Relationships and Recidivism

Compiled by Eric Mondesir on behalf of Community Mediation Maryland, July 2017

There are currently 2.2 million people held in prisons and jails in the United States. (Friedman, 2014). An estimated 95% of prisoners currently in custody will ultimately be released and returned to the community (Pew, 2011). One in 31 adults in the United States [is] either incarcerated, or on probation or parole (Pew, 2011). Each year, more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons, and 11.4 million people cycle through local jails (FIRC, 2015).

Avoiding future criminal conduct is measured by the recidivism rate and has long been considered the leading statistical indicator of return on correctional investment (Pew, 2011). Recidivism is one of the most fundamental concepts in criminal justice (NIJ, 2014).

Reentry is the transition from incarceration – life in prison, jail, or juvenile justice facilities – to life in the community (FIRC, 2015). Although returning to the community may be inevitable, successful reentry and reintegration are not (FIRC, 2015). Reoffending is common and complex (Appleby, 2015). It is linked to many individual and social factors, including personality, substance misuse, social support, employment, and education, factors that might interact or form a causal pathway (Appleby, 2015). All too often, returning citizens face enormous barriers that endure long after they have paid their debts to society – and with over 600,000 individuals released from federal and state prisons every year, societal choices about how reentering individuals are treated will have far-reaching implications (FIRC, 2015).

Measuring recidivism rates can be even trickier as researchers use different parameters, such as counting arrests or only counting sentences served; but the numbers still demonstrate that staying out of jail isn't that easy (Schroeder, 2016).The United States National Institute of Justice measures recidivism by the criminal acts that resulted in re-arrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three- year period following the prisoners release. (NIJ, 2014)

Per an April 2011 report by the Pew Center on the States, the average national recidivism rate is 43.3% (Friedmann, 2014). Based on that average rate, an estimated 276,000 released state prisoners can be expected to recidivate each year, many committing new crimes and returning to prison (Friedmann, 2014). A United States Sentencing Commission study of federal inmates revealed that nearly half of the individuals tracked — 49.3 percent — were rearrested within eight years for a new crime or for one or more technical violations of their supervision conditions; almost a third (31.7 percent) were reconvicted, and about a quarter (24.6 percent) were re-incarcerated (Dumville, 2016).

When reentry fails, the social and economic costs are significant – higher crime, more victims, increased family distress, and greater strain on state and municipal budgets. (FIRC, 2016). High rates of recidivism [also] mean more pressure on an already overburdened criminal justice system (Pew, 2011). At an average cost of $78.95 per inmate per day to keep an inmate locked up (Pew, 2011), the U.S. now spends more than $68 billion annually on federal, state and local Corrections. (FIRC, 2011). Corrections spending now accounts for one in every 14 [state]

general fund dollars, and one in every eight state employees works for a Corrections agency (Pew, 2011).

The costs associated with incarceration and recidivism are not just financial. The toll on prisoners and their families is impossible to calculate. Loved ones can suffer from economic strain, psychological and emotional distress, and social stigma. Prisoners endure isolation from their families and the community. They are often housed in overcrowded and dangerous prisons. The stress of surviving in prison can lead to depression and anxiety. Inmates may leave prison worse off than when they arrived, which can be detrimental to communities and society as a whole (Deady, 2014).

Those returning from prison lean on family, friends, and neighborhood resources to stay crime free and reintegrate into society (Cotton, 2014). Unfortunately, incarcerated individuals are likely to strain these integral sources of support, leaving family and friends in a poor position to assist in positive re-entry outcomes (Cotton, 2014)

However, studies have consistently found that incarcerated individuals who maintain close contact with their family members while incarcerated have better post-release outcomes and lower recidivism rates. (Friedmann, 2014).

A large body of social science research has shown that during personal crises family members are fertile sources of psychological, material and financial support (Berg, 2011). In fact, criminological research finds that upon release from prison, returning citizens commonly rely on parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles [as] family members are unlikely to consider the individual's arrest record as representative of their real self and exclude the person from their social network (Berg, 2011). In this manner, family ties connect returning citizens to conventional social order and, in doing so, thwart their impulses to recidivate (Berg, 2011).

In short, returning citizens often rely on social ties upon release from prison; and extant research suggests that family ties may have a more proximate influence on recidivism through the supply of social control, support, and the momentum for cognitive change that they provide (Berg, 2011).

Research has found that maintaining visits improves the incarcerated individual's institutional behavior, reduces the likelihood of recidivism and parole violations upon release, and enhances social support networks (Cotton, 2014). In a recent study examining presence and frequency of visitation, Duwe and Clark (2011) found that *any* visitation reduced the risk of recidivism by 13% and reduced the risk of technical violations by 25% after release. In addition, the findings suggest that when the visits were more frequent, closer to release date, and involved a variety of friends and family members, recidivism risk was further lowered (Cotton, 2014).

Other research has suggested that visitation may reduce incarcerated individuals' overall stress and psychological anxiety felt in overcrowded prisons by producing a sense of personal space and a connection to the outside world through their visitors (Cotton, 2014). Associating with others or believing that others have a stake in their well-being helps the incarcerated individual cope while incarcerated and provides mental strength post-release (Cotton, 2014).

An article published in August 2012 in Corrections Today, a publication of the American Correctional Association, titled "The Role of Family and Pro-Social Relationships in Reducing Recidivism," noted that "Family can be a critical component in assisting individuals transitioning from incarceration because family members provide both social control and social support, which inhibit criminal activity.... In contrast, those without positive supportive relationships are more likely to engage in criminal behavior."

Further, a Vera Institute study, published in October 2012, found that "Incarcerated men and women who maintain contact with supportive family members are more likely to succeed after their release.... Research on people returning from prison shows that family members can be valuable sources of support during incarceration and after release. For example, prison inmates who had more contact with their families and who reported positive relationships overall are less likely to be re-incarcerated."

Another Vera Institute report, published in 2011, stated: "Research shows that incarcerated people who maintain supportive relationships with family members have better outcomes – such as stable housing and employment – when they return to the community. Many corrections practitioners and policy makers intuitively understand the positive role families can play in the reentry process; but they often do not know how to help people in prison draw on these social supports" (Friedmann, 2014) .

Research also shows that the largest reductions in recidivism are realized when evidence-based programs and practices are implemented in prisons and govern the supervision of probationers and parolees in the community post-release (Pew, 2011).

It is abundantly clear that maintaining close family relationships during incarceration results in lower recidivism rates and therefore less crime, which benefits society as a whole (Friedmann, 2014). Unfortunately, insufficient resources and processes exist to help incarcerated individuals maintain family ties and make connections to potential external providers before they are released into the community (BCP, 2016).

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