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# THE CAPACITY OF YOUNG OFFENDERS TO DESIGN THEIR LIFE STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** *This article is based on a research conducted in the summer of 2013 at the Juvenile Prison of Craiova, held under the auspices of the University of Craiova. Among the topics of the study we have tried to identify the characteristics of life strategies of young offenders. Factors that determine the future vision are indicators of the likelihood of recurrence and the measures that can be taken to reduce risks from incorrect design of the future. The main objective of our study was to identify what factors may contribute to recidivism and what is the impact of the rehabilitation programs on prisoners. One of the conclusions of the research is that there are secondary factors that can diminish the influence during detention of the rehabilitation program on future attitudes of the prisoners.*

**Keywords:** *young offenders; delinquency; life strategy; social integration*

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## 1. Introduction

The debates concerning the punishment of the delinquent acts can be classified into different categories, starting with the most indulgent and going to the most severe. The harshness of the sentences required for correction is an inexhaustible topic of discussion. Simple looks at the different ways in which the same facts are punished in different societies are all arguments of the complexity of such a debate. However, through a careful analysis of how those who have been convicted of criminal offenses can distinguish the differences in the value systems of these persons compared with the values generally accepted in a society can also provide an effective way to rebuild the

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value system that justify the law violations. The social reintegration efforts are limited by the existence of some individual beliefs and ways of the specific goal setting. Maintaining some antisocial attitudes resulting from an inconsistently priority setting will have as consequences the extension and development of antisocial behavior and antisocial groups. On the other perspective, it is accepted that for the different categories of convicted persons should correspond different categories of penitentiaries and as it follows, there may be special penitentiaries for women, minors or penitentiaries for recidivists (Iancu, M.A., 2009:21). As a general understanding, the program of working with delinquents it is defined as a structural approach in order to support them in gaining abilities and knowledge, having as result relapse risk reduction (Oancea, Faur, 2009:71).

## 2. Literature review

Also known as *juvenile offending*, juvenile delinquency represents “the participation in illegal behavior by minors (juveniles) (individuals younger than the statutory age of majority)” (Siegel, Welsh, 2011). In United States, at the beginning of the XXI-century, more than one fifth of individuals in state or federal prisons and jails are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Beck, Karberg, & Harrison, 2002). What is very important to note that „many of these individuals will have spent some portion of their adolescent years in incarceration and, despite its putatively rehabilitative aims, it is all too often the case that young offenders finish their time with the justice system and move into the adult world with just as many, if not more, problems than when they first entered” (Steinberg, Chung, Little, 2004:22-23)

What are the factors that are increasing the risk of becoming delinquent? In some papers we may find them if we want to analyze the portrait of a young offender: a person who is confronting with the following problems: poor school performance, especially low grades, mental health problems, “unstable and unsupportive family relationships, poverty- and crime-ridden communities, delinquent peer influences, and the absence of positive role models” (Hawkins et al., 1998:106-146). It is very important to identify these youths as persons who are more in a strong need of treatment (not only medical treatment, but also social one), than punishment (Sampson & Laub, 1997: 133-162).

Our opinion is that „social treatment” of young offenders can help them in the future and lead them not to recidivate, even if according to other specialists, “whether delinquency stems from a violation of legality or from an attempt on morals, in most of the cases, the future offenders are not from the lower social class of the society” (Leaute, 1972: 424). Other theoreticians are stating the same conclusion, that unfortunately, most often, imprisonment is not achieving its purpose: the young offender will not learn from this situation and most often they will get to learn more delinquent behavior. Recidivist offenders are not always specialized: “most of them are passing without transition from minor to major and serious theft, from vandalism to violence, from rape to drug sale” (Boudon, 1998: 449).

Otherwise, it will be not important to analyze their life strategies, because there will be a lack of these strategies. This is also the main hypothesis of our research: if you focus

more on prison as a punishment institution, and not an educational and correctional one, this will affect the life strategies of offenders and their possibility of social reentry.

For young offenders, prison seems to be a place of passage, which is not meaning less for the actor (young offender). Being a specific episode of the existence, the detention requires the actor to make himself to a "biographical work" (sociology of detention experience) in which the past, the present and the future are redesigned and redefined (Chantraine, 2005; 2004)

The effects of the prison treatment success or failure should be evaluated very carefully, because they can spread in the entourage of the youths who are just released from prison. The increased interest on the restorative justice for juveniles is based on two main reasons. First, the increased pressure exerted in changing penal treatment of young offenders, has created a new trend of international opinion, bringing criminal law systems in a critical point, in terms of future reactions relative to juvenile crime. From this point of view, research on restorative justice is very helpful to avoid a return to traditional criminal measures. Secondly, the responses to the juvenile crime are generally stiffer, more stereotyped than the reactions to crimes committed by adults, which, in most cases, has led to a larger research concerning juvenile delinquency, thus leading to the emergence of a multitude of new specific intervention programs that are different from traditional models of treatment for young offenders. On the other side, it would be useful to develop a critical analysis of the methods used to evaluate the risks of reoccurrence of victimization using the clinical sociology which will may lead to the elaboration of quality standards for the social support to the victims (Nicolaescu D., 2011:126).

In Romania, "the scale and complexity of juvenile delinquency during the transition period has imposed a specific intervention of all institutions involved in the sense of optimizing the legislative, juridical and social protection, the reevaluation of the organization and functionality of the specific agencies, the creation of new services and institutions, of operational needed structures, depending on modern principles and rules, in concordance with the international criminal policy guideline sand the current needs of Romanian society" (Banciu, Rădulescu, 2002: 212).

According to the Romanian sociological literature "the analysis of the evolution of sanction stake against young offenders reveals that, unlike other criminal systems, the European or the American one, where there are anon-custodial penalties taken and, thus a reduction in the custodia in Romania the situation is exactly reversed, observing a significant increase of imprisonment measures applied to young offenders. For example, in 1996, of the 10,377 young offenders that were definitively judged by the courts, 4,667 of them were sentenced to prison (Banciu, Grecu, 2003: 355).

The institutionalization of young offenders, serving a sentence in prison or the educational measure of admission into a rehabilitation center are raising both economic and social problems, in terms of re-socialization and reentry into society. Therefore, it was felt the need of a change in criminal and social policies for the prevention and treatment of young offenders in Romanian society. Also, there have been diversified the methods of prevention, intervention and post-intervention under taken by the social institutions with an important role in the adaptation and social control of youth.

The theoretical framework responsible for the identification of the generating factors of the delinquency it assigns heuristic value. This approach provides an opportunity to conceptualize and explain the complex interaction of the risk factors from a dynamic perspective (Day and Wanklin, 2012:4). Through the analysis of the risk factors increase the understanding of the relationships between factors and their consequences. This understanding enables early intervention through specific programs intended to change the criminal trajectory (Day and Wanklin, 2012:4).

Theories on deviant behavior research reveal the factors complexity determinants of the juvenile delinquency. Monitoring the evolution of the phenomenon in the United States, James Teele (2000: 1485) found that the rise of this phenomenon is not specific only of the continent across the ocean but also other countries: England, Spain, France, Italy, Germany and others. Most cases of delinquent behavior have been reported in the developed countries and heavily industrialized. For those responsible for social order it became problematic the distinction between the dynamic behavior owing to their age and the criminal actions.

The severity of criminal acts committed by the young has increased steadily in USA. Researches in the advanced societies have found an increase in crimes committed by the young against the background changes of the industrialized societies. Quoting researches from other countries, James Teele (2000:1487) mentions that in the UK between 1987 and 1993 youth violence increased by 34%, due to the inequalities and the family stress, in France the researchers found the same phenomenon severity acts growth committed by the youth against the background the family, morality decline. In Japan, the increase in juvenile delinquency was explained by the stress of competition for academic success (Teale, 2000: 1487).

The researches performed internationally and associations with the contemporary society's modernization are meant to report possible risks of the juvenile delinquency in the developing countries. Long-term exposure to the same socio-economic phenomena of some societies among which Romania is part allows by analogy the prediction of the danger represented by the juvenile delinquency growth.

The globalization has a unifying effect on the value systems of modern countries. In particular the attitude towards the social success is largely shared by people in all societies. For young people in these societies social status the differences between the families are those that place them at the beginning of opportunities at various levels, and the difficulty achieving the initial objectives is the main cause of the juvenile delinquency. More, the inability to achieve these goals is the catalyst factor of the other risk factors that may present in a latent state, but the willingness and the disappointment given by the lack of resources of any kind they may become manifest.

By knowing how the young offenders design their life strategies, we have tried to identify the future goals and how they build their strategy of action to achieve them. Through the correlation with the choices expressed at other questions and the social context I tried to determinate the risk of recidivism in direct proportion to the distance between resources, understanding and goals.

### 3. Methodological framework

The research method was a sociological inquiry and the research tool was a questionnaire. To achieve the research objectives there have been developed a number of 61 questions grouped into eight themes: 1. Criminal profile, 2. Causes of criminal behavior, 3. Prison experience, 4. Reintegration programs impact, 5. Projection of the future 6. Economic situation 7. Cultural and value system 8. Socio-demographic data.

The first chapter was intended to provide information regarding the crimes committed the relapse status, previously offences, punishment perception and regret for the offence. To identify the possible causes of the criminal behavior there have been developed a set of questions about how each respondents appreciate itself and the influence of the social environment have on the criminal behavior. The social environment is understood in terms of two factors: family and friends. Another important dimension of this study was the prison experience. The data collected were related to the deficiencies received, difficulties of adapting from the prison life, prison assessment conditions, friendly relations related to prison, duration of this friendships after the ending of the sentence and how the respondents believe that the knowledge acquired in prison will help them in the future. The chapter intended to the reintegration programs impact includes questions about the favorite activities, knowledge and attendance to the training courses, educational activities and desires regarding the qualification courses. Chapter five is the base of this article. We wanted to identify the capacity of the young people interviewed to establish a life plan and the understanding level of the conditions to society reintegration.

Identification of the economic status of the young research group is intended to understand the economic determinants they may encourage the delinquent behavior.

The study was conducted in 2013 on a group of 211 people aged 18 to 21, from a total of 500 inmates. All respondents were male the penitentiary institution is intended only for this category. All 211 had discernment, not being diagnosed with a psychiatric disease and they understood the meaning of the questions they have been asked. Participation in this study was pure voluntary, the respondents was not forced to participate in any kind. Rewards were offered by the penitentiary institution, offering 3 credits point for the inmates who have expressed the written consent to participate in this study.

### 4. Results of the study conducted on the young offenders in the Juvenile Prison Craiova

Given that for those aged less than 18 years we can talk about addiction to the family, in the case of these youths we are talking of people directly in charge of their own destinies. However, the target group of this research believes that this category is also the most vulnerable due to the reduced opportunities for social reintegration. The first feature of the group the declared optimism, resulted from a rate of 80.1% said they would get a second chance. The pessimists group was only 11.4%. A percentage of 6.6% could not give an answer to this question.

**Table no. 1**

<i>Do you think you get a second chance?(%)</i>		
1.	Yes	80.1
2.	No	11.4
3.	I do not know	6.6
4.	NR	1.9
	Total	100.0

The optimism was maintained to the next question, regarding their capacity for social reintegration. 80.6% said that they can smoothly reintegrate into society, 16.6% said they can integrate only if they are helped, 2.3% said they cannot integrate smoothly into society, and a percentage of 0.5% did not answer this question.

**Table no. 2**

<i>Do you can smoothly reintegrate into society? (%)</i>		
1.	Yes, no problems	80.6
2.	Yes, if they are helped	16.6
3.	No	2.3
4.	NR	0.5
	Total	100.0

The optimism expressed by the two questions reveals a trend of overconfidence in their own strength and permeability of the social environment. Most of them expect family support (91.9%), considering that in the future they will be with family. Only a small group of them (2.8%) mentioned that the future will be "one against all".

**Table no. 3**

<i>What will be your next position? (%)</i>		
1.	Along with family	91.9
2.	Alone against all	2.8
3.	Along with friends	1.9
4.	Along with girlfriend	1.9
5.	I cannot say	0.9
6.	NR	0.6
	Total	100.0

Between this question and the one referred to person or institution which it can help them in the future, a percentage of 84.8% believe that the family will support them, 3.3% mentioned that they will be helped by the mothers and 0.9% said they will be helped by the father. We find that the difference of 7.1% of those who will be with their family in the future and those who believe that family will help them in the future

represents a group of young people who believe that after release they will take care of their family.

**Table no. 4**

<i>After liberation, who do you think will you support? (%)</i>		
1.	Family	84.8
2.	Mother	3.3
3.	Girlfriend	1.4
4.	Father	0.9
5.	State	0.5
6.	Someone	3.3
7.	I cannot say	3.3
8.	NR	2.5
	Total	100.0

Only 15.6% of the respondents said they were aware of the public or nongovernmental institutions which could help them to reintegrate into society. An overwhelming percentage of 77.7% were not aware of the possibilities offered by the government for social reintegration.

**Table no. 5**

<i>Know any public institution or NGO that supports people coming out of prison to reintegrate in associative? (%)</i>		
1.	Yes	15.6
2.	No	77.7
3.	NR	6.6
	Total	100.0

A percentage of 63.0% of respondents said they do not need support for social reintegration. Only 23.2% believed that after release they need institutional support. This structure of responses shows a dose high optimism of the young and neglects the factors that can contribute to social success.

**Table no. 6**

<i>Do you think the release must be counselled by a specialized institution for social reintegration? (%)</i>		
1.	Yes	23.2
2.	No	63.0
3.	I cannot say	11.8
4.	NR	1.9
	Total	100.0

A reduction of the number of optimists came to the question of future security: a rate of only 59.2% said that their future is secure. Compared with the 80.1% optimists a percentage of 20.9% did not believe that they have a secure future, in other words I think things will get a positive spin for them at the time of the interview they don't have any life plan.

**Table no. 7**

<i>Q37. You think your future will be..... (%)</i>		
1.	Sure	59.2
2.	Uncertain	39.3
3.	NR	1.4
4.	Total	100.0

The factorial analysis revealed the existence of two factors that explain the opinions variation in a proportion of 95.2%. The first explains the optimism displayed in a proportion of 48.4% and refers to the knowledge of the training they receive in prison, and the second generating factor of optimism is work experience, which explains the declared optimism, in a rate of 46.8%. Trying to grasp the factors generating the optimism reveals the major influence of this on the way prisoners imagine the future. Acquired qualifications and training courses in the penitentiary are appreciated positively by the inmates and believe that they will provide a solid foundation for the future. Work experience is the second element that supports optimism. While many of those interviewed did not perform skilled professional activities, still, they can compare the additional possibilities of work in prison. We mention that those who have completed courses are or will graduate qualification courses and consider that this activity will help increase work experience. Also, those who have held jobs before the arrest and probably had a longer criminal activity they don't appreciate the opportunities that may occur after release, due to skills acquired in prison. Optimistic assessment on smooth reintegration is based on the following factors which explains this option in a rate of 90.41%: work experience (33.27%), the support that they will receive after release, (25, 24%), gaps in prison (19.02%) and attitudes towards severity of punishment (12.88%).

Previous factors fall into two categories: related to the external environment and resulted from the present condition. On the one hand we talk about experience even if reduced in labour, but thought out and understood as a future solution, complemented by the support that the loved ones (especially family) are willing to provide after release. On the other hand prison conditions are causes of personal dissatisfaction, and the punishment expiated (in most cases considered too rough) is a second factor that contributes to the idea of integration in society. The risks involved in the work experience requirements and susceptibility to getting a job will not be completed, due to family discord. Labelling, marginalization, insufficient family support may be risk factors in the development of the youth post-detention. Dissatisfaction with the prison conditions will fade in the future, and the poor living conditions and lack of alternatives can reconfigure the current view so that in some point the one at issue may commit



new crimes considering the risk taken is too small compared to the potential profits. Although the optimism displayed decreases as the questions relating to the future are more precise, we find that for those who keep this opinion, the determining factors multiply and diversify. The four factors that explain variation in a rate of 86.39% the opinions are: work experience (35.43%), gaps in prison (19.55%), religiosity (16.75%) and the perception of the prison. It is noted that the four factors fall into three major dimensions: first work experience defines the first factor that supports the respondents attitude, the second dimension refers to the prison experience that includes two factors (perceived gaps and perception of life in prison). The third dimension relates to religiosity, factor which first appears in explaining the optimistic vision of the future. We believe that religion is an important factor in projecting the future but free of concreteness in building the individual future.

## Conclusions

The element analysis underlying the future projection by young prisoners highlights an optimism that hides the lack of real life strategies. Attendance in the penitentiary or the education or the skill encourages young people to believe that they have already acquired skills to help them reintegrate into society. This attitude is evident in the case of prisoners who have work experience. New knowledge and previous experience support the initial optimism.

The effect of prison on youngsters have discouraging effects, many of those present feel the period of incarceration in a dramatic way. The desire to be free and not to relapse is observed negatively attitude towards the prison conditions. The unpleasant experience became a factor that determinates the decision not to return in prison, even if they have not clarified what they will do after release. We find that the future imagined by the young prisoners is based on the knowledge acquired in prison, completed by the faith in family support, the discomfort of life in prison and belief in divinity. Instead the institutional system of public or private assistance which can provide their personal development direction is unknown for them.

The elements, on which their optimism is based, bring in attention the same number of questions on the behavior of the prisoners while the determinant factors of the future projection will disappear or change. For example, lacking in family support or job you want delay to appear. Therefore, it's reducing the optimism, and the new temptation to compensate for lack of material evidence becomes increasingly likely. For those involved in the social reintegration of the young prisoners appears as necessary for the preparation of the future and their training on life strategy based on facts and successive steps. The purpose of such activity serves to diminish naive and unfounded attitudes that will bring some of them in a position to relapse. Understanding expectations and difficulties of daily life becomes in turn a determinant of successful social reintegration. As a future solutions for better approaches of life strategies of young offenders it will be create a participative process by focusing each reintegration organization on the process itself, not only on their own objectives and responsibilities (Nicolaiescu D., 2009: 6), thus the actions can be implemented in a way that maximizes their efficacy and efficiency for rehabilitation of youngsters.

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