

1955

Effect of Social Environment Upon Former Felons, The

Dietrich C. Reitzes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dietrich C. Reitzes, Effect of Social Environment Upon Former Felons, The, 46 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 226 (1955-1956)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT UPON FORMER FELONS

DIETRICH C. REITZES

The author is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Indiana University, at Calumet Center. During the Korean conflict he was serving with the U. S. Army with the rank of Captain. At that time he had started a research project in association with Dr. Joseph D. Lohman (now Sheriff of Cook County, Illinois) and Dr. Lloyd E. Ohlin. They were evaluating the experience of the army with released felons during World War II. Dr. Reitzes was assigned by the Defense Department to Dr. Lohman to continue this research and to serve in the capacity of Associate Director of the study. He is now studying the effects of contacts with law enforcement officials on juvenile delinquents. This work is supported by a grant from Indiana University. He acknowledges his debt to Dr. Ohlin for criticisms and suggestions relating to the article which is published here.—EDITOR.

The successful adjustment of ex-convicts to law abiding society depends to a large extent upon the terms and conditions under which integration with conventional society becomes a feasible. Such integration is not only influenced by the past experiences and personality factors of the ex-convict but also by the specific situation in which the attempted adjustment takes place. This paper reports the results of a study specifically directed toward an examination of the influence of such situational factors as employment, family life, and social contacts.

The study reported here is one aspect of a larger study: the Illinois Felon Study which is being conducted under the direction of Joseph D. Lohman, Lloyd E. Ohlin, and the author. The felon study is primarily concerned with the adjustment of parolees in the armed forces during World War II. The study reported here examines the adjustment of these men in civilian life after release from service. Consequently this group is homogeneous in a number of important respects. All men interviewed are in the age group which made them eligible for military service during World War II, they all had the experience of service in the army, their previous criminal career was of such a nature as to make them acceptable to the army (they were all screened by the army), their adjustment to civilian life took place after military service and not directly after prison service (this means that the emotional problem of adjusting to free society after having been in prison is mediated by the intervening military service). We feel that these similarities in background highlight the significance of the differential experience in the areas studied.

SELECTION OF CASES STUDIED

For the Illinois Felon Study we selected a random sample of all the parolees inducted from the northern part of Illinois during World War II for purposes of intensive interviews. Five hundred cases were interviewed in 1951, 1952, and 1953. Most of these interviews took place in the free community. In some cases, however, the individual had gotten into trouble again and those cases were interviewed in the Illinois State prisons or in jails. The interviews were conducted by four trained in-

interviewers. For the purposes of this study I have selected a sample of 176 cases from the 500 interviews conducted. This is a random sample except that the proportion of cases from each interviewer for this sample is the same as for the 500 cases. I then extracted from the interviews all relevant information regarding work habits and employment patterns; family life; and social contacts. The 176 cases then were classified as non-recidivists, borderline cases, and recidivists. Criteria for classification were: non-recidivist: no further negative contact with law enforcement agencies; borderline case: arrest by law enforcement agency but no further conviction to prison or jail; recidivist: further convictions to prisons or jails. All cases had been submitted to the FBI for a fingerprint check. In this way we had information whether the individual had been fingerprinted anywhere in the U.S. and the reasons. This was the main source for the data used in making the above classification. In addition we checked with the Chicago Police Department for information and also used the information from the interview. We found that occasionally minor arrests were not reported anywhere but were admitted by the individual during the interview.

This classification gave the following results: 104 cases were non-recidivists, 26 cases were borderline, and 46 were recidivists.

Careful examination of statistical data and interview material indicated that the important comparisons for our purposes here were between the recidivists and non-recidivists. We found that the borderline cases were to a large extent persons who got into minor conflict with law enforcing agencies because of drinking and certain personality characteristics. We, therefore, limited our comparisons here to the recidivists and non-recidivists.

I. EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS

Several aspects of the differences in the employment pattern between recidivists and non-recidivists were examined.

a. Steadiness of Employment

In comparing the steadiness of employment we found that 55 percent of the non-recidivists worked steadily with less than three job changes and 26 percent of the recidivists worked that steadily. On the other hand only 14 percent of the non-recidivists had extended periods of unemployment while 41 percent of the recidivists were unemployed at one period. Both of these differences are significant at the 1 percent level.

The interview material indicates that while this may partially be the result of personality factors there is also the fact that some men were more fortunate or skillful in hiding their criminal records than others and this was often an important factor regarding future criminal behavior.

b. Type of Work

The kind of work the men did at the time of the interview was classified as unskilled; semi-skilled; skilled; and white collar.

Only 8 percent of the non-recidivists performed unskilled labor, while 46 percent of the recidivists were so classified. On the other hand 62 percent of the non-recidi-

vists were classified as skilled and white collar compared to 15 percent of the recidivists. The differences between these two sets of percentages is significant at the 1 percent level.

c. Occupational Mobility

A comparison was made between the work the men did upon release from the army and the work they did at the time of the interview. This was used to determine the occupational mobility of the individual. Based on a scale of: unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled, clerical, supervisory, 38 percent of the non-recidivists and none of the recidivists were upward mobile. On the other hand downward occupational mobility was found in 1 percent of the non-recidivists and in 17 percent of the recidivists. These differences also are significant at the 1 percent level. Sixty-one percent of the non-recidivists and 83 percent of the recidivists did not change in occupational level. This difference is significant at the 5 percent level.

d. Character of Occupation

We also classified the men's occupations as conventional or unconventional. An occupation was defined "unconventional" if it had a high probability of leading to contact with criminal elements. For the group studied the following occupations were thus classified as unconventional: working in or owning a tavern or bar, working in or owning a gambling place. Non-recidivists engaged in unconventional occupations comprise 8 percent of the group while 20 percent of the recidivists were working in unconventional occupations. The difference is significant at the 5 percent level.

Thus the employment data show a significant difference between non-recidivists and recidivists. While this does not necessarily indicate causal relationships it is apparent that real differences exist.

II. FAMILY LIFE

A second area of study concerned the difference in the family life of the two categories.

a. Marital Status

The study of marital status of the cases at the time of the interview indicated that the percentage of recidivists and non-recidivists who were never married is not significantly different. However, the non-recidivists show a significantly greater percentage of married men than the recidivists. Of the non-recidivists 78 percent were married as over against 45 percent of the recidivists. This difference is primarily accounted for by the divorced cases. Only 2 percent of the non-recidivists were divorced at the time of the interview while 30 percent of the recidivists were then divorced. These two differences are significant at the 1 percent level. There is also a difference between the two groups in regard to separations. Two percent of the non-recidivists were separated and 9 percent of the recidivists. This difference is significant at the 5 percent level.

b. Conjugal Relationships

Comparison of the nature of marital relationships of the cases was based on the men's own statements. This comparison deals only with those men who lived with

their wives at the time of the interview; it excludes therefore those who were divorced or separated. The data indicate that the marital adjustment of the non-recidivists is decidedly superior to that of the recidivists. Of the non-recidivists 83 percent reported having good relationships with their wives compared to 50% of the recidivists. Fourteen percent of the non-recidivists reported that they "get along" with their wives and only 3 percent reported "conflict." Whereas 40 percent of the recidivists reported that they "get along", 5 percent reported "strained" relationships and 5 percent reported conflict. The difference between recidivists and non-recidivists in the first two categories (Good, Get Along) is significant at the 1 percent level; the other two differences are not significant at either the 1% or 5% level.

c. Relationships with Parents

From the interview material we got the impression that the relationship of our cases with their parental families also was related to recidivism and non-recidivism. We studied two aspects of this relationship: degree of contact with parental family and nature of relationship.

Of the non-recidivists 70 percent reported that they had close contact with their parental family while only 33 percent of the recidivists reported this relationship. This difference is significant at the 1 percent level.

On the other hand only 6 percent of the non-recidivists had no contacts with parental families compared to 18 percent of the recidivists. This difference is significant at the 5 percent level.

Of those men who had contact with their parental families non-recidivists generally seemed to get along somewhat better with them. Thus 66 percent of the non-recidivists had good relationships with their parental families compared to 44 percent of the recidivists. On the other hand 4 percent of the non-recidivists had conflict with their parental families while 16 percent of the recidivists had conflict. The difference between recidivists and non-recidivists regarding those who reported they get along "Good" with their families is significant at the 5 percent level. The other differences are not significant at the 5 percent level.

The data on the family life of our cases indicate that non-recidivists as compared to recidivists have fewer divorces and separations, have less conflicts with spouses in those cases where they live together, have more contacts with their parental families and these contacts are of a more harmonious nature.

III. SOCIAL CONTACTS

Various aspects of social contacts of the ex-felons to persons other than family members were explored. Those that did not discriminate between the two groups of ex-felons were: marital status of contacts; sources of contacts; major social activities; and knowledge of criminal record by friends or associates. The three aspects of social contacts which were significant were the following: having friends; exposure to criminal influences; and organizational membership.

a. Friendships

Of the non-recidivists 94 percent reported that they had friends compared to 51 percent of the recidivists. Conversely, 7 percent of the non-recidivists reported having

no friends compared to 49 percent of the recidivists. These differences are significant at the 1 percent level.

b. Exposure to Criminal Influences

The comparisons regarding exposure to criminal influences are based on the answers of the interviewees to questions probing the activities and orientation of their associates. The interview situation itself was probably conducive to denying contacts with criminally inclined persons. Thus the data probably reflect the interviewees own orientation regarding criminal activities as well as those of his associates. Of the non-recidivists 92 percent reported that all their present associates were conventionally oriented compared to 41 percent of the recidivists' associates. Conversely, only 8 percent of the non-recidivists indicated that they still have contacts with individuals who are criminally oriented compared to 59 percent of the recidivists. The differences between the recidivists and non-recidivists are significant at the 1 percent level.

c. Membership in Organizations

Thirty-eight percent of the non-recidivists had joined some organization as over against 11 percent of the recidivists. This difference is significant at the 1 percent level. The most common organization for all groups were veterans organizations.

In the area of social contacts, therefore, non-recidivists are characterized by having more friends, having fewer non-conventionally oriented associates, and joining organizations more frequently than recidivists.

IV. COMBINATION OF FACTORS

Finally we tested the combined effect of the above factors by scoring each case in accordance with the following scale:

Working Steadily	+1
Extended Period of Unemployment	-1
Upward Occupational Mobility	+1
No Change in Occupational Mobility	0
Downward Occupational Mobility	-1
Conventional Work	+1
Unconventional Work	-1
Married	+1
Single	0
Divorced or Separated	-1
Family Relationships: Good or Get Along	+1
Family Relationships: Strained or Conflict	-1
Having Friends	+1
No Friends	-1
Organizational Membership	+1
No Organizational Membership	-1
Associates Conventionally Oriented	+1
Associates Unconventionally Oriented	-1

These scores were then added for each case and the distribution of scores thereby derived were tabulated for the three categories.

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF SCORES

Score	Percentages		
	Non-recidivists	Borderline	Recidivists
8	10	0	0
7	21	0	0
6	6	11	0
5	33	15	4
4	7	8	6
3	6	15	15
2	3	8	8
1	2	11	6
0	0	8	13
-1	1	8	15
-2	0	8	13
-3	1	4	11
-4	0	1	4
-5	0	0	2

The average score for the non-recidivist was 5.4, for the borderline cases 2, and for the recidivist 0. This indicates that the factors discussed in this paper are related to recidivism and non-recidivism individually as well as in combination.

SUMMARY

The data (presented here) indicate that non-recidivists differ significantly from recidivists in their employment patterns: regularity of work, type of work and occupational mobility; their family life, particularly in terms of the conjugal family and their social relationships. The statistics, of course, do not indicate whether this difference is the cause or the effect of criminal activity. The interviews themselves however, strongly suggest that in many cases the factors described here have a causal relationship to recidivism. The author feels that in any case the differences between recidivists and non-recidivists as discussed in this paper are sufficiently large to warrant further study.

This paper therefore provides further evidence that the adjustment of ex-convicts to law-abiding society depends on the social conditions under which this adjustment takes place. The particular conditions examined here are all subject to some extent to external control. This means that the ex-convict's chances of successful adjustment can be increased by guidance and help in providing him with work which is related to his capacities and interests, by providing counseling both to himself and his family; and by seeing to it that he is actively integrated into law abiding communities. (For the last point the support of community organizations might be enlisted.) All this points to the desirability of parole as against straight release provided that real parole supervision is given.