



Homicide offender recidivism: A review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

While there exists an abundance of research on the criminal histories of homicide offenders, little is known about their future criminal behavior. This review outlines the current state of knowledge regarding recidivism among homicide offenders. It addresses the dominant theories found within the literature in this field and the prevalence of recidivism among both general and subgroups of homicide offenders. In this literary review, several shortcomings are revealed which point to potential directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Although violent offenders and their future threat are the topic of ongoing debate (Lattimore & Visser, 2011), there is little information

on recidivism among homicide offenders. The need for delineating the present state of knowledge on recidivism among homicide offenders is at least threefold. First, homicide is the most violent form of crime, and is one of the oldest puzzles in criminology and criminal justice. The impact and consequences of homicide are severe – of particular concern to the general public is re-offending by this violent group of offenders.

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Second, opposed to general delinquents, who typically serve relatively short prison sentences, homicide offenders are incarcerated for an extensive period of time. However, as opposed to research on recidivism of general delinquents (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009; Sampson & Laub, 2003b), it remains unknown to what extent homicide offenders follow similar criminal trajectories after imprisonment: We do not know to what extent the likelihood of recidivism among homicide offenders resembles recidivism among general delinquents who have committed less serious crimes. The need for outlining the status quo of research on recidivism of homicide offenders is especially relevant given the long prison terms these individuals serve.

Third, so far no previous literature review has been conducted on criminal (specific and general) recidivism of homicide offenders. An exception constitutes a literature review on a specific recidivism (i.e., homicide offenders who kill again) by Bjørkly and Waage (2005). In their review, other types of (non-lethal) recidivism remained unaddressed.

The scarcity of literature on recidivism of homicide offenders stands in stark contrast with research on the criminal histories of homicide offenders (e.g., Cook, Ludwig, & Braga, 2005; DeLisi, Hochstetler, Scherer, Purhmann, & Berg, 2008; DeLisi & Scherer, 2006; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, Smith, & Medina-Ariza, 2007). It should be emphasized that this review article focuses on offenses committed by homicide offenders *after* they were incarcerated for homicide. As such, studies that attempt to predict future homicide offenders, out of an at-risk sample population (Berk, Sherman, Barnes, Kurtz, & Ahlman, 2009; Loeber & Farrington, 2011; Loeber, Lacourse, & Homish, 2005), and studies that assess criminal activity by homicide offenders while incarcerated (DeLisi, 2003) will not be included in this review.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a systematic review of the literature on recidivism among homicide offenders. This group of offenders includes individuals who committed a homicide were institutionalized in a prison or psychiatric facility as a consequence, and then committed another crime after release.

This paper begins with a review of some of the theoretical explanations used to explain recidivism among homicide offenders. It continues with a discussion on the prevalence of recidivism among homicide offenders. In this discussion, both 'general' studies on homicide offenders are addressed as well as studies that focus on specific types of homicide offenders. Finally, based on this literature review, directions for future research will be outlined.

2. Theoretical explanations

From research on general delinquents, we know that several mechanisms are at work when considering recidivism (Nagin et al., 2009). These theoretical notions can be roughly divided into three theoretical clusters: static theories (age-graded theories), dynamic theories (social learning theories, life course theories, developmental theories) and typological theories (for a detailed overview of these three clusters, see Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005). This review will discuss the extent to which these theories have previously been used to explain the nature and prevalence of recidivism among homicide offenders.

2.1. Static theories

According to the general static approach to criminal behavior, individuals – once engaged in criminal behavior – have a high likelihood to continue to commit crime throughout their life-course (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Nagin & Paternoster, 2000). This approach to recidivism holds that the antisocial behavioral pattern of persistent criminals can be explained by certain 'static' characteristics, which can be traced back to their early childhood. The presence

of these characteristics (e.g., male gender, lack of self-control, psychopathic personality, problematic family background) will lead to a manifestation of their predestination to crime already at an early age (Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005). In a recent study based on 137 juvenile homicide offenders, Vries and Liem (2011) found partial support for this static approach to recidivism; male juveniles and juveniles who lacked self-control were more likely to recidivate than those who did not possess these static risk factors.

2.2. Dynamic theories

Dynamic theories, such as offered by Sampson and Laub (Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003b), postulate that changes in life circumstances directly influence criminal behavior. Recognizing individual differences in criminal propensity, dynamic theories argue that the effects of age on crime are to a large extent a function of life circumstances.

2.2.1. Social learning theories

In social learning theory, the basic variables that explain recidivism or desistance¹ are the same variables that account for initiation of criminal behavior; e.g., differential association and imitation (Akers, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 2003a). Related to recidivism after imprisonment in particular, social learning theorists have referred to prisons as 'schools of crime' (Gendreau, Cullen, & Goggin, 1999; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Wermink, Blokland, Nieuwebeerta, Nagin, & Tollenaar, 2010). According to this perspective, differential association with criminals and imitation of these criminals make individuals more likely to develop norms that favor crime, and, consequently, more likely to recidivate. This approach has been supported in a recent study by Trulson, Caudill, Haerle, and DeLisi (2012), who found that gang-affiliated juvenile homicide offenders were more likely to recidivate compared to juveniles without such affiliations (Trulson et al., 2012). Another recent study by Baaij, Liem, and Nieuwebeerta (2012) based on 621 homicide offenders also found support for the social learning hypothesis; contact with 'negative social bonds' in prison leads to acquiring skills that facilitate (future) crime. When an offender's detention history was shorter, longer imprisonment increased recidivism to a greater extent. This is in line with the assumption that longer prison sentence increases the likelihood of recidivism, because during lengthy imprisonment, criminal knowledge and skills are acquired and norms that favor criminal behavior are internalized over a longer period of time.

2.2.2. Life course theories

Life-course theories hold that criminal behavior changes as important life events change. More specifically, life-course research suggests that marital and parental attachment as well as job stability are significantly related to changes in criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003b): The stronger the ties to family and work, the less criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Life-course studies suggest that imprisonment may constitute a turning point in the incarcerated offender's criminal trajectory (Sampson & Laub, 1993). The experience of imprisonment may reduce the incarcerated offender's legal prospects by eliminating pathways for conventional development (Nieuwebeerta, Nagin, & Blokland, 2009). In addition, both the reduced opportunities to keep in contact while imprisoned, and the fact that friends and relatives might not want to keep contact with someone who has committed a crime, can worsen prisoners' contact with conventional others. When these areas of social control (through employment, marital and parental attachment) are reduced, offenders have a smaller incentive to abstain from reoffending. This mechanism has been supported in a Canadian study on 86 homicide recidivists, which found that reduction of family and community support after prison release explained why some homicide offenders recidivated and others did not (Cale, Plecas, Cohen, & Fortier, 2010). The aforementioned study by Baaij et al. (2012) explicitly tested

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