



# Sociological Explanation of Prison Re-entry

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## Abstract

*This article aims to analyze the importance of labeling, structural, rational choice and control theories to partially predict the prison re-entry rate. Survey method is adopted and the respondents included the prisoners of at least two records of accusation. The sample size amounts 340 prisoners including 98 females and 242 males who were selected by stratified, systematic and random strategies from the prison list. The data was gathered using a questionnaire made and administered by the researcher. Results indicated that the most important factors in predicting prison re-entry rate related to the following theories respectively: labeling, rational choice, structural (objective dimension, i.e. social status, kind of crime), structural (subjective dimension, i.e. social and economic satisfaction and sense of discrimination) and control theories. In addition, results showed that the above theories altogether improved the prediction coefficient. The results were analyzed sociologically. It is concluded that less importance of structural (subjective dimension) and control theories may be related to the similar situation of prisoners in these respects, since all the participants had prison records. In addition, it was concluded that the society is responsible for prison re-entry and that social structure as well as social interaction with released prisoners should to be reconsidered.*

Keywords: labeling theory; structural theory; rational choice theory; prison re-entry

## Introduction

Sociologists maintain that criminal act is more a social rather than an individual phenomenon because a criminal actor deviates from the norms that are important to society and they are formally defined as crime. Therefore, prisoners are individuals who have deviated from socially defined important norms and thus are punished by incarceration in prison.

### *Importance of prison re-entry*

Some researchers have found that 32.6 per cent of prisoners in Central Prison of Mashhad had former record of incarceration in prison i.e. prison re-entry of which 64 per cent was arrested for drug crimes (Behravan, 1991). Based on the latest statistics, about 18 per cent of prisoners in Mashhad had 2 records of prison re-entry or more of which 90 per cent were male and 37.8 per cent were arrested with drug crimes (Central Prison in Mashhad, 2008). Evidently, prison re-entry ratio has decreased in the last 17 years; perhaps

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the main reason for this is an increase in total crime statistics and changes in drug crime definition that led to the exclusion of it from the list of crimes because drug use is an illness not crime.

Arrests of drug users had increased the prisoner statistics in the United States to about 10 times in recent years (Blumstein & Beck, 2005). It is reported that a large number of inmates which are being released from U.S. prisons annually will be re-incarcerated within three years from release (Langan & Levin, 2002).

### ***Failure of Prison re-entry programs***

Although imprisonment is the most important form of sanction and many factors inside or outside prison may have affected prison re-entry, results of some researches have shown that harsher prison treatment does not reduce former inmates' criminal activity (Drago, 2008). Recidivism studies have shown that 73% of those convicted at ages of 10 to 16 (juvenile age range) were reconvicted at ages 17 to 24, in comparison with only 16% of those not convicted as juveniles (Farrington, 1995). Recidivism studies have shown that reintegrating the offenders has been unsuccessful (Braithwaite, 1989).

Supervision of prisoners in society has been used as a way to decrease prison re-entry; more than 100343 prisoners were released in Canada in 2003 (Landry & Sinha, 2008) and about 600000 prisoners were released in the United States (Office of Justice Program, 2007).

### ***Statement of Problem***

Researchers have debated many factors to explain prison re-entry from different sociological standpoints. Most sociological researches usually confine only to one theory to explain prison re-entry and this may cause defective vision to the problem because every one of theories can reveal only one aspect while neglecting other aspects. Furthermore, using one theory cannot reveal explanatory power of theories together while different theories are correlated to each other, since social facts are multidimensional and thus need to be viewed simultaneously from multiple standpoints. Although there are many reports that explain every aspect of prison re-entry, it seems useful to investigate multiple theories to explain this problem. Another point is that any effort to encounter prison re-entry necessitates profound knowledge about the problem and this research can help planners to mitigate the problem.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How can we explain prison re-entry using multiple sociological theories?
2. Which theory can best explain the problem besides other theories?

The author hypothesizes that adding more theories can better explain prison re-entry. In addition, he hypothesizes that labeling theory is more likely to provide a plausible explanation for prison re-entry in comparison to social theories. Therefore, it is assumed that normal society members officially or unofficially lead the released inmates to reoffend hence prison re-entry. Then, we can assert that social elimination and isolation from normal social network because of stigmatization, imposed labels like "precedent" or "former inmate" and non-acceptance in normal groups leads the released prisoner to re-arrest and prison re-entry.

Four main theories are used to explain deviance: strain theory (Agnew, 1992), control theory (Hirschi, & Gottfredson, 1995), rational choice theory (Cornish & Clarke, (1986), and labeling theory (Lamert, 1999; Schur, 1973) and we are about to evaluate the power

of labeling theory over other theories to predict prison re-entry. Since a large number of prison population is usually being drawn from the less affluent members of society (Miller, 1958), it can be argued that the strain theory that stresses on the social structure and pressures does not explain prison re-entry. However, rational choice and control theories may have the power of predicting prison re-entry rate and therefore their effect is necessary to be controlled. Prison re-entry concept in this article, involves only the secondary crimes of former prisoners who repeatedly (at least two times) acted as criminal and got incarcerated.

Although there are some theories that are applied to explain re-offending or re-incarceration, more emphasis thus far has been on the accusation of the offender to be guilty and less on others who hold the power or are in the positions even within family or neighbors to impose criminal labels upon those who are formerly incarcerated. So, it is not always affluent, formal authority and upwardly members of society that continue to impose criminal label on someone who is released of prison after correction, but also being a former prisoner is a stigma that is usually applied on the individual by official and social position holders like police officers, judges, employers, and unofficial members like family members and kin that leads to re-arrest, mistrust, distance, aloof and social ejection. If the situation of the released prisoner is not accepted even by family and kin, there is no way for him/her but to join the groups of similar status and thus reinforce the stigma that results in more isolation and joining to similar groups to defend his attacked position. Lemert states that “when a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or role... as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the consequent societal reaction to him, his deviance is secondary” (1999, p. 388). It is important, now, in this article to ask, “What effect prisoner labeling imposed by formal authorities or informal position holders has on the former prisoner to re-offend and return to prison”?

## **Method**

### *Sampling*

In this study, survey method was adopted. The population in this study consisted of male and female inmates in Central Prison of Mashhad in summer of 2008. Sample size amounted to 340 prisoners who had at least two records of former conviction and imprisonment. Probability for calculating sample size was 99% and the precision, (based on the total respondents) was  $\pm 0.76$  of dependent variable i.e. prison re-entry rate. Sampling strategy was proportionate stratified and systematic sampling using the list of male and female prisoners. The first step was preparing a list of prisoners that included those who had two or more record of prison entry. The second step was classification of prisoners according to gender; the sample size in each category of males and females was proportionate to their ratio in every crime (prisoners list was not sorted by crime and included every types of crime). The third step was data gathering and information was gathered by a researcher-made questionnaire consisting of closed questions including five-point Likert items, which was administered by the interviewers. Respondents were selected randomly from the list of prisoners and were informed about the aim of study, confidentiality of responses, assuring irrelevance between responses and their criminal file and were free to respond voluntarily. If someone rejected to respond, the interviewer would simply move to the next participant.

### *Tools and techniques*

To analyze the data by using SPSS software it was necessary to prepare the data as appropriate for calculating by various techniques. Therefore, it was necessary for every theory to calculate indices, which consisted of variables based on that theory. When these indices were made the following techniques were used: Cronbach's Alpha to verify the reliability of a measure; it is a ratio between 0 and 1 and the higher the ratio, the more reliable the measure is. Factor analysis was used to verify the validity of the measures and the reduction of many variables in a measure to a few dimensions named as factors. Therefore, every theory includes some factors and every factor includes some variables. The final analyses were made using all the measures to investigate the power of theory and by dimensions to investigate the importance of variables in explaining prison re-entry. Since the tests showed that the measures were non-parametric, using PLUM - Ordinal Regression model technique was appropriate and this model was run according to the levels of prison re-entry.

### *Labeling measure*

The question was: "how do you describe the reactions and relationships of the official authorities, family members, kin or people with you after you were released from the prison for the first offend?" Twenty statements for description were offered and the answer as well as the score to each was: no (0), partly (1), yes (2) and sum of the total scores was used as the measure. Factor analysis for labeling items extracted four dimensions that are named as "appearance labeling" (Cronbach's Alpha=.86, range= 0-10), "job ejection" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.49, range=0-4), "social ejection" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.84, range=0-14), and "official labeling" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.82, range=0-8). The main score produced by the measure was the total value of all items.

### *Strain (structural) measure*

This measure consisted of two subjective and objective categories. Subjective category consisted of five dimensions of strains by factor analysis that are named: "social satisfactions" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.70, range=0-24), "job satisfaction" (Cronbach's Alpha=.80, range=0-10), "sense of discrimination" (Cronbach's Alpha=N/A, range=1-5), "disability of access to living aims" (Cronbach's Alpha=.70, range=3-15), "believe in destination" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.85, range=2-10). Objective category consisted of socio-economic status (e.g. gender, age, education, marriage, employment, birth and living place etc.) and kind of crime. The measure score for Subjective dimension consisted of the total value of all items and in the objective dimension categories of nominal variables changed into dichotomous variables and therefore considered as interval variables.

### *Rational choice measure*

This measure consisted of five dimensions: "Physiological motives" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.34, range=0-6), "esteem" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.53, range=0-6), "Excitement" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.65, range=0-6), "prediction of outcomes" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.81, range=0-10), "severity of punishment" (Cronbach's Alpha=0.78, range=0-4). The measure score consisted of the total value of all items.

### **Control measure**

This measure consisted of three main dimensions: “dependencies to family and friends” (Cronbach’s Alpha= 0.76, range=0-14), “commitment to society and religious values” (Cronbach’s Alpha=0.71, range=7-35), “believe in social norms and ethical values” (Cronbach’s Alpha= 0.64, range=6-30). The measure score consisted of the total value of all items

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Analysis**

*Gender:* Results showed that 71.2 per cent of prison re-enterers were male and 28.2 per cent were female.

*Education:* 14.7 per cent were illiterate and 32.6 per cent had preliminary literacy, 50 per cent intermediate and 2.7 per cent higher education.

*Birth and living place:* 94.6 per cent were born in cities and 96.1 per cent were living in cities.

*Marriage:* 36.9 per cent were unmarried, 36.9 per cent were married and living with their partner, 26.2 per cent were married but not living with their partner because of divorce (17.3 per cent), separation (4.8 per cent) or death of partner (4.2 per cent).

*Housing:* 27 per cent owned their housing, 35.1 per cent were renting a house, 35.1 per cent living with their kin and 2.7 per cent other kinds of housing.

*Employment:* 74.3 per cent had been employed before prison re-entry and 25.7 per cent were unemployed. Only 2.8 per cent had governmental jobs and 6.5 per cent had private company jobs, while 90.7 per cent had free jobs. 18.2 per cent were unemployed and seeking jobs and 68.2 per cent were housekeeping.

*Kind of crime:* 42.1 per cent committed drug crime, 36.7 per cent theft, 6.6 per cent committed crime against life, 3.9 per cent committed moral crime and 10.7 per cent others.

*Prison re-entry rate:* 32.1 per cent had two records of prison re-entry rate, 32.1 per cent three or four record, 17.4 per cent five or six and 18.5 per cent seven or more records. The average of records was 5.2 and median was 3 records.

*Length of prison and conviction:* The average length of prison was 2 years and median was 1 year. The average years of conviction were 12.1 year and median was 3 years.

### **Labelling measure**

The average for tolerating the appearance in society and being labeled as a criminal after the first time of release was 5.4 out of 10 (e.g. 0.54 per cent of the total scale), social ejection was 6.3 (0.45 per cent), official labeling as criminal was 4.2 (0.53 per cent), and job ejection was 1.4 (0.35 per cent).

### **Structural (Subjective) measure**

The average of social satisfactions was 8.13 (0.34 per cent), job satisfaction was 6.2 (0.62 per cent), sense of discrimination was 3.9 (0.78 per cent), disability of access to living aims 10.3 (0.69 per cent), believe in destination was 6.2 (0.62 per cent).

### **Rational choice measure**

The average of Physiological motives was 3.1 (0.52 per cent), esteem was 0.84 (0.14 per cent), Excitement was 1.3 (0.22 per cent), prediction of outcomes was 4 (0.40 per cent), and severity of punishment was 1.68 (0.42 per cent).

### **Control measure**

The average of dependencies to family and friends was 9.6 (0.69 per cent), commitment to society and religious values was 25.76 (0.74 per cent), believe in social norms and ethical values was 23.1 (0.77 per cent).

### **Correlates of prison re-entry rate**

Table 1 show that all of labelling factors have a significantly positive relationship with prison re-entry rate. None of the structural (subjective) factors is correlated with prison re-entry rate. Some of the structural (objective) factors are correlated with prison re-entry rate of which age or being male is positively and being married is negatively correlated with prison re-entry. However, education, living with wife, and birth or living places are not correlated.

Kind of crime is correlated with prison re-entry rate; crime against life is negatively and theft and some other crimes are positively correlated while some crimes like drug addiction or drug related crimes are not correlated with prison re-entry rate. Some of rational choice factors are positively correlated with prison re-entry rate, which can be mentioned as physiological motives, esteem and excitement. All of control factors are negatively correlated with prison re-entry rate namely dependencies to family and friends, commitment to society and religious values and belief in social norms and ethical values.

### **Causal Explanation**

All four theories' factors are entered into the stepwise model of regression analysis to test the importance of prediction power. Results are shown in the sixth step of the models in Table 1. As it can be seen, labeling is the most important theory of the four that explains best prison re-entry rate; it is responsible for about 15 per cent of variances of dependent variable. Rational choice is the second one, which is responsible for 12 per cent; Structural (socio-economic status) is the third with 7 per cent; Structural (kind of crime) is the fourth with about 6 per cent. However, strain (subjective) as well as control theories has the least importance, about 1 per cent to predict when these theories are controlled altogether. All the theories could explain about 43 per cent variances of dependent variable.

To analyze the details of predictor factors according to the theories, the results of PLUM - Ordinal Regression model for the step six is shown in table 2. This model indicates that 32 per cent of the variance observed in the dependent variable can be explained by the factors. Factors that had not any significant effect were omitted. Factors are ordered by the effect size importance and the results are as follows: Physiological motives (rational choice) had the most significant effect (17.475 wald parameter); other factors which respectively could predict prison re-entry rate included: age (structural); crime against life (structural); official labeling; appearance labeling; drug crimes (structural); moral beliefs (control) and being male (structural).

<b>Table 1. Correlates of prison re-entry</b>		
<b>Theory</b>	<b>Factors</b>	<b>Prison Re-entry rate</b>
<b>Labelling measure</b>	appearance labeling	.293(**)
	social ejection	.245(**)
	official labeling	.337(**)
	job ejection	.154(**)
<b>Structural (Subjective) measure</b>	job satisfaction	-.101
	sense of discrimination	.020
	failure in achieving living aims	-.039
	belief in common goals	.070
<b>Structural (objective)</b>	Age	.098(*)
	Being Married	-.091(*)
	Living with wife	-.084
	Being Male	.195(**)
	Education-illiterate	-.001
	Education- elementary	.007
	Education-pre high school	.014
	Education-high school	.001
	Birth place	.000
	Living place	.014
	Kind of crime-drug addiction	-.080
	Kind of crime-drug related	-.089
	Kind of crime-against life	-.155(**)
	Kind of crime-anti moral	-.041
	Kind of crime-theft	.159(**)
	Kind of crime-other	.102(*)
<b>Rational choice measure</b>	Physiological motives	.288(**)
	Esteem	.092(*)
	Excitement	.138(**)
	prediction of outcomes	.026
	severity of punishment	.074
<b>Control measure</b>	dependencies to family and friends	-.159(**)
	commitment to society and religious values	-.208(**)
	belief in social norms and ethical values	-.148(**)
(**)Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient is significant at 99% level of confidence		
(*)Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient is significant at 95% level of confidence		

entering by the significant order of theoretical predictors in the Model	Cumulative effects*	Individual prediction effect*	Model No.
labeling	.149	0.149	1
Structural or strain (subjective)	.167	0.018	2
rational choice	.290	0.123	3
control	.301	0.011	4
Structural (socio-economic status)	.375	0.074	5
Structural (kind of crime)	.434	0.059	6

\* Pseudo R-Square Nagelkerke

Theories		Predictors Ordered by effect size of Wald	Estimate	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
Level of dependent variable (prison records)	2 records		1.319	<b>2.305</b>	1	.129	-.384	3.021
	3-4 records		3.002	<b>11.579</b>	1	.001	1.273	4.731
	5-6 records		4.123	<b>21.215</b>	1	.000	2.368	5.877
rational choice	Motives physiological	<b>0.259</b>	<b>17.475</b>	1	.000	0.137	0.38	
strain(structural)	age	<b>0.046</b>	<b>16.306</b>	1	.000	0.024	0.068	
strain(structural)	Crime against life	<b>-1.975</b>	<b>14.901</b>	1	.000	-2.978	-0.972	
labeling	official Labeling	<b>0.166</b>	<b>12.875</b>	1	.000	0.075	0.257	
labeling	appearance Labeling	<b>0.088</b>	<b>6.144</b>	1	0.013	0.018	0.157	
strain(structural)	Drug related crimes	<b>-0.547</b>	<b>5.399</b>	1	0.02	-1.008	-0.086	
control	belief in social norms and ethical values	<b>-0.058</b>	<b>4.259</b>	1	0.039	-0.113	-0.003	
strain(structural)	Gender (male)	<b>0.563</b>	<b>3.896</b>	1	0.048	0.004	1.122	

Link function: Logit



## **Discussion**

Results about socio-economic situation showed that structural situation of the prisoners is conducive to prison re-entry because they are more frequently male, less educated, born and living in cities, unmarried or married but not living with their wife, are not house owners, mostly occupied with free jobs, mostly unemployed, mostly young, having less children. These situations lessen their bound to society and increase living in big cities more difficult, which entails problems. Some of the structural (objective) factors were correlated with prison re-entry rate of which age or being male is positively and being married is negatively correlated with prison re-entry. These results are consistent with the literature (Wilson, et.al., 2000; Schwaner, 1998; Dejong, 1997). Objective structural factors had more effect as the contextual situations on prison re-entry than subjective factors like socio-economic satisfaction, which can be interpreted with similarity of prisoners in the last respect. Correlates to prison re-entry rate showed that about two thirds of prisoners were similar in these regards so that only 0.34 per cent felt social satisfactions while 0.78 per cent felt discrimination. These results are consistent with the literature (Safdari, 1995; Mohammadnabi, 1996). Most frequent kinds of crimes were drug-related crimes and theft, which are more compatible with socio-economic situations. Theft was positively correlated to prison re-entry rate, which can be interpreted as having a low socioeconomic status after release.

Results showed that that all of labelling factors have a significantly positive relationship with prison re-entry rate. Labeling was the most important theory of the four that explained best prison re-entry rate; it was responsible for about 15 per cent of variances of dependent variable. These results are consistent with Lemert (1999) and Schur (1973) who argued that members of society continue to impose criminal label on someone who is released of prison after correction. Official labeling and appearance labeling were more effective than other forms, which emphasize the role of larger society than family and friends (Schur, 1973).

From the rational choice theory viewpoint, we saw that physiological motives, excitement and esteem were correlated to prison re-entry rate but in multivariate model, it was seen that only physiological motives were effective. This shows the importance of first level of needs in prison re-entry. These results contradict the ideas of some theorists who argued that individuals are naturally inclined to disorder behavior unless they are controlled (Reckless, 1973). Social disorder and delinquency are mainly caused by the lack of prohibition rather than motivational forces (Nye, 1958). However, it is consistent to lower level of socio-economic situations of prisoners, which has an effect on prison re-entry rate (Wilson, et.al., 2000). In accordance with the ideas put forward by some theorists, the results of this study show that committing crime indicates that the criminal act is more beneficial than law-abiding (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Some have viewed from the rational choice theory that need to money and other motives have an effect on secondary commitment (Safdari, 1995; Nabavi, 1995).

Results indicated that social control factors are negatively correlated with prison re-entry rate, although these factors are of less importance besides other factors including the labeling factors. This is consistent with Gendreau (1996) and others (Safdari, 1995; Shiri, 1997; Simon, 2008; Stalans et. al., 2004) implying that society linkage has more effect and social control such as social bound, religiosity, family affections, relationship with friends, and living with family decrease primary as well as secondary commitment.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that prison re-entry rate is not absolutely affected by only one set of factors but many factors are responsible in which labeling, motives, structural situations and beliefs could have partial effects. However, it seems structural as well as control versus rational and labeling factors are of less importance that can be analyzed by the similarity of prisoners' socio-economic situations in these respects. Low level of affluence and prestige and weak moral bonds can lead people to commit crime that ensue negative attitudes and avoidance by people in the community as well as family and friends the result of which is criminal labeling. In addition, lower class people have more unsatisfied needs than upper class and this makes committing crime more beneficial for them. Results showed that labeling is more effective in producing crime and prison re-entry. Therefore, some members of society, especially officials and employers, should be aware in their attitudes and interactions with people who are released from prison. In other words, society is responsible for prison re-entry and to alleviate the situation, social structure or social interactions should be reconsidered.

## Limitations

Although the researcher has made every effort to gain valid responses and many respondents trusted the research, still a few numbers might have concealed their information. In addition, this research can report only the situation of accessible prisoners inside the prison, therefore, the results are not generalized to the outside and a counterpart research may be needed to complete the results of this study. This research is limited only to prison re-entry in Central Prison of Mashhad and does not inform one about other cities or other countries. However, some of the results are consistent to the findings of researches conducted in Iran or other parts of the world.

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