of desistance from crime are yet to be integrated into reintegration policy and practice in the U.S., these topics are now part of policy discussions in other nations. In the UK, Best (2019a) made parallels between desistance from crime and addiction recovery. Citing key international consensus groups (i.e., the Betty Ford Institute and the UK Drug Policy Commission), Best highlighted three factors that influence addiction recovery: “control over or cessation of problematic substance use; improvements in global health and wellbeing; and active participation in and a contribution to community or society” (p. 4). Leamy et al. (2011) developed the acronym CHIME to summarize the key elements of successful recovery services and interventions, comprising of Connectedness (social support and relationships), Hope (positive
thinking and motivation to change), Identity (building a positive sense of self), Meaning (developing a meaningful life and social roles/goals), and Empowerment (personal responsibility, agency, self-esteem, and self-efficacy). Drawing on CHIME, Best (2019b) highlighted that positive social connections are a crucial first step in the recovery process. All these positive outcomes are highly relevant to the process of desistance from crime.

Relatedly, the notion of recovery capital is also pertinent to reintegration efforts. The term initially emerged in the context of recovery from substance use, trauma, and mental health issues. It refers to the scope of resources available to support individuals in their recovery process. Best and Laudet (2010) identified three domains of recovery capital (personal, social and community), all of which can foster positive change. Personal recovery capital refers to individual strengths such as resilience, self-efficacy, self-esteem, hope, optimism, and problem-solving skills. Social recovery capital includes social support networks, such as family and other intimate relationships as well as associations with other key social institutions (e.g., school, work, etc). Community recovery capital encompasses community resources that promote the recovery process and help to reduce the stigma of addiction/crime. In this regard, community resources and mutual aid groups (e.g., Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, local community groups) can help to foster various positive outcomes that are linked to the process of desistance from crime. An Australian study applied this framework to better understand the change process among justice-involved youth and highlighted several examples of positive justice capital: hope and future aspirations, engagement with the community (through sport and employment), positive peer support and family relationships, participation in recovery and healing services, and safe housing (Hamilton et al., 2020).
A group of UK-based researchers conducted a systematic review and consulted with a consensus panel of researchers and professionals to investigate outcome measures used in forensic mental health research (Fitzpatrick et al., 2010). The consensus group concluded that recidivism was the most prevalent outcome measure in the reviewed research, and that several other outcome variables were important, but overlooked, in the body of research. The neglected domains identified by the consensus group included several positive outcomes, such as engagement with treatment, relationships with family and friends, cognitive and psychological functions (problem solving, etc.), quality of life, and self-esteem. While the sample included research from various nations, nearly three-quarters of studies were based in the U.S.

*Some international empirical research examining positive outcomes*

Some of the positive outcomes mentioned above are reflected in research conducted in the UK. Wong (2019, p. 7) suggested a “proxy measure of desistance” by measuring outcomes such as client engagement with services, changes in individual needs resulting from provided services, and “changes in wellbeing, agency, and relationship.” Parsons (2017) assessed the impact of cooking and commensality on individual health and well-being among a sample of male prisoners on work release, and noted positive effects on self-esteem as well as human, social and cultural capital.

In the Canadian context, Rezansoff et al. (2015) examined the effects of drug treatment courts on various outcomes beyond recidivism and focused specifically on involvement with community-based social and health services. Drawing on data with over 600 drug treatment court participants in Vancouver, the study found that participation in drug treatment courts promoted engagement with outpatient healthcare services and income assistance services; this was especially
true for women and individuals who were diagnosed with concurrent substance use and mental health disorders. These findings are important because of the well-established links between financial hardship, health outcomes, and crime (Ford, 2014; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). It is important to note that Canadian citizens have free access to medically necessary hospital services, as well as basic physician and laboratory services. This sets Canada apart from the American system, which is characterized by distinctive disparities in access to health care.

Kazemian (2020) conducted a longitudinal follow-up of long-term French prisoners and examined the process of desistance from crime in the context of incarceration. The study identified several features of the desistance narrative in prison. Drawing on the adversarial growth framework, Kazemian (2020) found that individuals who achieved positive transformation in prison made a conscious decision to extract some positive outcome out of painful and traumatic experiences. This framework is based on the premise that individuals use past adversity and trauma, and the resulting suffering, as a springboard for positive change, and an opportunity to learn, heal, and grow. This finding is seldom captured in aggregate analyses, but individual stories paint a different picture. Adversarial growth provides an opportunity to develop more agency, a greater sense of control over one’s life, and a more positive sense of self. This hopeful and positive mindset is achieved through various means, including religion, education, meditation, sports, employment, or family relationships. In the desistance narrative, individuals take stock of their role in the suffering caused both to others and to themselves over the course of their lives. There is also a shift towards an identity of an individual who is deserving and worthy of a good life, and this is perceived to be an achievable outcome. Desisting individuals learn to separate their past behaviors from their sense of self and believe in their fundamental goodness. The desistance narrative is characterized by a clear openness to change; growth and transformation efforts largely
rely on factors that are within the control of the individual. The point of change is anchored in the present, despite exposure to circumstances that render transformation difficult. When coping with dark or violent thoughts, desisting individuals can recognize these thoughts as fleeting and do not necessarily act out on them immediately. Lastly, desisting individuals are inclined to take advantage of available opportunities for change, however limited. Overall, these features of the desistance narrative in prison underscore some important positive outcomes associated with the process of desistance from crime and bear relevance for the reintegration process.

In interviews conducted with 12 formerly incarcerated males in Singapore, a study found that successful reintegration is dependent on the combination of seven key factors: a firm commitment to personal change, age and maturity, developing a purpose and vision for one’s life, faith/spirituality, positive environment/people, consistent support, and access to employment (Chan & Boer, 2016).

In Malaysia, the parole system was adopted to address the rise in the incarcerated population, and to aid in “developing the well-being and self-development” of individuals involved in the criminal justice system (Sulaiman et al., 2016, p. 141-142). Sulaiman and colleagues (2016) examined the association between self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience among Malaysian males on parole. The authors noted that self-efficacy and optimism had a significant impact on resilience. They endorsed programs that focused on various positive outcomes, such as emotional intelligence and self-motivation. Sulaiman et al. (2016, p. 149) also provided suggestions to strengthen individual self-efficacy by providing feedback about success and failures and by helping individuals to set goals for themselves.
The intermediate outcomes framework

One of the most relevant efforts in measuring positive outcomes stems from the work of researchers in the UK. This group focused on the measurement of ‘intermediate outcomes,’ which are defined as “measurable changes in individuals that are directly or indirectly associated with reductions in reoffending” (Maguire et al., 2019, p. 5). These outcomes are referred to as ‘intermediate’ because they indicate positive changes that may reflect progress and eventually lead to the complete abandonment of criminal behavior, although individuals may not have completely ceased offending at the time of measurement (Burrowes et al., 2013). Maguire et al. (2019) developed a 29-item instrument, the Intermediate Outcomes Measurement Instrument (IOMI), to assess the impact of mentoring and arts interventions, but the instrument is likely applicable to a wider range of interventions. This tool aims to support service providers in evaluating their work with individuals under supervision.

The IOMI includes eight key dimensions (Maguire et al., 2019, p. 19): resilience, agency and self-efficacy, hope, wellbeing, motivation to change, impulsivity/problem-solving, interpersonal trust, and practical problems. Resilience refers to the ability to bounce back after exposure to adversity; this is similar to the adversarial growth narrative noted in the discourse of prisoners in France (Kazemian, 2020). Agency/self-efficacy measures an individual’s ability to take control of one’s own life, to make decisions and to take action. Hope refers to a “calculation about perceived scope for positive future change” (p. 19). Wellbeing assesses overall mental, emotional, and psychological health. Motivation to change reflects an internal desire to change, an increased engagement in interventions, and a reduced motivation to engage in offending. Impulsivity/problem-solving measures the ability to reflect, plan, and exercise self-control. Interpersonal trust is linked to the concept of social capital and indicates “positive attitudes toward
and connectedness with others” (p. 19). Lastly, practical problems document perceived problems in key areas such as housing, education, employment, substance use, financial situation, and family relationships. While the IOMI is still in preliminary stages of development and requires more validity and reliability testing, it offers valuable guidance for efforts to measure key positive outcomes that are known to be linked to the process of desistance from crime.

**Positive outcomes in the context of extreme violence**

In the context of terrorism, Marsden (2015) conducted interviews with a small sample of practitioners with London Probation Trust’s Central Extremism Unit (CEU) to assess how they conceptualized ‘success’ for probationers convicted of crimes of terrorism. Success outcomes included fostering positive relationships with practitioners, motivation to engage in the rehabilitation process, critical thinking (particularly with regards to religious doctrine and political issues), a “contextualized understanding of Islam” (p. 155), the development of a more balanced identity that extends beyond one’s involvement in extremist ideology, engagement in positive social networks/disengagement from negative networks, positive family relationships, training/education/employment opportunities, and changes in attitudes about violence and harm (i.e., ceasing to justify violence as a means to resolve grievances and acknowledging the harm caused to others through their crimes). Although this study is largely descriptive, examines one very specific type of offense, and relies on assessments of practitioners rather than on data collected from individuals who were involved in offending, it does provide insight into the types of outcomes that can be considered to measure success beyond the absence of recidivism.

In the context of the Rwandan genocide, it has been noted that “Hutu with economic capital were more likely to desist or save Tutsi” (Luft, 2015, p. 152). Luft (2015, p. 157-159) noted:
When Hutu desisted from killing Tutsi by drawing on economic resources, they were motivated by a transactional mechanism: the exchange of economic capital for agency in the highly constrained setting of genocide […] Those with capital had options and opportunities to cross the boundary from killing to desistance. Others did not. […] Sometimes poverty means not having the resources to desist. Economic resources equip actors to exert agency and opt out of participation in the highly constrained setting of genocide. The transactional mechanism links economic capital to behavioral outcomes in genocide.

These findings are generalizable to the process of reintegration after prison. The ability to satisfy one’s basic financial needs is one of the most fundamental conditions for desistance from crime, especially during the reintegration process. Research has consistently shown that incarceration is associated with reduced wages and increased financial hardship (for a review, see National Research Council, 2014). Financial stability is an important component of the desistance process, especially as individuals transition back into the community.

*The use of volunteers to better track positive outcomes*

Parole officers may find themselves too overburdened to find the resources to document positive outcomes in the reintegration process. We can draw on the Japanese example to remedy this issue in the short term. In Japan, there are two types of probation officers: professional officers and volunteer probation officers (VPOs; Kato, 2018). The latter are ordinary citizens with good standing in their community who are selected by local selection committees, which consist of prosecutors and members of the court. VPOs are not remunerated but are regarded as part-time government officials. They counsel probationers (usually those regarded as low- or medium-risk for offending) on various areas of their lives, including employment, health, and family issues. Probation officers are responsible for providing support and some training to the local VPOs; they can oversee 30 or more VPOs. There are far more VPOs than probation officers in Japan.
(approximately 52,000 VPOs versus about 1,100 probation officers; for a more detailed description of the profiles of VPOs, see Kato, 2018). Per Article 1 of the Volunteer Probation Officers Act of 1950, “the VPO assists adult and juvenile offenders to improve and rehabilitate themselves, and enlightens the public on crime prevention to enhance the local community and contribute to the welfare of both individuals and the public” (Kato, 2018, p. 118). The VPOs provide an additional layer of support, and a more informal one, in the reintegration process. They also help individuals to build up more social and human capital.

The Japanese model also relies on several other community resources to support the reintegration process, such as the Women’s Association of Rehabilitation Aid, Big Brother and Sisters movement (focusing on juveniles on probation), co-operative employers (private businesses who employ individuals on probation), and offender rehabilitation facilities (providing social skills training, substance use counseling, etc.; Kato, 2018). Drawing on the notion of generativity, some supervision orders may include a requirement to engage in “social contribution activities”, which aim to give back to the community through assistance at welfare facilities, cleaning public spaces, etc. (Kato, 2018).

Inspired by the Japanese VPO model, similar initiatives have since been adopted in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea (Ibusuki, 2019; Kato, 2019). It would be worthwhile to explore the applicability of this model to the United States. It can be regarded as a form of civic responsibility, like jury duty. Through more informal interactions with individuals under supervision, the VPOs would be instrumental in helping to document positive

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11 There is a precedent in criminal justice for this type of practice. For instance, the NYPD has the largest Auxiliary police program in the country. Auxiliary police officers are “trained to observe and report conditions requiring the services of the regular police”(https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/careers/human-resources-info/auxiliary-police.page)
outcomes, which they can report back to the parole officer. This type of initiative would be beneficial for the person under supervision (their needs may be better met), the parole officer (reduced workload), the public (by potentially promoting desistance efforts and reducing recidivism), and the volunteer. For the volunteers, increased exposure to individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system may help to dispel common misconceptions about this population, reduce fear, develop more compassion, and cease regarding individuals with a criminal history as being fundamentally different from other citizens.

The Japanese correctional philosophy highlights the “the value, contribution and importance of volunteers and communities in the supervision and rehabilitation of [our] brothers and sisters who have been in trouble with the law” (Kato, 2018, p. 136). The VPO system is effective in a society that has a strong value of communitarianism. Moreover, Japan has low crime and incarceration rates (Ibusuki, 2019). For these reasons, we need to carefully assess whether such an initiative can be adopted in the United States.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine some of the practices adopted in other countries that might inform reintegration policy in the U.S., particularly as it pertains to the consideration of positive outcomes beyond the absence of recidivism. Below are five key takeaways from the evidence presented in previous sections.

1. Countries with stronger social welfare systems are generally better equipped to tackle various social problems, including crime.

Welfare states tend to have lower crime rates, smaller populations under correctional control, and lower recidivism rates. In these nations, individuals often maintain continuous access to
welfare services before, during and after a prison sentence, which avoids sending individuals to the margins of society. While strong social welfare systems cannot erase the legacy of multigenerational historical marginalization, it can help to counter some of the risk factors for offending and provide all citizens with the means to satisfy their basic housing, health, and financial needs.

2. **Governments would benefit from disseminating data on recidivism as well as other outcomes related to desistance from crime and successful reintegration.**

Concerted efforts between correctional and other governmental agencies would facilitate the publication of data on various outcomes relevant to the process of desistance from crime in addition to recidivism, including housing, employment, and health outcomes. This type of initiative would include partnerships between the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Department of Labor, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Health and Human Services, among others.

3. **Tracking positive outcomes in the reintegration process will require 1) a cultural shift, from a recidivism-focused to a desistance-promoting approach; and 2) manageable workloads for supervision officers.** Lessons from abroad are only realistically applicable in the U.S. if we reduce the volume of our correctional population.

Some of the desistance-promoting strategies that have been embraced in Europe can only be realistically adopted in the United States if we reduce the workload of parole and probation officers (Kazemian, 2021), by decreasing the number of individuals under community supervision and
provide incentives to reduce time on probation/parole through compliance with the requirements of supervision (Bradner et al., 2020).

Until we can reduce the volume of the population under correctional control in the United States, short-term solutions can be adopted to better track positive outcomes. These include continuing training for supervision officers that incorporate some introductory overviews of the knowledge base about desistance from crime, and the use of volunteer supervision officers. Volunteer programs such as those observed in Japan are promising. These volunteers would be ordinary citizens who could support parole officers in their work, who would have a more informal rapport with individuals under supervision, and who may be in a more privileged position to track positive outcomes.

4. We need to revisit how we operationalize recidivism.

The United States is one of the few countries that uses rearrests as a measure of recidivism. This is problematic because most arrests do not result in a conviction, and police contacts disproportionately implicate people of color, specifically young black men. Because most other nations use convictions or incarcerations as a measure of official reoffending, U.S. recidivism rates will inevitably appear to be higher when compared with other nations. Individuals continue to be denied access to housing and employment because of criminal records checks that flag arrests, even those arrests that did not subsequently result in a conviction. There is no reason to keep an official record of an arrest that did not lead to any further criminal justice processing.

Moreover, in the context of reintegration, not all reoffending behavior will be equally significant. The circumstances of the new offense are important. The process of desistance from crime will inevitably involve some relapses. Desistance-promoting reintegration practice would
entail some tolerance for more minor forms of legal infractions that do not compromise public safety. In these circumstances, it is appropriate to provide additional support to individuals to prevent further relapses or at the very least, impose non-custodial sanctions. Responding to such violations with confinement may disrupt an otherwise downward trajectory of offending.

5. **Correctional agencies and empirical research from various countries have identified several positive outcomes that are linked to the process of desistance from crime.**

The positive outcomes highlighted in other nations need to be empirically tested with samples of individuals on parole to assess their validity and adapt them to the American context:

- Engagement in vocational training/education
- Employment outcomes
- Access to safe housing
- Financial stability
- Motivation to engage in the rehabilitation process and engagement with recovery/treatment services, if relevant
- Engagement with community-based social and health services
- Quality of relationship with practitioners/supervision officer
- Quality of relationships with family and friends
- Strength of the support network
- Engagement in positive social networks
- Perceived quality of life
- Problem-solving skills
- Self-esteem
- Hope and optimism for the future
- Self-efficacy
- Openness and motivation to change
- Finding meaning and purpose to one’s life
- Positive self-identity
- Changes in attitudes about violence and harm
- Assuming responsibility for the harm caused to others and to oneself
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Resilience from trauma and victimization

When measuring positive outcomes, it is important to bear in mind that life events and turning points may exert varying influences on the desistance process across different individuals. This is largely dependent on how these events are experienced and whether they bring a sense of meaning to one’s life (Kazemian, 2021).

To conclude, the examples drawn from other nations do not suggest that we need to abandon recidivism as a measure of reintegration success. Rather, this paper argues that we can supplement reoffending data with various positive outcomes that may help us to better track progress towards desistance from crime and offer reinforcements when needed. The consideration of positive outcomes is more aligned with a desistance-promoting approach and will be beneficial to public safety in the long term as well as preserving the human dignity of individuals under supervision.
References


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