

Abstract

In contemporary criminology, prisons are increasingly recognized as environments that may not only reinforce but also amplify criminal behavior. This dissertation examines prison programs as pivotal in transforming prisons from mere detention facilities to centers of rehabilitative change. It specifically investigates the historical and current perceptions of success within these programs, rooted in the rehabilitation ideal where success is primarily measured by the reduction or absence of recidivism. Advocating for a paradigm shift, this work champions the incorporation of a desistance approach, framing the path away from crime offending as a complex journey. This approach recognizes the departure from criminal behavior as a prolonged, gradual process and positions the prison program as a potentially powerful facilitator in this transformation, provided the right conditions are met. The initial sections lay the groundwork by distinguishing between rehabilitative and desistance approaches in the evaluation of prison programs, portraying the latter as a novel, enriching supplement to the traditional model. Subsequently, an in-depth exploration of desistance's theoretical underpinnings is undertaken, dissecting its socio-structural and subjective (agentic) branches. Drawing on the insights from this chapter, in the third methodological section, I delineate a systematic approach for integrating the desistance perspective into the assessment of prison programs. This framework guides the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from an extensive research collaboration involving a prospective survey of inmates across 27 Czech prisons (ROOT project). This survey is enriched with comprehensive datasets from the prison databases VIS and SARPO, encompassing 1,080 convicts placed in prison programs. Additionally, my independent research includes 15 interviews with prison program lecturers and 5 with program graduates. Employing both quantitative and qualitative analysis (following the mixed-methods approach), the research identifies four principal factors affecting the success of inmates in prison programs: pre-program, program, post-program, and system factors. These insights culminate in a complex reevaluation of success metrics for prison programs, anchored in desistance theory. The result is a comprehensive set of 15 policy implications, detailed in an annex, that are crafted to direct the design, execution, and assessment stages of prison programs. In its concluding synthesis, the dissertation contemplates the research limitations and proposes future investigative avenues within the spheres of prison rehabilitation and the journey towards desistance, marking a contribution to the discourse on criminal justice reform.