The Importance of the Company You Keep

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS FOR PRISONERS

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Executive Summary

Research has shown that the risk for delinquency, crime, and recidivism is higher for those who associate with antisocial peers. For example, prisoners with an active gang affiliation have an elevated risk for not only misconduct while they are in prison but also repeat criminal offending following their release from prison. Because social support interventions address antisocial peers (a major risk factor), they have shown potential in reducing prisoner recidivism.

Even though prison visitation is not widely regarded as a correctional intervention, it is one of the best sources of pro-social support for prisoners. A recent meta-analysis showed that prison visitation reduces recidivism by 26 percent. Prison visitation has been found to be more effective in decreasing recidivism when it is more frequent, is recent (i.e., closer to an inmate's release from prison), and involves multiple visitors who provide inmates with a broader network of support.

Visits are also more beneficial when they come from siblings, in-laws, fathers, and community volunteers such as clergy and mentors. In fact, a study from Minnesota found significantly better recidivism outcomes for released prisoners who had a greater proportion of visits from community volunteers, which may speak to community volunteers providing higher-quality social support.

While some correctional programs focus strictly on providing mentoring support to prisoners, some interventions such as employment, faith-based, and reentry programs also offer mentoring along with other services. Due to the scarcity of published evaluations, it is unclear whether mentoring programs for prisoners significantly improve recidivism outcomes. Nevertheless, published studies of programs that have relied on community volunteers to provide social support have shown promising findings.

The results from an evaluation of the Ready4Work program, which provided released prisoners with employment services, case management, and mentoring, indicated that participants who met with a mentor remained in the program longer, were twice as likely to find a job, and were more likely to stay employed. Evaluations of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a faith-based program run by Prison Fellowship, have shown better recidivism outcomes for participants who received a continuum of mentoring support from prison to the community. And evaluations of Circles of Support and Accountability, a reentry program for sex offenders that relies heavily on community volunteers, have found it is very effective in improving recidivism and cost-avoidance outcomes.

Social support interventions have been underused in American prison systems, and there are several ways in which to increase and enhance their delivery. First, given that the frequency of visitation is negatively associated with the distance potential visitors have to travel, more prison systems should consider implementing video visitation to foster more visitation. Second, broader recognition of prison visitation as an effective correctional intervention would likely create a stronger obligation by correctional authorities to undertake outreach efforts or develop contracts with nonprofit organizations to attract community volunteers. Third, in addition to a greater investment in programs that use community volunteers, these interventions should consider using multiple volunteers per program participant to maximize the impact on recidivism.

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As the well-known saying goes, we are known by the company we keep. Our relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances can affect our thoughts and behaviors for both good and bad. For example, research has shown that youths who spend time with pro-social peers have a lower likelihood of violence.[1] On the other hand, the risk for delinquency is higher among youth who associate with delinquent peers.[2] Likewise, with adult prisoners, maintaining relationships with antisocial peers can affect whether they will desist or recidivate after their release from prison.

Association with antisocial peers is, in fact, one of the major risk factors for recidivism. Research has identified eight central risk factors (or criminogenic needs) for recidivism, of which four have been considered especially influential for reoffending.[3] These major risk factors, known as the "Big Four," include antisocial history, antisocial personality, criminal thinking, and antisocial peers. Although antisocial (i.e., criminal) history is the strongest predictor of recidivism, it is a static risk factor that cannot be modified through programming.[4] The other three, however, can presumably be addressed through interventions because they are dynamic risk factors in which some change can take place.[5]

When individuals are in prison, they are surrounded by peers who are also imprisoned for antisocial and, more specifically, criminal behavior. Therefore, it may be tempting to think that little can be done to reduce the risk of antisocial peers for recidivism. Even among prisoners, however, the extent to which antisocial peers are a risk factor varies. For example, if prisoners have an active gang affiliation (i.e., they are members of a "security threat group"), they are, in general, committed to preserving a criminal lifestyle. Research has shown gang membership not only is positively associated with prison misconduct[6] but also significantly increases the risk of recidivism, at least for male offenders.[7]

Research has also shown that pro-social support can facilitate desistance from crime. It has been theorized that social support, which can be expressive (e.g., providing advice and friendship) or instrumental (e.g., finding housing, searching for jobs, and providing money, material goods, or transportation), helps individuals form an attachment to a conventional lifestyle.[8] Much of this support, which can help ease the stresses precipitated by a transition from prison to the community,[9] comes from family and friends who provide housing, employment opportunities, and financial assistance.[10] Yet some research has found that the most effective support may come from community volunteers such as clergy and mentors.[11]

But despite the importance of antisocial peers as a risk factor for both misconduct and recidivism, relatively few formal institutional programs are dedicated to addressing this criminogenic need by helping

offenders maintain, develop, or enhance pro-social sources of support. Prison visitation is seldom identified as a type of correctional program per se, but it is arguably the most prominent source of pro-social support for prisoners.

Mentoring is another form of social support occasionally provided to prisoners. Often delivered by volunteers from the community, mentoring tends to be targeted toward youthful offenders. While some programs focus strictly on providing this form of support, some interventions such as employment, faith-based, and reentry programs offer mentoring along with other services.

In what follows, I review the evidence on the effectiveness of social support interventions for prisoners. In addition to examining the prison visitation literature, I discuss research that has examined social support from mentors and, more broadly, community volunteers. In the conclusion, I offer several recommendations to increase and enhance the delivery of social support interventions for prisoners.

Prison Visitation

Prisons have been designed to punish offenders, which is accomplished, in part, by separating them from the rest of society. It should therefore come as little surprise that many prisoners are not visited while they are confined. Research shows the rate of unvisited offenders has ranged from a low of 39 percent[12] to a high of 74 percent.[13] The relatively low visitation rates found among American prisoners have been linked to restrictive visitation policies,[14] inhospitable visitation settings,[15] travel and lodging costs,[16] and the physical distance between the facilities where inmates are confined and the communities where their potential visitors live.[17] After all, prisoners tend to come from heavily populated urban areas that are geographically distant from the rural areas where most prisons are located.[18]

A recent study measured the effects of physical distance and social disorganization on the frequency of visitation among 2,817 Minnesota prisoners released in 2013.[19] As the distance increased between the residences where visitors lived and the prisons where they visited inmates, the frequency of visitation decreased. Even a distance as short as 60 miles (a little over an hour of driving time) could effectively cut visitors off from prison facilities. Moreover, this study found that higher levels of concentrated disadvantage in the neighborhoods where visitors lived were associated with less visitation. That is, all else being equal, the frequency of visitation was lower for residents of more disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The reason why the rate of unvisited inmates and, more broadly, the barriers to visitation matter is that prison visitation has been associated with better outcomes for both prison misconduct and recidivism. While some studies have found that visitation does not affect misconduct[20] or has mixed results,[21] others have found that it significantly reduces prison infractions.[22] The effects on recidivism have generally been more consistent. For example, a recent meta-analysis found a 26 percent reduction in recidivism for visited inmates compared to those who were not visited.[23]

While the effect size from this meta-analysis measured the overall impact of prison visitation on reoffending, the findings from other studies suggest it tends to be more effective when it is more frequent, recent, and spread out among numerous individual visitors. For example, the reduction in recidivism is, on the whole, greater for inmates who are visited more frequently, which is a finding that has been observed in studies on prisoners from Florida,[24] Minnesota,[25] and Canada.[26] Several studies have found that visits occurring closer to an offender's release from prison are more important in reducing recidivism.[27] Moreover, the Minnesota study found that recidivism decreased as an offender's number of individual visitors increased; in other words, inmates were less likely to reoffend when they had larger networks of social support, as reflected by a greater number of different visitors.

Several studies have also looked at whether some prisoner-visitor relationships are more beneficial than others in reducing recidivism. The results from two of the Florida studies suggest that visits from spouses or significant others were associated with better recidivism outcomes.[28] In both studies, there were

seven offender-visitor relationship categories: parent, spouse, significant other, child, relative, friend, and other. In the Minnesota prison visitation study, which analyzed in greater detail the effects of visitor type on recidivism by examining 16 offender-visitor relationship categories, the results showed that visits from siblings, in-laws, fathers, clergy, and, to a lesser extent, mentors were the most beneficial in reducing the risk of recidivism.[29]

The findings for clergy and mentor visits are especially promising given that visits from friends and family members may not be a viable option for many prisoners. By the time inmates reach prison, many have lost their loved ones' trust and ruined important personal relationships, often due to their chemical abuse and dependency. After some offenders enter prison, their friends and family members have little or no interest in visiting them. Visits from community volunteers may thus be the only sources of pro-social support for a sizable segment of the prison population.

In a follow-up evaluation to the initial Minnesota prison visitation study, researchers isolated the effects of visits from community volunteers—clergy and mentors—on recidivism. The results showed that community volunteer visits reduced the risk of recidivism by 25 percent for rearrest, 20 percent for reconviction, and 31 percent for new offense reincarceration. The proportion of community volunteer visits relative to all visits had a significant negative association with the three measures of reoffending, reducing the hazard by 50 percent for rearrest, 40 percent for reconviction, and 83 percent for new offense reincarceration. As the proportion of community volunteer visits increased, the risk of reoffending decreased.[30]

These results may speak to community volunteers providing higher-quality social support. While friends and family members provide offenders with much-needed support, this support may not always be beneficial, as evidenced by the finding that ex-spouse visits can actually worsen recidivism outcomes.[31] Clergy, on the other hand, may be able to give offenders effective counsel and support because they often receive training in helping individuals through difficult life circumstances.

Community Volunteer Support

Mentoring is perhaps the best-known form of social support community volunteers provide. Often used with adolescents instead of adults, mentoring programs generally improve behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes.[32] Nevertheless, due to the scarcity of published evaluations that have examined the effects on criminal offending, it is unclear whether mentoring programs significantly improve juvenile recidivism outcomes.

A recent evaluation of mentoring programming for youthful offenders in Ohio found that it had no impact on recidivism.[33] To achieve a reduction in recidivism, the researchers suggested that mentoring programs should attempt to target relevant behaviors such as antisocial peers, impulsivity, and negative attitudes.

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The mentoring program concept, however, may be too narrow, especially when considering its application in adult correctional populations. Notwithstanding some programs that use a peer-to-peer mentoring model, mentoring often implies that a mentee is a younger protégé who is guided by an older mentor who serves as a role model. The findings from several studies suggest, however, that mentors are not necessarily viewed as "role models."[34] Instead, mentors are valued more for their friendship and support. Moreover, as the findings from a recent evaluation of a sex offender reentry program in Minnesota suggest, social support can be effectively delivered by community

volunteers who are younger than the recipients of this support: prisoners.[35]

While few studies have evaluated how mentoring programs affect recidivism, especially for adult offenders, several studies have examined the effectiveness of programs that provide mentoring support along with other services. During the early 2000s, Ready4Work programs were implemented in 17 sites across the US. Results from an evaluation of the program, which provided released prisoners with employment services, case management, and mentoring, indicated that participants did better when they met with a mentor. Compared to participants who did not meet with a mentor, these individuals remained in the program longer, were twice as likely to find a job, and were more likely to stay employed.[36]

Qualitative interviews confirmed that the mentoring relationship brought a level of support and social connectedness that otherwise was missing in the lives of ex-prisoners without mentors.

Evaluations of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), a faith-based program run by Prison Fellowship, have yielded similar findings on the effects of mentors. One of the main components of IFI involves providing participants with community volunteer mentors. Mentors are expected to meet with IFI participants on a weekly basis during the last six months of their incarceration and then continue meeting with them following their release from prison.

While the initial evaluation of the IFI program that originated in a Texas correctional facility showed it did not significantly lower recidivism for all participants,[37] a follow-up study found that program participants who were matched with mentors were significantly less likely to recidivate than were those who did not receive mentors. Qualitative interviews confirmed that the mentoring relationship brought a level of support and social connectedness that otherwise was missing in the lives of ex-prisoners without mentors.[38]

In a more recent evaluation of the IFI program in Minnesota's prison system, researchers found that it significantly reduced reoffending.[39] In comparison to a carefully matched group of prisoners who did not participate in the program, IFI participation lowered the risk of recidivism by 26 percent for rearrest, 35 percent for reconviction, and 40 percent for new offense reincarceration.

Detailed analyses of mentoring data collected by program staff showed that 173 (or 47 percent) of the 366 InnerChange participants met with a mentor, whereas the remaining 193 (53 percent) did not. Of the 173 who met with a mentor, 131 (76 percent of those who met with a mentor and 36 percent of all IFI participants) had a mentoring continuum insofar as they met with their mentors both in prison and in the community. The findings showed that a mentoring continuum significantly reduced all four measures of recidivism, decreasing the risk by 44 percent for rearrest, 52 percent for reconviction, 95 percent for new offense reincarceration, and 62 percent for technical violation revocations.[40]

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is the aforementioned sex offender reentry program that has proved to be very effective in improving recidivism and cost-avoidance outcomes. As I wrote in a previous report,[41] the CoSA program involves surrounding a "core member"—the sex offender participant—with a small group of community volunteers (e.g., four to six) who provide him with support and help him remain accountable as he transitions from prison to the community. The CoSA program

in Minnesota demonstrates that older adult prisoners (upper 30s is the average age for MnCOSA participants) can benefit from receiving social support from community volunteers who are younger.

Indeed, many of the MnCOSA volunteers have been students from colleges and universities in the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area. To be sure, it is not as though these younger community volunteers are meeting one-on-one with released prisoners, which is typical for mentoring programs. However, the effectiveness of the collective, team-based approach of CoSA aligns with a key finding from the prison visitation literature: The reduction in recidivism is generally greater for inmates with larger networks of social support.

Conclusion

Prisons in our country have been designed to mete out punishment. Isolating prisoners from the rest of society not only helps maintain public safety but also serves as retribution for the crimes prisoners have committed. Although the penitentiary movement in the US during the 19th century was predicated on the idea that isolation would promote rehabilitation through reflection and remorse, decades of evidence have revealed this model does not work very well in producing individuals who desist from crime after their release from prison. Cutting prisoners off from potential sources of social support achieves the goal of punishment, but it does not lead to rehabilitation and desistance.

To help prison systems expand inmate access to pro-social support without compromising the safety and security of correctional facilities, I offer several recommendations. First, the overarching goal of expanded access should be a continuum of social support from prison to the community. One of the common threads that runs through effective correctional interventions is a continuum of care, or service delivery, from the institution to the neighborhoods to which prisoners are released. As the IFI and MnCOSA evaluations have demonstrated, a continuum of pro-social support can produce much better recidivism outcomes.

Second, to increase access to social support while inmates are confined, prison systems should augment the opportunities for visitation. To this end, correctional agencies should consider not only revising their visitation policies and practices to make facilities more "visitor friendly" but also investing in programs that help provide transportation to the families of prisoners. Along the same lines, since physical distance is negatively related to visitation frequency, home community location should be included among the myriad considerations for facility placement. Likewise, even though existing prisons cannot be moved to more convenient locations, policymakers would be wise to carefully consider the locations of new facilities and the potential effects on visitation.

To help alleviate some of the challenges physical distance poses, more prison systems should consider implementing video visitation.

To help alleviate some of the challenges physical distance poses, more prison systems should consider implementing video visitation. For offenders confined at facilities that are geographically distant from where their potential visitors reside, video visits may represent the best, and perhaps only, means of staying connected with pro-social sources of support.

Moreover, video visits may be more cost-effective, not only for correctional agencies but also for prisoners and their visitors. Whether video visitation is more cost-effective, however, depends on the fees that correctional authorities establish for virtual visits, which are borne by the prisoner and/or visitor. If

the fees are made affordable for lower-income families, then video visitation could also help lessen the effects of concentrated disadvantage.

Third, to foster more visitation, correctional authorities should regard visitation as effective of an intervention as educational programming, chemical dependency treatment, or cognitive-behavioral therapy. To guide the delivery of programming, American correctional agencies tend to rely on the risk-needs-responsivity (RNR) model, which recommends matching program intensity to recidivism risk level, targeting known criminogenic needs, and delivering programming that is tailored to individual motivation, strengths, and learning styles.[42] If visitation was recognized more widely as a correctional intervention that should operate in the RNR framework, then correctional agencies would likely make a greater effort to promote more visitation, particularly among unvisited, or seldom visited, inmates.

After getting assessed for risk, needs, and responsivity, higher-risk offenders with a greater need for social support might then be prioritized for visitation programming opportunities. For example, if these offenders were unlikely to be visited in prison due to distance and disadvantage for their potential visitors, then video visitation or a transportation program could be used to provide much-needed social support. Yet, for many inmates, their criminal behavior before coming to prison has badly damaged important relationships, which means that visits from friends and family members may not be an option even with video visitation or transportation programs.

But if visitation were more widely recognized as an effective intervention, then correctional agencies may feel a stronger obligation to undertake outreach efforts or develop contracts with nonprofit organizations to attract community volunteers to serve as mentors. To promote greater community volunteer involvement, correctional agencies could also consider waiving fees that would otherwise apply to video visits or transportation assistance.

Finally, to improve effectiveness in reducing recidivism, social support interventions such as mentoring programs should consider using multiple community volunteers per offender. Rather than pairing, say, 120 community volunteers with 120 offenders, it may be better to match the 120 volunteers with 60 offenders (two volunteers per offender) or perhaps 40 (three volunteers per offender). To be sure, this social support model would be resource intensive, and it would likely result in fewer program participants.

However, prior research on prison visitation and CoSA suggests there are strong recidivism reduction dividends for prisoners who have broader networks of pro-social support. Instead of achieving little or no recidivism reduction for 120 offenders, as in the example above, it would be better to significantly lower reoffending for a smaller group of offenders. And, consistent with the risk principle in corrections, the smaller group of offenders should be higher risk to help maximize the impact on recidivism.

About the Author

Grant Duwe is an academic adviser to AEI for criminal justice reform. He is also the research director for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, where he develops and validates risk assessment instruments, forecasts the state's prison population, and conducts research studies and program evaluations. Duwe has published more than 60 articles in peer-reviewed journals on a wide variety of correctional topics, and he is a coauthor of the book *The Angola Prison Seminary: Effects of Faith-Based Ministry on Identity Transformation, Desistance and Rehabilitation*.

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