

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS



The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism

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The Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) recently completed a study that examined the effects of prison visitation on offender recidivism. Using an average follow-up period of nearly five years, the study evaluated the relationship between prison visitation and recidivism among 16,420 offenders released from Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2007.

KEY FINDINGS

- Offenders who were visited in prison were significantly less likely to recidivate. The reductions in recidivism were:
 - 13 percent for a felony reconviction
 - 25 for reincarceration for a technical violation revocation
- Nearly 40 percent of the offenders were not visited once while in prison.
- Visits from siblings, in-laws, fathers and clergy were the most beneficial in lowering recidivism.
- The frequency with which inmates were visited had a significant effect on recidivism.
 - Inmates visited more often were less likely to recidivate.
- Visits closer to an offender's release date had a greater impact on reducing recidivism.
- The larger an offender's social support system, the lower the risk for recidivism.
 - The total number of different individual visitors an offender had was significantly associated with less recidivism.

The results from recent studies on prisoners in Florida and Canada suggest that both the presence and frequency of prison visits during the last year of confinement were associated with reduced recidivism. Rather than focusing on the impact of visitation during the last year of imprisonment, this study extended research on prison visitation and recidivism by using multiple measures of visitation over the entire confinement period to assess the effects of the number, timing, and type of visits (e.g., friend, sibling, mentor, etc.) on reoffending. It also examined whether the size of an offender's social support network, as reflected by the number of individual visitors, is associated with recidivism. Further, given that offenders in the sample were tracked through June 2010, a relatively lengthy follow-up period (an average of nearly five years) was used for recidivism, which was measured two different ways.

Recidivism Results

The findings suggest that prison visitation can significantly improve the transition offenders make from the institution to the community. Any visit reduced the risk of recidivism by 13 percent for felony reconvictions and 25 percent for technical violation revocations. The findings further showed that more frequent and recent visits were associated with a decreased risk of recidivism. The results also suggest that the more sources of social support an offender has, the lower the risk of recidivism.

While visits in general reduced recidivism, visits from some individuals (fathers, siblings, in-laws, and clergy) were more beneficial than others. The significant effects found for visits from fathers may reflect the fact that, compared to growing up with a single parent (usually the mother), a two-parent household is generally a protective factor against criminal offending. In offering more of a peer perspective, siblings may help offenders remain accountable by providing them with more honest support and feedback. For those who are married, visits with either spouses or children may be difficult because they create more stress and are often reminders of how their incarceration is preventing them from raising their children or helping provide for their families. In-laws, on the other hand, may be able to provide offenders with supportive visits from family members that are generally free of the difficulties that may accompany visits with spouses or children. Finally, considering that clergy often receive training in helping individuals through difficult life circumstances, they may be able to give offenders effective counsel and support.

Summary

The results indicate that prison visitation can improve recidivism outcomes by helping offenders not only maintain social ties with both nuclear and extended family members (especially fathers, siblings, and in-laws) while incarcerated, but also by developing new bonds such as those with clergy or mentors. In doing so, offenders can sustain or broaden their networks of social support, which was important in lowering recidivism. Revising existing visitation policies to make them more “visitor friendly” may represent a relatively low cost-potentially high benefit measure that correctional systems could take to help ease the burden of prison overcrowding and budget deficits.

While policies that are more visitor friendly would likely help increase visitation overall, it is anticipated that these types of policy changes would not necessarily increase visitation to a significant extent among inmates who have little or no social support. To encourage the development of social bonds among unvisited inmates, who comprised nearly 40 percent of the sample, it may be helpful to consider allocating greater resources towards identifying sources of social support for high-risk offenders who are less likely to be visited. Given that correctional programming tends to be more effective when there is a continuum of care, or service delivery, from the institution to the community, efforts should also be made in the community to help to preserve the social ties that were established or maintained in prison so as to further strengthen the beneficial effects of prison visitation.