

The role of family ties in desistance from crime

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in brief

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Key Points

- Desisting from offending (or 'going straight') can be long and complex process, often characterised by setbacks.
- Families may be able to support desistance by providing practical and emotional supports and informal social controls, or 'social capital'.
- Family relationships can provide motivation to change and strengthen new, positive identities.
- Families and communities may also reward and recognise positive changes, which can reduce stigma and support desistance.
- There is a need for more research into who is affected when a person goes to prison and a greater recognition of the support needs of prisoners' families.

Background

There is a general consensus in current research that desisting from crime (or 'going straight') can be a long, difficult and complex process but also that strong family ties can reduce the likelihood of reoffending. This paper explores why family ties might assist prisoners in building more positive futures, concluding that, while families have an important role to play here, they should not be viewed solely as a potential 'resource' by the criminal justice system, as many have their own needs that must be recognised.

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Building Social Capital

Much of the research that argues for the importance of family or community ties in the successful resettlement of prisoners builds on the idea of social capital. While social capital has become increasingly popular, it is often ill-defined. One way criminologists have used social capital to explain why family relationships can reduce reoffending is by arguing that people with strong relationships also have high levels of social capital, which can provide emotional or practical supports in difficult situations:

“Good familial relationships provide a further resource: advice on problems faced; loans of money or expensive items; contacts with parental friends; somewhere to live when other accommodation proves unsatisfactory; and so on. Social relationships forged at work and at home create a sense of obligation, reciprocal trust and provide individuals with information channels and knowledge. In short, they provide people with social capital”. (Farrall 2004)

Therefore family relationships can be a positive resource that can help people resettle into the community by providing social capital in the form of advice, emotional support or by helping to resolve personal difficulties such as homelessness. Families may help ex-prisoners

achieve goals that would be overwhelming or unattainable without support, such as finding a job through family connections. This can build new relationships and greater inclusion in society, which in turn promote desistance and create further stocks of social capital. However, families may not necessarily be the most productive source of social capital: wider, more diverse social networks may allow access to a wider range of potential resources and may therefore be more effective for ‘getting ahead’. Another way in which building social capital through family relationships has been argued to reduce reoffending is that this can create ‘informal social controls’ that prevent people from reoffending, as they do not want to jeopardise their relationship with their family. Therefore a positive relationship with a partner, parents or other family members can act as a ‘turning point’, not only keeping the individual ‘on the straight and narrow’ by occupying their time, but also by building trust and a sense of commitment to the relationship that can keep individuals from offending. Similarly, becoming a parent can also lead to more time being spent at home with the family and reduce the appeal of offending behaviour, as parents do not want to jeopardise their relationship with their children. The quality of relationships is key here: the more invested a person is in the relationship, the less likely they are to put it at risk by reoffending.



Recognising prisoners’ strengths

Others have suggested that, not only does the individual need to choose to change his or her life, but this change must also be recognised by wider society. Strengths-based models of desistance argue that offenders are stigmatised by the wider community, and it is this stigma that leads to reoffending. To reduce this stigma, the (ex-)prisoner should be given opportunities to make amends and contribute positively, either through useful and visible voluntary community work, restorative justice or by adopting a ‘generative’ or caring role in family life:

“The strengths narrative begins with the assumption that ex-convicts are stigmatized persons, and implicitly that this stigma (and not some internal dangerousness or deficit) is at the core of what makes ex-convicts likely to reoffend....To combat this social exclusion, the strengths paradigm calls for opportunities for ex-convicts to make amends, demonstrate their value and potential, and make positive contributions to their communities” (Maruna and LeBel 2003)

This not only allows previous offenders to ‘earn redemption’ but also provides the opportunity for the community to recognise that individual as a productive member of society. Families can have an important role to play here, as taking on caring responsibilities for children or other family members can provide an opportunity for an ex-prisoner to ‘give something back’ and contribute to family life. Clearly, a potential difficulty with such a model is that communities may not wish to offer forgiveness and may prefer to remain ‘punishing communities’; however, rather than providing a justification for dismissing strengths-based desistance, this should instead motivate us to challenge punitive attitudes.

Conclusions and directions for future research

While the above arguments can help us better understand how family ties might help in reducing reoffending, there are also a number of areas that would benefit from further research. For example, the current research tends to use the terms 'family' and 'community' uncritically without clearly defining what is meant by these terms. Communities are often seen as a largely positive resource, particularly in strengths-based models, and the high levels of social deprivation that affect the communities many prisoners return to are rarely recognised. This is problematic, as it is well established that the prison population is disproportionately drawn from Scotland's most deprived communities:

“Former prison governor and criminology professor Roger Houchin discovered that half of the population in Scottish prisons on the night of 30th June 2003 came from home addresses in just 155 of the 1222 local government wards in Scotland; that although the overall imprisonment rate for men in Scotland at that time was 237 per 100,000, for men from the 27 most deprived wards the rate was 953 per 100,000; and that about one in nine young men from the most deprived communities would spend time in prison before they were 23.” (Scottish Prisons Commission 2008: 2.24).

Given these high levels of social disadvantage and deprivation, the reality of community life may not reflect the image projected in the desistance literature.

Similarly, family relationships may be more diverse and complex than current research might suggest. The term 'family' is generally used to refer to nuclear, heterosexual families, with other less traditional family models being neglected. For example, little is known about other potentially significant relationships such as friends, foster parents and other carers, or ex-partners or co-parents. There has also been little research into the relationships that might be important to female offenders, or indeed women's pathways into and out of offending.

Further, it is rarely acknowledged that women may be disproportionately affected by the imprisonment of partners or family members as, regardless of the gender of the prisoner, additional caring responsibilities tend to be taken on by women.

There is also little discussion in the desistance literature of the impact of imprisonment on family relationships and the consequent implications for the support families might be able to provide. For example, the family's ability to offer practical assistance such as housing, employment or financial support may have been undermined by the imposition of a prison sentence, as a source of income may have been lost, child care costs may have increased, or debts may have been inherited. There may also be considerable extra expenses associated with legal proceedings and visits, phone calls and gifts for the prisoner, often by families who are least able to absorb these extra costs, and who may be reluctant to seek help because of fear or embarrassment.



Further, while it has been suggested that families may help offenders construct a new, positive identity and provide emotional support, families affected by imprisonment often experience a range of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, loneliness, isolation, jealousy, shame, or guilt which may leave little emotional energy to direct towards supporting the returning prisoner. Indeed, it is often assumed in the desistance literature that prisoners' families will always be willing to offer support. However many families may have good reasons for not wishing to continue these relationships, particularly if they have been negatively affected by the prisoner's offending or have been subject to domestic abuse. Yet even where this is not the case, the imprisonment of a family member can strain relationships, as there are often considerable barriers to maintaining contact, such as geographic distance, poor and expensive public transport, and restrictive visiting times.

Conclusion

In summary, the desistance literature has identified four distinct ways in which families may assist in the difficult process of desisting from crime:

- By providing a source of practical and emotional support
- By occupying the person's time and keeping them on 'the straight and narrow'
- By reinforcing new, positive identities (for example as a good parent rather than as an offender)
- By recognising positive changes and reducing the stigma felt by ex-offenders.

However, there is a need for more research, as there has been little critical analysis of the forms that these family relationships might take and how interventions by the criminal justice system might affect these relationships. Importantly, both policy makers and academics have been criticised for constructing families as a potential 'resource' to reduce reoffending while failing to recognise their own legitimate support needs:

"To co-opt families into the resettlement process uses families simply for instrumental reasons, allowing the State to shrug off some responsibility for the consequences of the negative effects of imprisonment.....In terms of future approaches, therefore, it would seem more satisfactory to support prisoners' families for reasons of human rights, because they are not themselves offenders, and for the good of children in the future, in an attempt to prevent inter-generational repetition of patterns of incarceration, rather than to co-opt families into the resettlement process." (Codd 2007)

Such an omission is particularly problematic not only as families of prisoners often suffer from high levels of social disadvantage, but also because the Scottish prison population has steadily increased over the last ten years, so more families will continue to be affected by these issues. Consequently there is real value in both further research exploring how prison sentences are experienced by offenders and their families and in greater service provision for this often neglected group.



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Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland that works solely to support the families of people involved in the criminal justice system. We work to mitigate the effects of imprisonment on children and families - and consequently to reduce the likelihood of reoffending - through support and information for families and for the people who work with them.



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voicing the needs
of families affected
by imprisonment

