

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2017 No 233



Prisoner-family ties during imprisonment:

Reassessing resettlement outcomes and the role of visitation

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Prison life can be hard time for both those serving time and for their families on the outside. Prisoners who maintain ties with family members during their sentence can often see their relationships tested by the physical isolation and social strains which imprisonment brings and the value of a family support network for prisoners has been recognised across a number of prison service policies.¹ Successive studies have shown that familial ties are important for prisoners as a mode of social support during their sentence, as a motivation to behave inside prison in order to improve their chances of early-release, as well as for resettlement outcomes including finding accommodation, desisting from drug use, and reducing reoffending risk.² Despite these important positive outcomes, few studies have sought to understand what actually happens to prisoner-family relationships across the course of a sentence. During any prison sentence a lot can happen to an offender, whether it be anxiety adapting to a sentence, victimisation, loss of privileges, or a host of other events which may impact on the overall experience of confinement. These experiences no doubt are dynamic and open to change, not least because some prisoners are able to adapt to their sentence more effectively than others.³ They also have obvious implications for ties with family. For the families of offenders too, life paths may change—family members may die, new romantic relations may be developed, and children may be born. Taking stock of these factors, policy makers require a clearer insight into whether or not prisoner-family ties change during a prison sentence, and what the implications of these

changes are for resettlement outcomes such as reoffending, drug use after release, and chances of gaining employment.

This paper summarises key implications for prison practitioners and policy makers from recent research into prisoner–family dynamics over the course of custodial sentences in England and Wales.⁴ We discuss the main results of this study, and orientate these findings towards practical steps which the prison service and its partner agencies can take to implement effective policies working with prisoners and their family members.

Prisoner–Family Ties: What we know, what we don't know

Previous studies in the area of prisoner–family ties have focused on the question of whether visitation contributes towards positive resettlement outcomes, especially reduced recidivism risks.⁵ It is generally accepted that those prisoners who maintain contact with their family during a sentence have greater levels of commitment to behave well during custody and upon release due to the motivation of re-acquainting with their family at the earliest opportunity. Although many studies have indicated positive associations between contact and lower recidivism risk, the extent to which this is a causal association remains questionable. More recent efforts to account for this methodological problem⁶ have looked at the quantity and timing of visits during a sentence as ways of differentiating between prisoner groups to test the impact of contact. Visitation effects have still held up when such measures have been employed.

1. Her Majesty's Prison Service (2001) Prison Service Order 2300: Resettlement, London: HMPS; Her Majesty's Prison Service (2011) PSI 16/2011: Providing Visits and Services to Visitors, London, HMPS.
2. Cochran, J. C., & Mears, D. P. (2013). Social isolation and inmate behavior: A conceptual framework for theorizing prison visitation and guiding and assessing research. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 41(4), 252–261.
3. Toch, H., & Gibbs, J. C. (1992). *Living in prison: The ecology of survival*. New York: Free Press.
4. Brunton-Smith, I., McCarthy, D. J. (2017). The Effects of Prisoner Attachment to Family on Re-entry Outcomes: A Longitudinal Assessment. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57 (2): 463–482.
5. Mears, D. P., Cochran, J. C., Siennick, S. E., & Bales, W. D. (2012). Prison visitation and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 29(6), 888–918; Mitchell, M. M., Spooner, K., Jia, D., & Zhang, Y. (2016). The effect of prison visitation on reentry success: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47, 74–83; De Claire, K., & Dixon, L. (2015). The Effects of Prison Visits From Family Members on Prisoners' Well-Being, Prison Rule Breaking, and Recidivism A Review of Research Since 1991. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, advanced access.
6. Examples include Mears, D. P., Cochran, J. C., Siennick, S. E., & Bales, W. D. (2012). Prison visitation and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 29(6), 888–918; Cochran, J. C. (2012). The ties that bind or the ties that break: Examining the relationship between visitation and prisoner misconduct. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(5), 433–440.

The visitation–recidivism focus remains one of the most widely discussed areas of resettlement policy. Yet there is far more going on with prisoner–family ties over the course of a sentence. For prisoners, family ties have been linked to the immediate provision of support when exiting prison, such as housing, financial and emotional support.⁷ Research has also identified that released prisoners who exit prison with strong family are not themselves necessarily at lower risks of recidivism, but instead are more likely to achieve employment through family contacts which then can promote positive resettlement benefits.⁸ But the views of prisoners are only half of the story, with the perspectives of family also necessary to arrive at a clear understanding of the reciprocal processes which go into building and maintaining family ties during the course of a prison sentence and beyond.⁹ From the perspectives of family members, the ability to maintain ties with a prisoner is often a challenging process regardless of the quality of relationships when they first enter prison. Difficulties communicating via telephone, parcels not getting to the correct prison destination or taking lengthy periods in the mail, costs of travel and restrictions to transportation, taking time off work, or managing childcare have all been widely cited as factors which render the maintenance of ties difficult during a prison sentence.¹⁰ What family members offer prisoners may therefore not be determined by their commitment and love, but rather by the structural and material resources they can feasibly deploy.¹¹

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A question that remains is the extent that relationships between prisoners and family change over the course of a sentence. Some evidence exists, with high levels of marital breakdown identified during the incarceration period,¹² and the risks of separation heightened when sentences are longer. In a recent attempt to analyse change in the strength of prisoner–family bonds after release from prison, Mowen and Visser¹³ identify particular prisoners as more at risk of decreased social support; white men with longer offending records and mental health issues. Yet the authors also show that those prisoners who maintained greater levels of contact with family prior to entering prison were more likely to continue these relationships upon release from prison.

Our analysis is similar to Mowen and Visser, but draws on data from England and Wales—a nation with a vastly different size, scale and prisoner demographic to the USA, and with considerable differences in the societal conditions of re-entry.¹⁴ Unlike Mowen and Visser, we examine both the extent of prisoner-family relationship change, and whether these changes influence resettlement outcomes for the offender after release from prison.

Methods

Using a longitudinal survey in England and Wales commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (Surveying

7. Naser, R. L., & Visser, C. A. (2006). Family members' experiences with incarceration and reentry. *Western Criminology Review*, 7(2), 20–31; Western, B., Braga, A. A., Davis, J., & Sirois, C. (2015). Stress and Hardship after Prison. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(5), 1512–1547.
8. Berg, M. T., & Huebner, B. M. (2011). Reentry and the ties that bind: An examination of social ties, employment, and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 28(2), 382–410.
9. Lanskey, C., Lösel, F., Markson, L., & Souza, K. A. (2015). Re framing the Analysis: A 3 dimensional. Perspective of Prisoners' Children's Well being. *Children & Society*, 29(5), 484–494; Lösel, F., Pugh, G., Markson, L., Souza, K., and Lanskey C. (2012). Risk and Protective Factors in the Resettlement of Imprisoned Fathers with their Families available online at http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/research/fathers_in_prison/final_report.pdf.
10. Smith, R., Grimshaw, R., Romeo, R., & Knapp, M. (2007). Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
11. Current research is developing these insights in the context of young prisoners and their families in England (Daniel McCarthy, Surrey University), and female prisoners. See also Mowen, T.J., & Visser, C.A. (2015). Drug use and crime after incarceration: The role of family support and family conflict. *Justice Quarterly*, 32(2), 337–359. <http://justicecenter.psu.edu/research/pins>.
12. Lopoo, L. M., & Western, B. (2005). Incarceration and the formation and stability of marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(3), 721–734; Massoglia, M., Remster, B., & King, R. D. (2011). Stigma or separation? Understanding the incarceration-divorce relationship. *Social Forces*, 90(1), 133–155.
13. Mowen, T. J., & Visser, C. A. (2016). Changing the Ties that Bind. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 15(2), 503–528.
14. We have in mind here work conducted by Clear (2007) and Sampson (2012) who have both identified the deep structural divisions in US society during prisoner re-entry, matched by vastly different concentrated spatial inequalities by race which are hard to draw close parallels with in the UK. Clear, T. R. (2009). *Imprisoning communities: How mass incarceration makes disadvantaged neighborhoods worse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Sampson, R. J. (2012). *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Prisoners Crime Reduction Survey/SPCR) that follows prisoners through their prison sentence and back in to the community after release, we assessed the extent that male prisoners' familial ties change, and whether or not prison visits can help support prisoner–family relationships. We then looked at whether those prisoners who experienced improving family relations went on to have more successful resettlement outcomes up to two years after release.

The SPCR was collected between 2005 and 2010 and is a nationally representative sample of prisoners serving between three months and four years in prison. The data was collected at three time points—on reception to prison (Wave 1), two weeks pre-release (Wave 2) and approximately four months after release into the community (Wave 3). Data on reoffending was also captured after two years of release from prison (from the police national computer database).

Further technical details about the dataset and methodological strategy for this study can be consulted.¹⁵

Key Results

Rather than report more detailed statistical analysis of the data which are available elsewhere¹⁶ we instead focus on key results and implications of these analyses. Three key findings are discussed, together with ways forward in terms of supporting prisoner–family ties during the sentence.

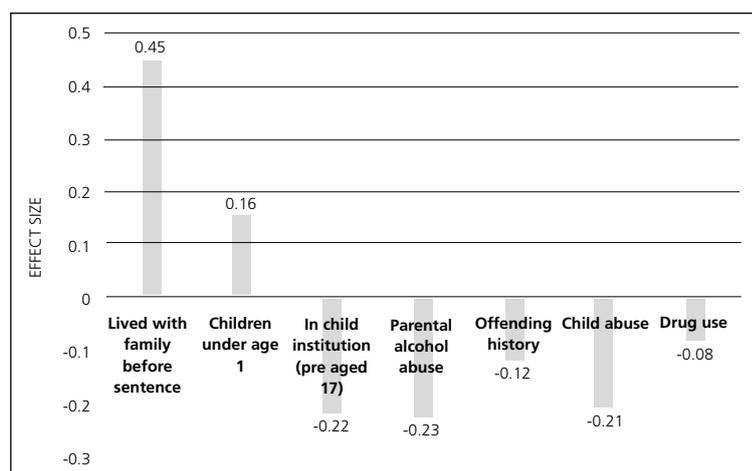
1. Those prisoners with the least and most to lose experience weakened family attachments during their sentence

Figure 1 summarises the factors which shape prisoners' family attachments when going into prison, with figure 2 addressing factors which are influential in changing relations with families. Prisoners living with family prior to their sentence are most at risk of experiencing weakened ties as their sentence progresses. This is plausibly because these prisoners have the most to lose through the separations which prison brings, as well as the difficulties of maintaining these relationships due to the restricted communication and visitation opportunities afforded by imprisonment. Previous studies have noted that romantic relationships are at considerable risk of breakage during a prison sentence,¹⁷ with further

consequences for the wellbeing of a prisoner as they come to terms with such events through limited opportunities to resolve conflicts. Those prisoners experiencing significant adversities prior to prison (i.e. child abuse, parent alcohol abuse, living in institution such as children's home, and drug use) had weaker relationships with family on entry to prison, and did not experience any improvements during their sentence. In other words, starting at such a low baseline with fragile or broken familial ties results in these attachments remaining weak throughout the sentence.

For some groups we find relations improve over the course of a sentence—for ethnic minorities and those from foster families. For offenders from ethnic minorities, struggles with life inside prison due to a combination of discrimination by fellow prisoners and staff, as well as difficulties coping in the prison environment due to language or cultural barriers may encourage contact with family as a mechanism to help prisoners cope with their time in prison. Offenders from foster families are more likely to have grown up in challenging circumstances, which may in some cases involve removal from biological parents due to extreme familial adversity. Foster families in such instances may act as a key source of support for prisoners in light of limited alternatives. Our findings also demonstrate the positive impact of parental visits on improvement to family relations during a prison sentence.

Figure 1: Prisoner characteristics associated with closeness to family on reception to prison (statistically significant results only)

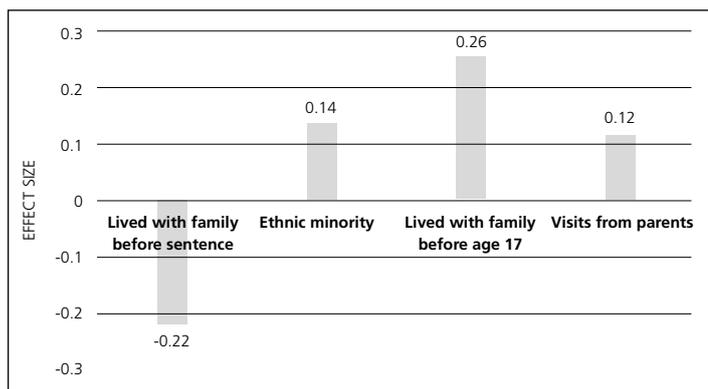


15. Full details on the sample design can be found in Cleary et al., (2012a; 2012b; 2014). Cleary, A., Ames, A., Kostadintcheva, K. and Muller, H. (2012a), Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR): Wave 1 (Reception) Samples 1 and 2 Technical Report. Ministry of Justice; (2012b), Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR): Wave 2 (Pre-release) Samples 1 and 2 Technical Report. Ministry of Justice; (2014), Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR): Waves 3 and 4 (Post-release) Samples 1 and 2 Technical Report. Ministry of Justice. For details on methodological strategy on prisoner-family ties and measurement of latent change in attachments, see Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017).

16. Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017).

17. Lopoo, L. M., & Western, B. (2005). Incarceration and the formation and stability of marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(3), 721–734; Massoglia, M., Remster, B., & King, R. D. (2011). Stigma or separation? Understanding the incarceration-divorce relationship. *Social Forces*, 90(1), 133–155.

Figure 2: Prisoner characteristics associated with changing family relations on release from prison (statistically significant results only)



2. Prison visits are only effective in improving resettlement outcomes (reduced reoffending, drug use desistance and finding employment on release) when they improve family attachments throughout the sentence.

We find that family visits do not automatically translate into positive resettlement outcomes upon release from prison. Instead, for families to exert a positive effect on resettlement outcomes, familial attachments must continue to develop over the duration of a sentence. As well as reducing recidivism risks, improving family relations were also linked to other measures of resettlement, notably finding employment and desisting from problem drug consumption.

These findings fit with one of the central messages of desistance research—how attachments with family can operate as ‘turning points’ to help steer offenders away from further criminality.¹⁸ Familial ties can operate as a social commitment for offenders to maintain, taking on the role positions required for engaging in normative behavioral conduct upon release from prison. Laub, Nagin and Sampson¹⁹ liken the development and maintenance of ties as an ‘investment process’ which involves ongoing work and contribution. If such ties are maintained during a prison sentence, it provides an important pathway towards desistance. Our own work indicates that recidivism risks up to two years after release are reduced for prisoners maintaining strong attachments with family. Therefore, it is not simply frequency of visits which are important for improving resettlement outcomes. Rather, it is what the visits actually do to strengthen relationships over the duration of the sentence which matter more.

3. Visits from parents are more effective than visits from other family members and friends.

Who makes visits to prisoners is also important. Visits from parents were moderately linked to improving family relations and improved resettlement outcomes.²⁰ But visits from partners/spouses, and from children were not. It is plausible that ‘families of origin’ such as parents present a more dependable option for prisoners to turn to for financial and emotional support during their sentence.²¹ This is contrasted with ‘families of formation’ such as partners who can often find relationships placed under high levels of strain during incarceration. It may be that these visits exacerbate already tenuous relationships and lead to further frustrations for prisoners who feel unable to connect in any meaningful ways with their partners or children during visitation. It is also possible that the lack of suitable visitation provision in many prisons may serve to limit family interactions. That parents play a key role in facilitating resettlement more than other family members points to the possibility that the commitment in the form of bonds with ‘flesh and blood’ are harder to break than ‘families of formation’.

Policy Implications and Further Research

The quality of prison visits, rather than the mere existence of visits should be emphasised to help ensure positive resettlement outcomes. Our results show that prison visits are only effective where they improve family ties over the duration of a sentence. This raises questions about what exactly can be done to facilitate improving prisoner–family relationships. Prison visits themselves are often poorly supported and resourced in some prisons, with insufficient attention placed on more naturalised opportunities for prisoner–family interaction. (e.g. family days designed to support prisoners to engage with family over a longer period than a normal visit, and within a more natural setting compared to traditional visiting halls). Such visitation opportunities are crucial for prisoners, especially those with children where normal visitation provision can be unsuitable and logistically difficult for prisoners and family to interact freely.

Several promising projects are currently being conducted in prisons across England and Wales which stress the importance of family building. However, building familial ties may not always be appropriate for all prisoners, notably those whose offending may

18. Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Harvard University Press.
 19. Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (1998). Trajectories of change in criminal offending: Good marriages and the desistance process. *American Sociological Review*, 63 (2): 225–238.
 20. Bales, W. D., & Mears, D. P. (2008). Inmate social ties and the transition to society: Does visitation reduce recidivism? *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. 45, 287–321.
 21. Western et al (2015).

have been committed against a family member, or where offenders may possess particular risks which may place family members in danger. Prison programmes are also prone to selection effects, and it is possible that those prisoners pre-selected to participate in family building schemes may themselves already be lower risk offenders, limiting their success as a general solution for all offenders.²² Further, the pressures faced by families when absorbing offenders back into the home following imprisonment should also be acknowledged. Prisoners' families often manage a multitude of challenges, confronting social problems within the family and community of residence, as well as limits on the social resources which can be offered to offenders returning home.

Our results also demonstrate the need for the Prison Service and Probation Service to strive to work more closely with families during the sentence and in preparation for resettlement. Greater information about prisoners' familial circumstances should be captured by the prison service and used to help identify prisoners with potentially more to lose from restrictions to contact with family. Such information should also be utilised to help pre-release planning via probation.

It should be stressed that this study is based on the experiences of male prisoners only, and it is possible that we are missing important gender differences in terms of familial relationships and visitation.²³ We also recognise the importance of

conducting further longitudinal studies which identify prisoner–family relationships over a longer time frame, including those adopting a qualitative research design. Such studies may help provide a richer insight into the processes by which prisoners readapt to family life, from the perspective of prisoners and family members, long after release from prison.

Yet despite these drawbacks, our study is one of the first to match changes in the quality of ties to family during a prison sentence, with measures of visitation and resettlement outcomes. This builds on previous research explaining the visitation–recidivism link by highlighting the importance of the impact of visits on family relations—that is do visits actually reduce recidivism, or rather are those prisoners who receive visits already independently at lower risks of recidivism due to having good family ties, and indeed with greater levels of access to support? Our results demonstrate only moderate support for the visitation–recidivism link. In fact, we find that strong familial ties when entering prison (especially prisoners with strong attachments to family) are more at risk of weakening precisely because of the difficulty maintaining such bonds within the restricted setting of the prison. Therefore, what can ultimately be achieved in terms of building on, or maintaining familial ties solely through visits is limited. Here the prison service should look at additional methods to help support such ties, and not strictly rely on visitation as a panacea to the challenges of prisoner resettlement.

22. Cochran, J. C., & Mears, D. P. (2013). Social isolation and inmate behavior: A conceptual framework for theorizing prison visitation and guiding and assessing research. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 41(4), 252–261.

23. Acoca, L., & Raeder, M. S. (1999). Severing family ties: The plight of nonviolent female offenders and their children. *Stanford Law & Policy Review*, 11, 133–143.