

CICERO SPOTLIGHT | CLEMENTINE JACOBY | RECIDIVIZ



The Cicero Institute
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1) What were you doing before you started Recidiviz, and why did you decide to start it?

I was working as a product manager at Google. Specifically, I was working on augmented reality mobile games, and I decided that that was probably not my highest calling. I had grown up with family members caught in the criminal justice system. And

when I say, ‘caught,’ I mean, they were people who clearly needed help but clearly didn’t need jail. So criminal justice was the issue that I turned to when I started looking for ways to have more impact. It was something I had a personal connection to and I wanted to learn more.

I remember very early on, someone explained to me that recidivism — the concept of re-offending — was so ill-defined that it was functionally useless. Depending on the context, it could mean re-offense, re-arrest, re-conviction, or re-incarceration. And there are almost as many methodologies for measuring it as there are measurements. It fails to do the one thing a metric is supposed to do: mean the same thing in all circumstances.

For some reason, that problem really...moved me. It felt surprising and like it had profound implications for our ability to make progress. It also felt fixable. It turned out to be just a gateway drug to the wildly fraught role of empiricism in criminal justice reform, but it was the first of many problems that captured my imagination. You can see that reflected in the name of our company (‘Recidiviz’). But if I had the authority, I’d actually scrap the word ‘recidivism’ — it would make us all be more precise about what we’re actually trying to do, and it might have more profound implications. For example, is relapse recidivism? Any addiction professional will tell you that relapse is a normal and expected part of recovery. Do we want to be counting relapse as a failure in the same way that we’d count a return to violent crime?

2) How does Recidiviz work?

Recidiviz works with criminal justice agencies, like the department of corrections, to help them set and tackle measurable goals for their system.

For example, a state may want to reduce its incarcerated population by 10% or reduce recidivism by 20% over two years. To do that, officials have to understand what’s driving admissions, intervene, and track their progress. That’s where we come in. Recidiviz has built a platform to automate the intake, cleaning, and linking of criminal justice data. We roll out this platform to get the states’ data into a standard format that can power real-time tools that help them make decisions in line with their goals. These data let state officials see the good news and the bad. They can congratulate specific officers for having a high rate of successful treatment referrals. And they can see in which counties people have the most difficulty finding housing or jobs. We provide tools for leadership to revisit their goals every month, see how things have changed, and troubleshoot and for staff to help them improve outcomes.

3) Criminal justice reform is a big undertaking. Within that, what is your focus?

Criminal justice reform is an all hands on deck effort: we need to change legislation, move public opinion, remove barriers to reentry, create better alternatives to incarceration, improve conditions of confinement. But the question for Recidiviz is, where can a team of software engineers have the most impact? To me, the clear answer to that is, “in the things that we can scale,” for example:

1. What if every parole and probation officer got an automatic alert when it looked like someone on their caseload had stable housing, stable employment, and might be ready for early discharge from supervision?
2. What if leadership could see which officers were doing a great job of helping people find stable jobs and housing, and could celebrate them and have them teach their peers?
3. What if we could advocate for more funding for programs based on their results? Could show which demographic groups or areas of a state didn't have enough opportunities?
4. What if states could automatically expunge records and send cases for resentencing after legislation passed?
5. What if we could model the impact of legislation in terms of years of freedom, dollars averted, and lives impacted?

Tech can sometimes have the attitude that things are messy and inefficient simply because tech hasn't yet gotten around to “disrupting” that space. That is not our attitude. Tech is a small part of the solution here, but an important one. We started Recidiviz because people who have dedicated their lives to this work told us that data had become a huge stumbling block for the people trying to make things better.

4) What are some of the big lessons from the last year?

The demand from states has been the biggest surprise. When we started out, the reaction we often got from advisors and funders was, “this would be so powerful if it were possible, but no state will ever work with you.” That's turned out to be the opposite of true. Public opinion has shifted — many states are under enormous pressure to reduce incarceration, and Recidiviz provides a path to help them do that. Some states are in tough spots and are looking for responsible ways out and others are

on the forefront of state-led criminal justice reform — they've already done lots of good things and they're partnering with Recidiviz to find new areas of innovation.

A good example of this at work is “technical revocations.” A technical revocation is when someone goes to prison not for committing a crime but for violating a rule while they're on supervision. These account for 1 in 4 admissions to prison nationwide, and every state we've met wants to reduce them. That's 150,000 admissions a year. If you could reduce that number by even 10% nationwide, you could avoid 15,000 people going to prison each year, many of them for the first time, which has huge huge knock-on effects for them and for their families (not to mention that that would save states 300 million a year).

5) You're a talented software engineer working in a space where most software systems are 30+ years old. Where do you see opportunities for other computer scientists to rebuild the infrastructure of our criminal justice system...and, more broadly, American government?

Gosh, there's almost nothing good that can be said about the way these agencies are forced to buy technology today. It's very sad to me that you can pay 99 cents as a consumer and get a slick app on your phone, and that the government, which funded the research that led to the internet, is the one left in the dust. To really solve government infrastructure problems, you have to significantly improve the government procurement process, and I'm not smart enough for that. Recidiviz is a thin layer that sits on top of all of these legacy and proprietary systems, pulls data out of them, and provides the smarts that agencies need to make decisions. It takes us on the order of weeks to set up, whereas the data systems they're using cost them double and triple digit millions and require 3–9 year migration periods. It's a real bloodbath. Most of the hope I have on that front comes from the work the United States Digital Service (in the US) and the Government Digital Service (in the UK) are doing to improve how the government can procure and use infrastructure.

I would also emphasize, to people in tech who want to do more impactful work, that building tech for government isn't nearly as difficult as other tech people say it is. Recidiviz uses a fully modern tech stack (see for yourself — everything we do is [open source](#)), has a product- and engineering-led culture, and was integrating with government agencies in less than a year. You don't need to replace legacy systems to improve the way things are done, and the government is often a great partner.

6) If you could change one thing about the criminal justice system, what would it be and why?



I think I'd have us decide, as a country, what it is that our prisons are actually for. Punishment? Rehabilitation? Incapacitation? Addiction treatment? Mental health treatment? These are wildly different ends with wildly different means, and it's not surprising that the system we've created isn't able to do any of them well, when we ask

it to do all of them at once with a single tool (prisons). This is why we work with agencies up front to set a measurable goal: because it's not at all clear right now what it is we're trying to do with incarceration in the United States, and you can't improve in a vacuum — you can only improve in relation to a goal.

I know it's unpopular to invoke Europe in anything to do with American politics, but one reason Europeans have much lower prison populations is because they see prison as a drastic step that is likely to substantially alter one's life course for the worse. It's a step that France and Germany are thus loathe to take for smaller infractions. The Germans essentially won't do a jail or prison sentence for fewer than six months, and they look for lots of ways to provide alternatives to prison. The underlying philosophy is that society needs a more diverse set of tools to deal with unwanted behavior and that incarceration is not a tool to be reached for so easily and, often, lightly.

7) What inspires you the most about what you do?

Well, first, it's inspiring to imagine more people living lives shaped by something more than their mistakes. We want to reduce the number of people whose resources and skills and souls and even bodies are eroded by years of unnecessary incarceration. Second, I think that in a time of societal division, it's important to find areas where there is a lot of agreement that there are new things we can build and build together. Third, America is a big country, and it works best when we combine the states' freedom to do things as they judge best for their people — the core principle of federalism — with an obligation to transparency and accountability, so that we can all see both what works and that basic standards of fairness are observed. We want Recidiviz to help with both of these things — help states innovate but also help them (and everybody else) see what works and fix what doesn't. Fourth, I'm inspired by how many smart and capable people there are working for change in this space. Everyone at Recidiviz has taken a pay cut to do this, and I'm motivated by their commitment to doing this work, which is harder, grungier, sometimes sadder, and always less lucrative than alternatives.

To learn more about Recidiviz, please click [here](#).

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