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## Lowering Recidivism through Family Communication

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There are currently 2.2 million people held in prisons and jails in the United States,<sup>1</sup> and an estimated 95% of prisoners currently in custody will one day be released. Based on 2012 data, around 637,400 people are released annually from state and federal prisons.<sup>2</sup>

According to an April 2011 report by the Pew Center on the States, the average national recidivism rate is 43.3%.<sup>3</sup> Based on that average rate, an estimated 2 million released prisoners can be expected to recidivate each year, many committing new crimes and returning to prison.

This negatively impacts our communities in several ways, including the societal costs of more crime and victimization as well as the fiscal costs of reincarcerating ex-prisoners who commit new offenses – at an average annual cost of \$31,286 per prisoner, according to a 2012 report by the Vera Institute.<sup>4</sup>

Studies have consistently found that prisoners who maintain close contact with their family members while incarcerated have better post-release outcomes and lower recidivism rates.

These findings represent a body of research stretching back over 40 years. For example, according to “Explorations in Inmate-Family Relationships,” a 1972 study by the Vera Institute, “The central finding of this research is the strong and consistent positive relationship that exists between parole success and maintaining strong family ties in prison. Only 50 percent of the ‘no contact’ inmates completed their first year on parole without being arrested, while 70 percent of those with three visitors or more were ‘arrest free’ during this period. In addition, the ‘loners’ were six times more likely to wind up back in prison during the first year (12 percent returned compared to 2 percent for those with three or more visitors). For all Base Expectancy levels, we found that those who maintained closer ties performed more satisfactorily on parole.”<sup>5</sup>

These findings still ring true. An article published in August 2012 in Corrections Today, a publication of the American Correctional Association, titled “The Impact 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup>

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 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.

According to research published in Western Criminology Review in 2006, “a remarkably consistent association has been found between family contact during incarceration and lower recidivism rates.”<sup>9</sup>

Correctional practices that “facilitate and strengthen family connections during incarceration” can “reduce the strain of parental separation, reduce recidivism rates, and increase the likelihood of successful re-entry,” according to a 2005 report by the Re-Entry Policy Council.<sup>10</sup>

A 2003 study by the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute, “Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry,” as revised in 2005, noted that “Research findings highlight the importance of contact among family members during incarceration. Facilitating contact has been shown to reduce the strain of separation and increase the likelihood of successful reunification. Studies comparing the outcomes of prisoners who maintained family connections during incarceration through letters and personal visits with those who did not suggest that maintaining family ties reduces recidivism rates.”<sup>11</sup>

Also, a 2004 study by the Urban Institute stated, “Our analysis found that [released prisoners] with closer family relationships, stronger family support, and fewer negative dynamics in relationships with intimate partners were more likely to have worked after release and were less likely to have used drugs.” The study by Christy Visher, Vera Kachnowski, Nancy La Vigne and Jeremy Travis, concluded, “It is evident that family support, when it exists, is a strong asset that can be brought to the table in the reentry planning process.”<sup>12</sup>

It is thus abundantly clear that maintaining close family relationships during incarceration results in lower recidivism rates and therefore less crime, which benefits society as a whole. Yet in spite of this clear correlation, corrections officials often do little to encourage contact between prisoners and their family members.

There are three primary forms of communication available to prisoners: letters, visits and phone calls.

With respect to letters, many prisoners are illiterate or functionally illiterate, which frustrates correspondence. A 2007 report by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 39% of prisoners scored “below basic” for quantitative literacy testing, while another 39% scored at only a “basic” level.<sup>13</sup>

Other studies likewise have found high levels of illiteracy or poor written communication skills among prisoners, which makes letter-writing as a means of contact between prisoners and their families problematic.

Further, an increasing number of jails are adopting postcard-only policies, whereby prisoners can only receive, and sometimes send, mail in the form of postcard, a very limited means of correspondence. [See: PLN, Nov. 2010, p.22]. Such policies place additional burdens on communication between prisoners and their families; PLN and other organizations have challenged postcard-only policies in various jurisdictions, including Florida, Tennessee, Oregon, Washington and Michigan. [See: PLN, Jan. 2014, p.42; Nov. 2013, p.24; June 2013, p.42; Jan. 2012, p.30; Sept. 2011, p.19].

In regard to visitation, a November 2011 study by the Minnesota Department of Corrections examined recidivism rates for 16,420 ex-prisoners over a five-year period, comparing rates for those who received visits while incarcerated and those who didn't. The study found that “Any visit reduced the risk of recidivism 10 percent for felony reconvictions and 25 percent for technical violation revocations, which reflects the fact that visitation generally had a greater impact on technical violations. The findings further showed that more frequent and recent visits were associated with a decreased risk of recidivism.”<sup>14</sup> [See: PLN, May 2013, p.19].

However, prison officials often make visitation an unpleasant process, including lengthy waits, onerous searches, restricted visitation times and rigid enforcement of often petty rules. For example, one female attorney said she was told by prison officials that she could not visit a prisoner because her underwire bra set off a metal detector. After leaving, removing her bra and then returning, she was told she could not visit because she wasn't wearing a bra.

According to the 2011 Vera Institute study, “Many family members also indicated that prison rules and practices – including searches, long waits, and inconsistent interpretations of dress codes for visitors – can be unclear, unpleasant, too restrictive, and even keep people from visiting again.”

Due to such problematic issues with visitation, and because prisoners are frequently housed at facilities located far from their families which makes in-person visitation difficult (federal prisoners, for example, may be held at any federal prison in the United States), phone calls are a primary means of maintaining family contact.

As acknowledged by the largest prison phone company in the nation, Global Tel\*Link: “Studies and reports continue to support that recidivism can be significantly reduced by regular connection and communications between inmates, families and friends – [a] 13% reduction in felony reconviction and a 25% reduction in technical violations.”<sup>15</sup>

Kevin O'Neil, president of Telmate, another phone service provider, agreed, stating, “The more inmates connect with their friends and family members the less likely they are to be rearrested after they're released.”<sup>16</sup>

When the Federal Communications Commission voted in August 2013 to reduce the cost of interstate prison phone calls nationwide, the issue of reducing recidivism played a contributing role in the FCC's decision.

As stated by FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn: “Studies have shown that having meaningful contact beyond prison walls can make a real difference in maintaining community ties, promoting rehabilitation, and reducing recidivism. Making these calls more affordable can facilitate all of these objectives and more.”<sup>17</sup>

The FCC's order imposing rate caps on interstate prison phone calls went into effect on February 11, 2014, though other parts of the order have been stayed by the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals. [See: PLN, Feb. 2014, p.10].

Notably, numerous corrections officials filed objections to the FCC's plan to impose rate caps, and intrastate (in-state) prison phone rates, which were not addressed by the FCC's order, remain high. Meanwhile, prisons and jails nationwide have received hundreds of millions of dollars in “commission” kickbacks from prison phone companies, and such kickbacks have long resulted in inflated phone rates that create financial barriers to communication between prisoners and their families. [See: PLN, Dec. 2013, p.1; April 2011, p.1].

In conclusion, although research has consistently found that regular contact between prisoners and their families results in better post-release outcomes and lower recidivism rates, corrections officials have done little to facilitate – and have sometimes deliberately frustrated – such communication with respect to written correspondence, visitation and phone calls.

Investments in prison-based literacy programs and less restrictive mail policies, revising visitation policies to encourage visits by family members, and reducing intrastate prison and jail phone rates would provide prisoners with greater opportunities to maintain close relationships with their families, leading to lower recidivism rates and less crime in our communities.

Few corrections officials seem willing to take such actions, though, which is a strong indicator that reducing recidivism – thus reducing the size of our nation's prison population and the associated costs – is not one of their priorities.

#### Endnotes

1 <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus12.pdf>

2 <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p12tar9112.pdf>

3

[http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing\\_and\\_corrections/State\\_Recidivism\\_Revolving\\_Door\\_America\\_Prisoners'](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing_and_corrections/State_Recidivism_Revolving_Door_America_Prisoners)

4 [www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/Price\\_of\\_Prisons\\_updated\\_version\\_072512.pdf](http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/Price_of_Prisons_updated_version_072512.pdf)

5 <http://www.fcnetwork.org/reading/holt-miller/holt-millersum.html>

6 <https://www.aca.org/fileupload/177/ahaidar/Flower.pdf>

7 <http://www.vera.org/files/the-family-and-recidivism.pdf>

8 <http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/Piloting-a-Tool-for-Reentry-Updated.pdf>

9 <http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v07n2/20-naser/naser.pdf> (citing other sources)

10 <http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Report-of-the-Reentry-Council.pdf>

11 [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310882\\_families\\_left\\_behind.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310882_families_left_behind.pdf)

12 [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310946\\_BaltimorePrisoners.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310946_BaltimorePrisoners.pdf)

13 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007473.pdf>

14 <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/pages/files/large-files/Publications/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy.pdf>

15 Petitioners' Opposition to Petition for Stay of Report and Order Pending Appeal, FCC WC Docket No. 12-375, Exhibit D, page 6 (October 29, 2013)

16 [www.telmate.com/oregon-doc-installatio](http://www.telmate.com/oregon-doc-installatio)

17 [http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily\\_Releases/Daily\\_Business/2013/db0926/FCC-13-113A2.txt](http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2013/db0926/FCC-13-113A2.txt)

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