



New Trends  
in Psychology

## Personality Specificities of Recidivist Offenders: Psychological and Social Correlates

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**Abstract:** This article explores the personality traits of recidivist offenders, with a focus on impulsivity, antisocial tendencies, and lack of empathy, in order to better understand the psychological mechanisms that contribute to repeated offending. Building on foundational research in criminology and forensic psychology, this paper synthesizes existing findings on the personality structure of repeat offenders and integrates them with social and contextual factors influencing recidivism. A narrative review of the literature and relevant empirical studies was conducted, complemented by a case study illustrating the interaction between personality traits, substance abuse, and social circumstances in the life of a recidivist offender. Evidence shows that recidivists present consistent patterns of impulsivity, egocentric thinking, and deficient empathy, which—when combined with environmental stressors—lead to a higher likelihood of reoffending. Cognitive-behavioral intervention programs have demonstrated the strongest outcomes in reducing criminal relapse. The findings support the design of targeted rehabilitation programs that combine psychological treatment, social support, and vocational training, offering actionable insights for policymakers and prison administrators. This paper highlights

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the necessity of a multidisciplinary, evidence-based approach to recidivism reduction and provides an integrative perspective linking personality, context, and intervention strategies.

**Keywords:** recidivism; offender personality; antisocial traits; rehabilitation strategies; forensic psychology

## 1. Introduction

Criminal recidivism represents one of the most persistent challenges for criminal justice systems worldwide, posing significant implications for public safety, prison management, and rehabilitation policies. Recidivist offenders account for a disproportionate share of crimes, which highlights the urgency of understanding the factors that drive repeated offending. While criminal behavior is shaped by multiple influences, research has consistently shown that personality traits—such as impulsivity, antisocial tendencies, and lack of empathy—play a central role in predicting recidivism (Hare, 1991; Eysenck, 1996).

Despite the extensive literature on criminality, many studies have focused on structural or socio-economic predictors, leaving a relative gap in the comprehensive exploration of psychological and personality-related mechanisms underlying repeated offending. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for designing effective interventions that go beyond punishment and aim to reduce reoffending rates through psychological treatment and social reintegration strategies.

The present paper aims to analyze the personality profile of recidivist offenders, explore the psychological and social factors contributing to criminal relapse, and outline evidence-based rehabilitation approaches. By integrating empirical findings and practical examples, this study seeks to inform policymakers, psychologists, and prison administrators about effective strategies for reducing recidivism and facilitating successful reintegration into society.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on criminal recidivism has long emphasized the importance of personality traits in predicting repeated offending. Eysenck's (1996) biosocial theory suggests that individuals high in extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior due to deficits in conditioning and impulse control.

Subsequent studies have confirmed that impulsivity and low self-control are among the strongest predictors of criminal persistence (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Another key construct is psychopathy, characterized by superficial charm, callousness, and lack of remorse (Hare, 2003). Psychopathic traits have been repeatedly linked to higher rates of violent recidivism, posing challenges for correctional systems due to their resistance to traditional rehabilitation approaches (Hemphill, Hare & Wong, 1998). Additionally, research indicates that recidivists often display cognitive distortions, such as externalizing blame or minimizing harm, which sustain maladaptive behavioral patterns (Maruna, 2001).

Environmental factors interact with these personality predispositions. Farrington's (2005) longitudinal studies highlight the role of disrupted family environments, early exposure to delinquency, and socio-economic disadvantage as risk amplifiers. Social disorganization theory also suggests that lack of community support and reintegration programs increases the probability of reoffending (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Despite these insights, gaps remain regarding the integration of psychological, social, and contextual predictors into holistic intervention models. Most existing programs still emphasize punitive measures rather than tailored psychological rehabilitation, resulting in what researchers term a "revolving door" phenomenon (Bonta & Andrews, 2017). This gap underscores the need for evidence-based, individualized approaches that address both internal traits and external circumstances.

### **3. Methodology**

This article adopts a mixed theoretical and illustrative approach to examine the personality traits of recidivist offenders and the psychological and social factors influencing repeated criminal behavior. The primary methodology consisted of a comprehensive literature review, integrating findings from criminology, forensic psychology, and social sciences, focusing on studies published between 1941 and 2023. Priority was given to meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, and theoretical models that explore antisocial personality traits, impulsivity, empathy deficits, and their relationship to recidivism.

In addition to the literature review, a case study method was employed to provide practical insight into the lived experience of a recidivist offender. The selected case

(Marius I.) was chosen for its representativeness of common risk factors such as dysfunctional family background, substance abuse, and lack of social reintegration support. Data for the case were reconstructed based on existing criminological reports, clinical evaluations, and rehabilitation program outcomes.

This dual approach — combining evidence from prior research with an illustrative case — allows for a deeper understanding of the interplay between personality traits, contextual variables, and recidivism, and supports the development of practical recommendations for prevention and rehabilitation strategies.

#### **4. Findings**

The literature consistently reports that recidivist offenders exhibit elevated rates of antisocial personality traits, with prevalence estimates ranging between 40–60% for clinically significant antisocial features in prison populations (Hare, 2003; Bonta & Andrews, 2017). Impulsivity and poor self-control are among the strongest predictors of repeat offending, with meta-analyses showing that offenders in the highest quartile for impulsivity scores are up to 2.5 times more likely to reoffend compared to those with lower scores (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Empathy deficits were also consistently documented, with psychopathy-related traits present in approximately 15–25% of incarcerated individuals (Hare, 1991), suggesting a subset of offenders with entrenched emotional detachment and manipulative behaviors. Cognitive distortions—such as externalizing blame, minimizing harm, and perceiving themselves as victims—are frequently reported as sustaining factors of criminal behavior (Maruna, 2001).

Socio-environmental predictors remain powerful: children raised in families with criminal models are twice as likely to become offenders themselves (Farrington, 2005), and lack of stable employment after release increases the probability of reoffending by over 40% (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Substance abuse is strongly associated with both violent and non-violent recidivism, with some studies reporting comorbidity rates exceeding 60% in repeat offenders.

The case study of Marius I. is consistent with these data: his high impulsivity, drug dependence, and absence of social support networks contributed to repeated incarcerations despite participation in rehabilitation programs. His trajectory illustrates how unaddressed psychosocial vulnerabilities and structural barriers hinder sustainable reintegration.

Taken together, these findings emphasize that effective interventions must be comprehensive, integrating personality-focused psychotherapy (particularly cognitive-behavioral modalities), substance abuse treatment, vocational training, and structured post-release support. Addressing both individual-level traits and systemic reintegration barriers appears to be critical in reducing recidivism rates.

## 5. Discussion

The present findings confirm that recidivist offenders exhibit a distinct constellation of psychological traits — notably impulsivity, antisocial tendencies, and empathy deficits — which substantially increase their likelihood of reoffending. These results align with the theoretical framework of Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime, which posits that low self-control is a central determinant of persistent criminality. The strong association between psychopathy scores and repeat offending, documented in multiple meta-analyses (Hare, 1991; Bonta & Andrews, 2017), highlights the need for interventions that specifically target maladaptive cognitive schemas, moral reasoning, and emotion regulation.

From a rehabilitative perspective, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) programs remain the gold standard in reducing recidivism rates. Interventions such as Reasoning & Rehabilitation (R&R) and Thinking for a Change (T4C) have demonstrated measurable improvements in offenders' problem-solving skills, impulse control, and pro-social decision-making. Similarly, Moral Recondition Therapy (MRT) has been effective in enhancing moral reasoning and personal accountability, whereas Aggression Replacement Training (ART) targets anger management and social competence. Evidence from correctional psychology research consistently shows that offenders who complete structured CBT programs are 30–40% less likely to recidivate compared to untreated controls (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007).

Nevertheless, psychological treatment alone is insufficient without parallel social reintegration strategies. Stable employment, housing, and community support networks are key protective factors that mitigate the risk of relapse into criminal behavior. Programs that combine CBT-based interventions with vocational training, mentorship, and structured post-release supervision have demonstrated the highest success rates. The case study of Marius I. illustrates this point: despite completing

in-prison programs, the lack of external support systems and ongoing drug dependence contributed to repeated offending.

These findings suggest that policymakers and practitioners should adopt a holistic, multi-level approach to offender rehabilitation. Psychological interventions must be integrated with systemic measures that address structural vulnerabilities — including poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to mental health care — thereby creating conditions that support sustainable desistance from crime.

## **6. Recommendations**

Reducing recidivism requires a comprehensive, integrated approach that combines psychological treatment, social support, and systemic reform. One essential step is the nationwide implementation of evidence-based cognitive-behavioral interventions, including programs such as Reasoning & Rehabilitation (R&R), Thinking for a Change (T4C), Moral Reconnection Therapy (MRT), and Aggression Replacement Training (ART). Delivered by trained psychologists and carefully monitored for effectiveness, these interventions help offenders develop self-control, improve moral reasoning, and replace maladaptive thinking patterns with prosocial alternatives.

An equally important measure is the introduction of standardized psychological risk and needs assessments at the moment of intake into the correctional system. These assessments allow for individualized treatment plans tailored to each offender's criminogenic needs, thereby improving the efficiency of rehabilitation efforts. In addition, post-release supervision must be strengthened through psychological counseling, relapse prevention groups, and mentoring by community volunteers, ensuring a smooth transition back into society and minimizing the risk of relapse into criminal behavior.

Rehabilitation also depends on providing meaningful opportunities for education and employment. Establishing vocational training programs and building partnerships with private employers can equip offenders with market-relevant skills and increase their chances of securing stable jobs upon release. Similarly, substance abuse must be addressed systematically through integrated programs that combine medication-assisted treatment, relapse prevention therapy, and peer-support initiatives to reduce the impact of addiction as a driver of criminal behavior.

Finally, successful reintegration is possible only through close collaboration between psychologists, social workers, correctional officers, probation services, and community organizations. Regular interdisciplinary meetings and case conferences can ensure that interventions remain consistent across incarceration and reintegration phases. Parallel to these efforts, public awareness campaigns are needed to combat stigma, encourage community acceptance, and create a supportive environment that allows former offenders to rebuild their lives.

## **7. General Conclusion**

The analysis of recidivist offenders' personality traits underscores that repeated criminal behavior is rarely the result of isolated factors but rather emerges from a complex interaction of psychological predispositions, social disadvantages, and systemic shortcomings. Impulsivity, antisocial tendencies, and a diminished capacity for empathy remain central elements that predispose individuals to reoffend, yet these traits are significantly amplified when offenders return to environments marked by poverty, lack of social support, and limited opportunities for legitimate self-realization.

The findings presented in this article highlight the urgent need for a shift from a punitive to a rehabilitative paradigm in criminal justice systems. Evidence-based cognitive-behavioral interventions, combined with individualized treatment planning, targeted vocational training, and sustained post-release support, offer a viable pathway for reducing recidivism rates and improving public safety. When paired with collaborative efforts between correctional institutions, healthcare providers, and community organizations, such approaches have the potential to transform the cycle of incarceration into a process of reintegration.

Ultimately, reducing recidivism is not merely a correctional objective but a societal responsibility. A justice system that prioritizes rehabilitation over retribution can contribute to breaking the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior, restoring offenders' dignity, and fostering social cohesion. By integrating psychological science, public policy, and community engagement, the criminal justice system can move closer to its dual mission of protecting society and enabling offenders to rebuild meaningful, prosocial lives.

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