Lectio praecursoria

Can Post-prison Life Course Be Explained With Context?

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In 2022, we saw 5656 releases from prison in Finland (Rikosseuraamuslaitos, 2023). Globally, almost 12 million people are incarcerated in prisons (UNODC, 2025). Many of them – but not all – will at some point return to their homes, families and friends to continue their lives.

Ari and Benjamin

My dissertation begins with a depiction of Ari and Benjamin, two imaginary people released from Finnish prisons, Ari in 1993, and Benjamin in 2015. I described Ari and Benjamin very little in the work, but I decided to talk about them a bit more today. Who they could have been, what they could have done and – above all – what could have happened to them after their release.

I chose the names Ari and Benjamin as 92 percent of people in Finnish prisons are men. It is likely that they would have been in their thirties, maybe a bit older. While Ari may have only used alcohol in his time, Benjamin would probably have used some substances too, such as cannabis, amphetamine or buprenorphine, in addition to alcohol.

In the dissertation, I envisioned that Ari was released to a cold morning in 1993, while Benjamin enjoyed a warmer breeze in 2015. With some luck, Ari could have found the morning paper to read news of the ongoing recession, whereas Benjamin would have only needed to turn on his smartphone to check what's going on in the world and to ask for a ride to town.

Given these differences in the society mere twenty years and change apart, I wanted to know what would happen to these two after their release. Could they find a job? Could they find an apartment? Could they find a partner? Or would they just simply die.

Buprenorphine – a key to lower mortality?

Prior research has already shown that the first weeks after release from prison are a risk period for death (Borschmann et al., 2024; Merrall et al., 2010). However, many studies are from countries where other opioids than buprenorphine are mainly used. Buprenorphine is slightly safer than other opioids (Walsh et al., 1994), which could lead to less drug-related deaths. Therefore, in the first study of my dissertation, I examined the mortality and causes

of death after criminal sanctions here in Finland.

For all the studies, I used administrative register data, data that each Finn creates in their interactions with state authorities. Whenever Ari went to school, grades were written down. Whenever Benjamin treated his broken wrist, a doctor wrote a diagnosis, which got recorded.

The data I had for the first study was on people who had sought treatment for substance use and that treatment data was linked to data on their prison spells and causes of death. The linking was done with the Finnish personal identification number, which enables direct matching between registers. While this may seem straightforward, the reality was anything but. For the first study, I perused some grainy PDFs from the 1980s to see if tens of people had actually died in elevators or in terrorist attacks I hadn't heard of. Thankfully, causes of death were just classified differently before 1995, and I hadn't gone completely mad.

The first study revealed that time in prison was associated with lower mortality than time in freedom. The time of community sanctions was not associated with lower mortality, but community sanctions aren't as intensive in constraining peoples' lives as incarceration. Despite the lower mortality, 40%, or every two out of five of deaths during incarceration and community sanctions were from suicide. The finding is in line with a previous comparison of Norwegian prisons with English and Welsh prisons, which showed that people in Scandinavian *closed* prisons experience similar pain and frustration than people in English and Welsh institutions (Crewe et al., 2022).

The results on post-release mortality also showed that many deaths were more often from drug-related and other external causes even 2 to 5 years post-release. Drug-related mortality was over 8.5 times higher in the first two weeks compared to those never incarcerated and the mortality rate remained elevated even beyond the first 12 weeks.

All this is to say, that both Ari and Benjamin likely were at heightened risk of death when they were released. The results did not show differences in post-release mortality between those who only had an alcohol use disorder, like Ari, and those using opioids, like Benjamin, although that may just be due to a lack of data – a very positive problem in this instance.

Broadening the scope of inquiry

With the first study focusing on mortality and the most immediate time after release, it was time to broaden the horizons. If not previously helped by the prison staff, Ari and Benjamin next needed to find a place to sleep in and some work.

To this end, the second study of the dissertation examined employment, homelessness and marriages up to 25 years after release. Employment, homelessness and marriages were studied as they are the mainstays of life course criminology. The debate is still ongoing as to whether they are the beginnings, midpoints or ends of the desistance process (see, e.g. Nguyen & Loughran, 2018), the effort of detaching from criminal life, but that was not central to the study. More central was to understand how each of them developed after first prison conviction and when they would even occur.

This was because Neil and Sampson had suggested a few years prior that people could differ not because of *who* they were, but because *when* they were (Neil & Sampson, 2021). I wanted to apply this principle to study the aggregate rates of employment, homelessness and marriage post-prison. I wondered if the post-release life course of those released in the 1990s would differ from those released in the 2010s just because of the sociohistorical context.

The study focused on time since release, while comparing cohorts and considering the temporal context. As I had three dimensions of time to think about, age-period-cohort models entered the scene. The crux of age-period-cohort modelling is that the three dimensions of time are interrelated – if I know how old you are (your age) and the year it is (the period), I can do a subtraction to calculate your birth year (your cohort). In statistical modelling, this relation produces a problem in identifying how much each of the three time components affects the outcomes of interest.

Therefore, in the second study I employed the age-period-cohort-interaction model introduced by Luo and Hodges (2021). The model approaches the identification issue by expressing the cohort component as the interaction of age and period. That is, the model allows each period to affect people of different age differently and thus sidesteps the identification issue.

I reimagined the age-period-cohort-interaction model so that age referred to time since release and cohort to the release year. Then, more important for post-prison life would be the time of an event in relation to release rather than the age of that person at the time of the event. The results of the study showed that employment rate would increase rather steadily after the strong yearly fluctuation from the labour market cycle was removed. Recessions appeared to affect both those who had been released recently and those who had been out for longer.

The study also showed that the rate of homelessness remained rather stable post-release. Prior research shows that homelessness is a transitive state, wherein one's status could change on a weekly basis (Remster, 2021; see also O'Flaherty, 2019). Therefore, the yearly measurement used in the study may not be optimal, but still the relative stability in the aggregate rate was surprising. Further, the results showed that about one in five, 20%, was without a conventional apartment, even a decade after their first conviction. The finding is notable, as the lack of a conventional dwelling has already been linked to an increased risk of a new conviction in the Finnish prison population (Aaltonen et al., 2021).

The results on marriage showed that they increased with time from release as the people aged. There was also some evidence that those released later would be less likely to marry. This reflects trends in the general population, where cohabiting has become more common, replacing marriages (e.g. Jalovaara & Andersson, 2023).

We also asked an intriguing question in the study. Could it be so that the aggregate rates of the outcomes would be the same, but there would be opposite changes in the aggregate rates of background factors and the way they predicted the outcomes? For instance, it is known that incarcerated women are less likely to be employed than incarcerated men. Now, there could be an increasing number of women in the prison population, but over time women could find jobs more often than men. This would result in the overall post-release employment rate remaining the same despite important changes in the process behind it.

The results showed some changes like this. For example, foreign background initially predicted a low probability of employment. Then the data showed that the share of people with foreign background convicted to first incarceration *increased* over time, and at the same time foreign background began to predict better and better odds for finding employment.

The analysis of the background variables also revealed that none of them were consistently associated with more positive post-release outcomes, that is, being employed, housed *and* married. Even education was not signifi-

cantly associated with all outcomes in all release cohorts.

The study also examined whether specific measurable context variables predicted the post-release outcomes. The only measure associated with all outcomes was the general unemployment rate. High unemployment rate predicted less employment and less marriages, but also less homelessness. The fact that high general unemployment predicted less homelessness was puzzling, but likely due to the homelessness reduction programs that were initiated at the time of recessions (Juhila et al., 2022; Pleace, 2017). This could have led to the unexpected sign of the association.

As the second study showed that the labour market cycle was connected to many facets of post-prison life, I wanted to examine it in more detail in the third and final study. In the third study I took a more econometric approach and asked whether industry-specific labour demand would affect employment and reoffending rates in the immediate time after release. The study focused on industry-specific effects as the recidivism-reduction has been observed only for some industries in previous research.

Will labour demand affect recidivism in Finland?

Previous results from the U.S. and France had shown that labour demand in construction and manufacturing industries reduces recidivism (Galbiati et al., 2021; Schnepel, 2018), but has not been able to answer the basic underlying question: does the increase in labour demand lead to the employment of the released individuals *themselves* or is recidivism reduced via some other mechanism? For example, in a strong labour market their friends and family could lend them more money, or there could be more illegal work available or more goods to be stolen.

Before establishing any effects labour demand could have, I needed to explore where the Finnish prison population worked after release. The data showed that construction industry was the most common employer. Based on prior research, work there has many qualities that improve the chances of recruitment for justice-involved people (for a review, see Griffith et al., 2019). Less education is required and there is less customer-facing contact than in other industries. The work is manual, and temporary work is well available. Further, if there are other formerly incarcerated people working in an industry, they could recommend others like them, or employers may get positive experiences working with them increasing future hires from this population.

The second most common industry was *administrative and support service activities*. While the name suggested white-collar work, like management consultancy in a corporation, a more detailed examination revealed that the employers were temporary work agencies. In the Finnish context, temporary work agencies can be very relevant employers for the prison population as termination of employment can be challenging. With the use of these agencies, the employers can see people's quality of work without carrying the risk of an unsuccessful recruitment.

The estimates from the fixed-effects regression models showed that low-skill labour demand in construction increased post-prison employment within six and 12 months after release. However, demand for labour did not have any effect on recidivism, contrary to prior studies. This could be related to the small effect sizes in play, the availability of social welfare in Finland or working off-the-books, but more research is needed.

Conclusions and closing

Now, what would all this mean for Ari and Benjamin? Ari would probably have had serious issues in finding employment, after all the unemployment rate was exceedingly high in the mid-1990s, around 20 percent.

Benjamin, had he survived the first weeks, would likely have had a slightly better outlook in terms of work but would have been less likely to marry. He could have just cohabited with someone without tying the knot. Based on the results, both would have been equally likely to live without a home.

Let us now turn our attention to the future and ask ourselves what we should do with all this information. Based on the current findings, I envision that future studies on Finnish prisoners should investigate their suicide mortality and homelessness. Prior research on suicides in Finnish prisons is almost 30 years old (Joukamaa, 1997) and things have changed a lot since then. Post-release homelessness should be studied with more detailed measures and more frequent measurements as atypical housing comes in many forms and situations can change rapidly.

Although the design of the first study does not permit a causal interpretation – that is, I cannot say that incarceration *causes* high mortality post-release – the observed pattern of high post-release mortality is still concerning. Many people wiser than me have already listed the ways in which drug-related mortality could be reduced in this country and I'll repeat a few of their ideas. Post-release drug-mortality could be reduced by distributing naloxone to the released individuals and training them to identify signs of a respiratory depression.

Prison authorities and people responsible for drug treatment of the formerly incarcerated in the communities should communicate with each other more, and at the very least introduce themselves to each other. This way continuity of treatment would be more guaranteed. The last two studies indicated the strong role of the labour market. Therefore, increased resources for finding a job could be warranted in a weak labour market, such as now. Further, prioritizing education to work in manual occupations could be beneficial.

With all this, I'd like to revisit three key points from this lectio. Firstly, the transition from prison into the civil life carries a short-term increased risk of death. Second, post-prison life course is not steadily progressing integration, and no single measure can capture the process. As I explained, chances of employment changed with the labour market, homelessness was stubborn, but marriages became more common. Third, context is not all you need. While labour market can affect the chances for finding employment, the effect is only minor. Although context-specific matters can enrich interpretation, they help very little.

In closing, I urge us to keep future Aris and Benjamins alive. Let's give them a chance to find a job, a home and a partner. Second chances are not charity; they are smart investments in our common good.

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