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Clementine Jacoby combats recidivism through nonprofit Recidiviz

By Anita Tun on January 27, 2021

Clementine Jacoby '15 is using data to reduce recidivism rates and encourage an equitable criminal justice system through her nonprofit, Recidiviz.

Recidiviz works to standardize data across prisons, probation and parole systems to aid informed decision-making in the hopes of reducing incarceration rates and creating a fairer criminal justice system.

Amid COVID-19, Recidiviz has worked with 30 states to demonstrate the possible influence the virus may have on staff and the incarcerated community by assisting to prevent predicted outbreaks. Ultimately, states that utilized Recidiviz's resources released approximately 40,000 people early; in North Dakota alone, the state's prison population decreased by 25% in one month.

Jacoby's accomplishments have landed her a spot on this year's Forbes 30 Under 30 Social Impact list. More importantly, experts say that technology such as Recidiviz has the potential to create a fairer criminal justice system.

"Recidiviz, I thought was a very interesting example of technology," said Robert Weisburg '79, faculty co-director of the Stanford Criminal Justice Center. "They realized we don't know very much of what works and what doesn't work because we don't track things over time. Very often they hear about the failures. We often don't hear about the successes and in any event we don't trace back to see what the particular programs were that led to either good or bad outcomes."

Jacoby's work with Recidiviz builds on the wave of support for criminal justice reform intensified by Black Lives Matter protests this spring and summer. Activists have noted that although Black Americans make up about 13% of the United States population, they comprise about 33% of the population of state and federal prisons.

That political momentum to address mass incarceration gives Jacoby and other activists “an opportunity to make very real, non-incremental progress on this issue in the next five years,” she said.

“The focus on finding low-cost solutions was key for me,” Jacoby wrote. “It taught me a lot about scrappiness and the importance of listening — if you listen carefully upfront, you’re much more likely to build something of value to the person you’re trying to help ... That training has paid off over and over again in the context of Recidiviz, where we’re trying to have a big impact with a small team.”

During her time at Stanford, Jacoby taught dance at a local prison, initially aspiring to be a professional circus performer after she graduated. In Brazil, she joined a circus and taught in the gang diversion program at the circus to try to reduce gang-related violence. Jacoby noticed how the program was highly effective for behavior change, saying it was more effective than the U.S. juvenile justice system.

After graduation, she became a product manager at Google working on augmented mobile games. However, inspired by her family’s personal experiences with the criminal justice system, Jacoby shifted fields to criminal justice reform.

“Criminal justice reform is a unique area of public policy, where you have broad alignment across people with very different ideologies about what needs to be done,” she said.

As its name suggests, one area where Recidiviz is working to make a difference is in the issue of recidivism. According to Weisberg, a loss of basic social skills and psychological damage while imprisoned contribute to a lower likelihood of success once released and thus high recidivism rates.

Michael Romano ’94, director and founder of the Three Strikes and Justice Advocacy Projects at Stanford Law School, says that mental illness is another factor contributing to an increase in recidivism rates. Despite an overall decrease in California’s prison population, the number of prisoners with mental illness is rising and the majority of people in jail or prison suffer from some kind of mental illness.

Additionally, Weisberg said, several misconceptions about recidivism prevent meaningful change on the issue. According to Weisberg, people believe “if you keep them in long enough, it’s going to make them good or scared of going back, but that is not always true.” He added that people can commit minor crimes but are “forever tagged with the stigma, the label of being violent,” blurring the division between “violent criminals” and “non-violent criminals.”

Recidiviz, which works alongside local and state governments to provide technological tools tracking what’s working and what isn’t in the criminal justice system, has the potential to clarify these misconceptions, helping improve the system as a whole.

Looking to the future, Romano said that Jacoby's role is "part of a bigger movement to bring data analysis into the criminal justice system."

"I think Recidiviz is a leading role in that and is a tremendous part of that movement," he said.

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