

A Case Study on Recidivism in Indonesia: Understanding the Role of Inadequate Self-Control

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Abstract: Recidivism is a phenomenon caused and influenced by a multitude of factors. In this study, we interviewed four former prisoners who received parole and were previously incarcerated more than once for property crimes and substance-related offences. Semi-structured interviews with these four participants were afterwards analysed thematically. This qualitative study aims to understand how inadequate self-control influences the decision to reoffend, guided by the General Theory of Crime. We found that indicators of inadequate self-control were apparent in participants' statements; among six indicators, impulsivity and self-centeredness in particular appear to significantly affect reoffending committed by the participants. Poor self-control tends to make participants ignore the potential consequences and long-term risks of their behaviour. We are hoping that this study could inform policy-making processes related to prisoner reintegration in order to minimise reoffending. This study could also serve as an early finding that can inspire more comprehensive studies using the General Theory of Crime on prisoner studies in Indonesia.

Keywords: Recidivism, Self Control, Thematic Analysis, Property Crime, Substance Abuse

Introduction

Reoffending rates are usually employed as a primary indicator of the criminal justice system's effectiveness (Yukhnenko et al., 2019). Specifically, recidivism rates serve as a standard for assessing the performance of incarceration systems or rehabilitation programs implemented during the inmates' custodial sentence (Yukhnenko et al., 2023). Reducing the rate of recidivism has implications for the safety and well-being of society. Furthermore, from an economic perspective, the recidivism rate correlates positively with the increased economic and social costs incurred. In the UK, the economic and social costs for recidivists are reported to be double the costs for community sentences (Newton et al., 2019).

A "recidivist" is someone who committed a repeat of a criminal offence. A person is classified as a recidivist/committing recidivism if they repeat a criminal offence that meets certain conditions that would aggravate their sentence (Nurfatlah et al., 2024). In Indonesia, despite earnest rehabilitation and social reintegration efforts by the correctional system, persistently high recidivism rates among Persons Deprived of Liberty (*Warga Binaan Pemasyarakatan/WBP*) remain a grave concern. The Directorate General of Corrections (DGC) reports indicate that the percentage of individuals who relapsed into criminal activities increased steadily from 2021 to 2023 with 1.81%, 1.42%, and 1.83% respectively (Direktorat Jenderal Pemasyarakatan, 2024). This alarming trend underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive understanding of factors contributing to recidivism. The existing

quantitative data on recidivism rates alone do not sufficiently explain the causes and extenuating factors related to reoffending and recidivism. A comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of criminal recurrence would enhance the effectiveness of preventive policies (Andersen & Skardhamar, 2017).

Recidivism in Indonesia not only impacts the social sphere, where communities are directly affected by criminal acts (Kurniawan, 2023), but also incurs significant costs to the state in criminal justice proceedings, rehabilitation processes, and guidance during the reintegration into society, including the social costs incurred by offenders to their victims (Eren & Owens, 2023). This condition has persisted for years in Indonesia. However, efforts to address this issue have not adequately emphasised data availability, data analysis, and evaluation of the ongoing rehabilitation processes. The availability of data on recidivism can be utilised to analyse the typology of cases that occur (Goodley et al., 2022) and is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs. The typology in question may include gender, criminal offence types, and sentence duration. Through this analysis, policies can be more precisely targeted based on the issues encountered in the field.

Furthermore, to formulate effective policies for reducing recidivism rates, understanding the root causes of why former inmates become involved in criminal activities again is crucial (Goger et al., 2021). Various studies indicate several factors contributing to repeat offences, such as coping inability (Agustin et al., 2019), stigma and economic instability (Indrayani et al., 2018), opportunity (Panggayuh et al., 2022), and peer influence (Situmorang & Wibowo, 2023).

One theory that explores the specific trait of self-control in its relation to crime is Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime (1990). This theory posits that low self-control is the primary factor behind criminal and deviant behaviour. According to this theory, people with low self-control are more impulsive, risk-seeking, and less capable of delaying gratification, making them more likely to engage in crime and other immediate-gratification activities. Therefore, this study will focus on understanding the role of

inadequate self-control as a key factor contributing to recidivism. By examining how limitations in self-control affect decision-making and increase vulnerability to reoffending, this research aims to uncover insights into the psychological underpinnings of repeat offences. Understanding the impact of inadequate self-control on former inmates' ability to resist negative influences and manage high-stress situations will provide valuable guidance for developing targeted rehabilitation interventions. This focus not only highlights the significance of self-control in successful reintegration, but also underscores its potential as a foundational skill to reduce recidivism and promote long-term behavioural change.

Materials and Methods

Procedures

Sampling

Our participants were purposefully sampled from Correctional Clients (*Klien Pemasyarakatan*) who were undergoing probation under their parole at the time of data collection under the authority of a Probation and Parole Office (*Balai Pemasyarakatan/BAPAS*) in Indonesia. Specifically, we conducted sampling among clients who had been incarcerated more than once either for multiple instances of the same type of crime, or different types of crime. No other criteria was determined during the sampling process. Potential participants were approached by the researcher, who afterwards explained and gave the potential participants the opportunity to read the informed consent form. Four Clients agreed to participate in this study.

Sample Characteristics

All four participants were males with ages ranging from 20 to 48 years old. Two participants were incarcerated for substance-related crimes including illegal drugs abuse and distribution of illegal drugs. Meanwhile, two others committed multiple property crimes which include theft, robbery, and fencing (receiving stolen goods). Coincidentally, both participants whose crimes were drugs-related

have been imprisoned twice, while participants who committed property crimes were incarcerated three and four times each.

Interview

All interviews with the participants were conducted in October 2024. We utilised a semi-structured approach in the interviews, which is suitable when there is a limited opportunity to interview the participants (Bernard, 1988). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview will provide room for suitable follow-up questions to probe for particular topics that arise during interviews with each participant (Kallio et al., 2016). We composed the interview schedule in accordance with six indicators of inadequate self-control inferred from Gottfredson & Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime, parallel to the low self-control instrument formulated by Arneklev et al. (1993). These indicators are (1) impulsivity, (2) preference to simple tasks, (3) risk-seeking behaviour, (4) preference to physical activity over mental activity, (5) self-centeredness, and (6) temper.

Data analysis

We conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) on a semantic level, where the collected data (i.e., interview transcripts) were coded to identify relevant themes and ideas. The aforementioned indicators of inadequate self-control guided the theme identification, although this does not mean that all six indicators are necessarily pointed out in the themes. In addition, several themes are not directly related to participants' self-control, but are related to the discussion. The analysis of participants' interview data subsequently informed the conclusions and answers to our research question.

Results and Discussion

Thematic Findings

The following themes were identified from interviews with the participants:

Themes Related to Participants' Crimes

Both external factors and personal motives influenced the commission of crime (n=4)

Participants attributed their involvement in crime to both personal aspects (e.g., personality and needs) and external factors (e.g., peer pressure and persuasion). Participant F, for instance, described these following influences and motives in his abuse of illegal drugs:

"...and when I was using, I did that not to disturb peace or harm other people, it's only for the sake of my own peace of mind. ... Ever since I was single I guess my circle of friendship has been unruly people like that. That's where I fell into abusing meth." (Participant F)

Participants' description of the events preceding the crimes they committed indicate that, most of the time, either external factors or personal motives was more prominent in influencing their commission of crime. This is apparent, for example, in participant C's statements regarding what caused him to steal a motorcycle:

"The reason I foolishly did that was because I used to do meth—I think 99% of people who do meth would also gamble and need money ... At that time, my salary was only Rp800.000 per month ... Anyway I saw an opportunity, there was no one there, so I decided to do it." (Participant C)

Peer influence(s) was reported in reoffending (n=4)

All participants reported the role of their peers to a certain extent during the reoffending. This is especially prominent in illegal drugs-related charges, where the participants' relapse into drug abuse was said to be influenced by peer pressure from circles of friendship that consume illegal drugs. Another form of influence from other people in the reoffending of theft was experienced by Participant H, who reported that a friend suggested that they both steal scrap metal.

"If I had just stayed in my room, I would have stayed out of trouble. But once I started hanging out with them again, with my friends, you could say that was the start of the problem." (Participant C)

“He said it’s okay, since the iron bars were rusted and everything anyway, so I agreed to join him.” (Participant H)

Participants argued justification for crime (n=2)

Two participants argued that the crime they committed could either be somehow justified, or can be explained by another factor that caused them to commit it. The aforementioned opportunity reported by Participant C was one instance, and he further explained what he perceived to explain why he committed the crime.

“It’s just the drugs that I mentioned before. When you do drugs, you only think short term– ‘I’ll just deal with the consequences later’– something like that.” (Participant C)

“I think weed is a medicine... Someone’s addiction to meth could be treated by entering a circle who uses weed, since weed is not addictive.” (Participant F)

The commission of crime hardly have any immediate positive impact in participants’ lives (n=4)

Participants did not report that the crimes they committed gave them immediate benefits or advantage in their daily life. This is apparent both in participants who committed property crimes (e.g., they did not get to sell the goods and use the money before they were arrested) and substance-related crimes. Moreover, the lack of immediate benefit was described by participants to comprise both their first crime and the subsequent crimes.

“Not really, well taking drugs felt good but then the next day I’d regret why I took the drugs so I’d end up feeling more tired than I would be without them.” (Participant D)

“The effect was that I became terrified every time I saw a police on a bike passing by, I became scared of seeing all the police, I thought they’d arrest me.” (Participant H)

These statements show that participants still reoffend despite not experiencing a meaningful benefit following their previous crime.

Themes Indicating Inadequate Self-Control

Forethought regarding consequences of crime was absent or disregarded (n=4)

All participants described the extent to which they were thinking about the potential legal consequences of the crime they were about to commit. Two participants claimed that they did not consider the potential consequences of their action because they reported committing the crimes impulsively.

“It was a reckless action on my part; so I wasn’t thinking about long term matters.” (Participant C)

“No ma’am, I used (the drugs) impulsively, only because my friend happened to offer me some.” (Participant D)

Meanwhile, two participants reported having thoughts about the potential legal consequences of their crime, but ultimately disregarded these thoughts and still committed the crime. Participant F, for example, said that regarding “using or selling weed, I was aware that the consequences would be like this.”

Simple, physical tasks are not necessarily preferred to more complex and mentally challenging tasks (n=4)

Although preference to simple tasks is one of the indicators of inadequate self-control, we did not find a consistent preference from the participants to perform simpler, more physically taxing tasks despite their recidivism. The variability on this matter was indicated by both the participants’ work experience and the type of tasks they would rather do in their jobs:

“Tasks that need a lot of concentration? I can’t be bothered to do that, I’d rather give it to a friend.” (Participant D)

“I’m more satisfied doing something complicated, yeah personally I think so.. Like, when I manage to do something my boss asks me to do”. (Participant F)

“At work? I’d rather do the deeper, thinking parts, maybe like trade, since I used to work as a motorcycle salesperson.” (Participant C)

Recidivism does not necessarily corresponds to risk-seeking behavioural tendency (n=3)

Only one participant (D) reported his enjoyment in doing risk-seeking behaviours such as illegal racing and physical fights. The other three expressed their reluctance to “look for trouble,” which shows that, as an indicator of low self-control, a tendency to seek out risky situations and perform risky actions in their lives was not prominent among the participants of this study.

“If I’m not under the influence, say from drugs or drinks, I wouldn’t think something like, ‘let’s look for some trouble.’” (Participant H)

“Depending on whether I’m getting paid for it (doing risky behaviours)... If I am, I might think about it. Gotta be careful about that.” (Participant F)

Self interest was prioritised during the commission of crime and reoffending (n=4)

Two participants in this study reported having thoughts about the potential impact of their crimes on other people such as their family. Regardless, they ended up prioritising the rewarding aspects of the crimes on themselves. One participant, C, attributed this disregard for other people to the influence of drugs, while two participants admitted that the impact of their crimes on other people simply did not cross their minds.

“Every time I do things that break the law, I’d always think about that [impact on other people], but like I said before, since we’re under the influence, we’d think in a short time manner.” (Participant C)

“I don’t think so, I wasn’t thinking about that, that didn’t cross my mind...” (Participant F)

Participants did not report difficulty in controlling their emotion (n=3)

Among the four participants interviewed in this study, only one recalled an instance where they experienced an explosion of rage that caused them to damage their cellular phone. Another, Participant C, stated that they would only become violent reactively in a group setting. Meanwhile, statements from other participants indicated that in

anger-inducing situations, they would rather remove themselves from the stressful environment.

“I myself would rather avoid it [fights], ma’am. But if you’re hanging out with your friends, and someone provokes you, and your friends start getting into a fight, there’s no way you’d just watch, right.” (Participant C)

“When I’m angry I’d express—I’d probably just slam whatever I’m holding in my hand to the ground ... of course I regretted it, what should I do after I break my phone? Didn’t have money to get a new one.” (Participant F)

“When I’m angry I’d go out for an entire day, only going home once I’ve cooled down.” (Participant D)

Overall, there is little indication that participants in this study experience difficulty controlling their emotion in general, which is one of the behavioural-affective indicators of inadequate self-control.

Discussion

Arneklev et al. (1993) has previously adapted the General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) into an instrument that quantify levels of self-control, and identified six elements that essentially comprise low self-control in an individual, namely impulsivity, preference to simple tasks, risk-seeking behaviour, preference to physical or less mentally taxing tasks, self-centred outlook, and temper. In this study, we adopted those six elements into indicators of inadequate self-control, and conducted our interview using these indicators as a guideline. Using open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews, this study shows that the theory can be utilised as an analytical tool to explain the risk of recidivism in Indonesia, especially for substance-related and property crimes.

After analysing the participants’ interview transcript, we identified four themes related to the crimes participants committed. The first two themes explain how participants perceived a range of influential factors—both personal and environmental—that affected the commission of their recurring crimes. In particular, all four participants in this study described how other

people influenced their decision to reoffend, either tangentially by roping them into negative societal influence like substance abuse, which in turn inhibited their proper judgement, or directly by suggesting that they commit a certain criminal act such as theft.

In regards to self-control and the role of its inadequacy on recidivism, we identified five themes that correspond to six inferred indicators of inadequate self-control according to the General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). These themes show the prominence of two indicators of inadequate self-control in influencing recidivism. Firstly, participants described a distinct lack of regard to forethought about potential consequences of their actions. Even participants who reported thinking about incarceration or any other potential consequences prior to their study ultimately still committed crime. This describes **impulsivity**, which Baumeister & Vohs (2004) defined as a personality trait that is associated with poor inhibition, inadequate consideration during decision-making process, and impaired ability to perform reflexivity upon one's actions.

Previous study by Forrest et al. (2019) found that both impulsivity and risk-seeking contribute to criminal behaviours among youths. In this study, however, we did not find strong evidence among the sampled participants that they tend to seek to be involved in risky behaviours. To some extent, this might be explained by the higher age range of the participants compared to people studied in the aforementioned study. As adults, even more so those who had previously been incarcerated, participants of this study possess a wider range of experience and opportunity to have moved on from risk-seeking behaviours, such as reported by Participant D, compared to adolescents (Van den Bos et al., 2015).

Another prominent factor that we found to influence reoffending is **self-centeredness**. Oftentimes, participants prioritise the fulfilment of their own needs with little to no regards to the impact of their actions on other people. Participant C, for instance, admitted that abusing illegal drugs limited his ability to consider long-term consequences of his actions, as well as how these actions could affect the people closest to him. The

described impact of substance abuse was well-documented; people who abuse illegal drugs were found to be impaired in tasks that require priority on long-term goals and consequence as opposed to short-term incentives (Grant et al., 2000), something that participants showed both in the property crimes and the instances of substance abuse that they committed.

We found a lack of clear pattern on themes related to four indicators of inadequate self-control. Preference to menial, simpler tasks have previously been found to influence self-control trait, since an individual's belief that they would be able to complete a complex task has a relatively strong correlation to self control (e.g., Gottschling et al., 2016; Luszczynska et al., 2005). However, both the occupational history and aspirations of the participants varied and showed that some participants, despite relapsing into criminal behaviour, were able to hold mentally engaging tasks. Another indicator of self-control, temper, was previously found to be weakly linked to successful self-control (Necka et al., 2019), and is related to both risk factors and protective factors for substance use (Wills & Ainette, 2010). This is particularly evident in Participant F, the only one who reported personal damage caused by his inability to control his emotional outburst, and whose repeated drug abuse landed him in prison.

The findings we discovered in this study informs the need of preventative approaches to reduce the potentials of recidivism in the future. This is all the more important in Indonesia, where 18% of prisoners have been incarcerated before (Directorate General of Corrections, 2021), and a third is currently serving time under substance-related charges (Directorate General of Corrections, 2024). Among this population, the repeated crime is in fact a deviance that harms one's self, instead of crime as a behavioural pattern that harms others.

Conclusions

We identified four themes related to the participants' crimes, along with five themes related to indicators of inadequate self-control in regards

to criminal reoffending they committed. Our study suggests that two indicators of inadequate self-control prominently influenced recidivism among the participants, namely impulsivity and self-centeredness. Respectively, these two indicators were operationally defined as a lack of forethought regarding consequences of their actions, and the lack of consideration beyond the participants' self interest.

We found that recidivism is not only affected by situational factors such as social influence or monetary needs, but also the individuals' self-control and their resolve to live a better life and become a better person. The effort to achieve this is in accordance with the Indonesian Correctional system, whose paradigm emphasises restorative justice: the correction and the restoration over punitive deterrence.

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