

## Why Recidivism Is a Core Criminal Justice Concern

**Why is recidivism important?** Recidivism is an important feature when considering the core criminal justice topics of incapacitation, specific deterrence and rehabilitation. *Incapacitation* refers to the effect of a sanction to stop people from committing crime by removing the offender from the community. *Specific deterrence* is the terminology used to denote whether a sanction stops people from committing further crime, once the sanction has been imposed or completed. *Rehabilitation* refers to the extent to which a program is implicated in the reduction of crime by "repairing" the individual in some way by addressing his or her needs or deficits.

[More about measuring recidivism.](#)

Recidivism research is embedded throughout NIJ-sponsored research in sentencing, corrections and policy intervention evaluations. Many NIJ-funded studies of community supervision depend on recidivism measurement to inform probation and parole policy.

**Recidivism and desistance.** An important connection exists between the concept of recidivism and the growing body of research on criminal desistance. *Desistance* refers to the process by which a person arrives at a permanent state of nonoffending. In effect, an offender released from prison will either recidivate or desist. To the extent that interventions and sanctions affect the process of desistance, the research overlaps.

Desistance is usually measured as a "discrete state," researchers for the National Consortium on Violence Research noted in a 2001 study. They advocated considering desistance to be a developmental process and developed a statistical model for future research. [\[1\]](#)

**Evaluating prisons.** Recidivism has also been implicated in the performance of prisons and has been used to study the difference between the effectiveness of privately and publicly managed prisons. [\[2\]](#)

**Next Section:** [How Prison Experience Affects Recidivism.](#)

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### Notes

[\[1\]](#) From "[An Empirical Framework for Studying Desistance as a Process](#)" [Exit Notice](#), by S.D. Bushway, A.R. Piquero, L.M. Broidy, E. Cauffman, and P. Mazerolle, *Criminology* 39(2)(2001): 491-516. For more about desistance, see "[Understanding Desistance from Crime](#)," 2001, NCJ 192543 (pp. 1-69), and "[Advancing Knowledge About Desistance](#)," Feb. 2007, NCJ 217616 (pp. 125-134).

[\[2\]](#) See [Measuring Prison Performance: Government Privatization and Accountability](#), by G.G. Gaes, S.D. Camp, J.B. Nelson, and W.G. Saylor, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004.

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