

Fall 2014

Perception of Family and Community Support among Released Felons in the State of Texas

June Gerber

Gaylene Armstrong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/criminaljusticefacpub>

 Part of the [Criminology Commons](#)

PERCEPTION OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT AMONG RELEASED FELONS IN THE STATE OF TEXAS

by

Jurg Gerber, Ph.D.

and

Gaylene S. Armstrong, Ph.D.

There are about 1.6 million people incarcerated in U.S. prisons. Of the currently incarcerated prisoners, more than 700,000 individuals are annually released. The probability that they will subsequently return to prison is around 50 percent. For the State of Texas, the figures are 154,656 inmates in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), 42,069 were released during Fiscal Year 2008, and about 50 percent will be re-incarcerated (TDCJ, 2009a, 2009b). We examine one of the factors that reduce the probability that released inmates recidivate: the level of support they expect to receive from family and their community upon their release.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of reentry into society. In a comprehensive study of recidivism among released prisoners, Beck and Shipley (1989: 1) found that "recidivism rates were higher among men, blacks, Hispanics, and persons who had not completed high school than among women, whites, non-Hispanics, and high school graduates." Furthermore, prisoners who were young when they were released and had extensive criminal records were more likely to recidivate.

However, relatively little research exists on the topic of family support. We plan to conduct several studies on this general topic. In this first stage, we limited ourselves to male felons. Research has shown that male and female inmates face different obstacles to successful reintegration into society and the same holds true for long term inmates (i.e., felons) and jail or state jail inmates. For instance, the lack of family relationships poses a greater problem for females, while the longer duration of incarceration leads to greater difficulties for felons to maintain supportive family relationships.

Literature Review Relevant to Study Topic

One of the recurring problems of returning prisoners is that they have become "embedded" in criminality while in prison, with their bonds to conventional society becoming increasingly weaker. Once they do return, they are not necessarily welcomed with open arms:

Recycling parolees in and out of families and communities has a number of adverse effects. It is detrimental to community cohesion, employment prospects and economic well being, participation in the democratic process, family stability and childhood development, and mental and physical health and can exacerbate such problems as homelessness (Petersilia 2000: 1).

There is a considerable body of research that shows that family and community support are important predictors of recidivism (Bales and Mears, 2008; Petersilia, 2003; Visher et al., 2004). Most inmates return to the very same people and communities that they had lived in before they were arrested. While they are likely to find the same pressures and illegal opportunities that led them to committing the crimes that led to

their previous incarceration, it is also these communities that are most likely to provide them with the necessary emotional and material support to succeed on the outside. In general, men who are able to maintain strong family ties are more likely to experience post-release success and so do those who assume family roles upon release (Petersilia 2003).

With respect to community support, the literature is equally clear: pro-social networks are an important source of social capital ("the features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination for mutual benefit" [Putnam, 1995: 67]), and the greater the social capital of released inmates, the greater the likelihood that they will succeed on the outside. Unfortunately, released inmates are unlikely to have much social capital (Hagan and Coleman, 2001; Braman, 2004; and Clear et al. 2001).

Furthermore, researchers have preconceived notions of what *family* and *community support* are, but what researchers and inmates perceive them to be may not be identical. We report on a qualitative assessment of *what inmates think family support is and how much support they think they will receive*. Furthermore, we examine the idea that *perceptions* of support may be more important than *actual* support.

Research Design and Methodology

Two researchers attempted to interview 100 inmates within 24 hours before their release. We were able to conduct 89 interviews, with 74 usable transcripts, that lasted between 20 and 75 minutes in length. Interviewees were mostly white and African-Americans, aged 20s to 60s, who had served time for offenses ranging from homicide to parole violations, and with current incarcerations ranging from a few weeks to 30 years in length.

The interviews focused on their perceptions of family and community support and were open-ended: the interviewers had checklists of topics to cover, but the interviewees were free to cover topics as they saw fit.

Findings

With respect to *family support*, inmates seemed to distinguish between biological and non-biological families and then subdivided them into nuclear and extended vs. "pseudo families" (friends, community members, churches, etc.). In particular, they expected to receive support from them in the following areas:

Emotional Support. "I have a friend. I mentioned this friend before. He's an ex-felon too, he was in here, he got out and is living his life good, got his wife back, and his family's back. He is kinda my moral support too, we kinda help each other. He asks me questions about his family, he is like family to me. He is like a brother, you know." (Respondent #2).

Discipline. “Oh man, she’s [his wife] like my parole officer. It’s hard without your man being there, and she scared I’m going to go back to the same old things. She don’t want me hanging around old friends, going to old places, or even the old job I used to have because I used to work night shifts. And when you work night shifts, you can do whatever you want. So I would go to work, and there is no superiors telling you anything, so I would do that and get [drunk].” (Respondent #27).

Employment. “My mom’s brother in law is the superintendent out there, and he told me as soon as I get out to call him and he’s gonna put me to work.” (Respondent #4).

Material Support. “I’m gonna need help getting my life back in order, buying clothes, stuff like that. I own a motorcycle but I obviously cannot take my 2 1/2-year-old son on a motorcycle, so I need better transportation. My family’s gonna have to help me adapt back into society. I’ve been arrested a lot, she’s just disappointed I know I’ve disappointed my mother a lot. I’m lucky they haven’t given up on me. They’re still willing to help me.” (Respondent #103).

Housing. “I’m being paroled to a friend’s house, this lady. She’s older Christian lady that I stayed with before.” (Respondent #23).

Substance Abuse. “I’m going to go to AA and NA when I get out. My mother’s going to go with me. I don’t know what other conditions I’m going to have this first parole but my mom is going to be supportive. She said she’ll go with me. She’ll support me.” (Respondent #106).

Negative Influences. Inmates expressed considerable concern over some family members being negative influences in their reintegration. In other words, they were concerned more about family *conflict*, rather than family *support*:

- “No, they didn’t come to visit me, so I didn’t see them. So, I don’t really know how the transition back to them would be, to even have...what kind of relationship we would have. And, plus, you now, family members...they do certain things I don’t want to be involved with maybe, I’m not sure, you know, I’m not sure what all they’re doing out there and I don’t want nothing to end my freedom. If it takes staying away from them, I’m staying away.” (Respondent #2).
- “Yeah my little brother. With his drinking. It’s okay if he drinks, but while I’m on parole I don’t want him to end up over there drunk, with beer, and all of a sudden the parole drives by or cops go by and I get in trouble. I need to talk to them. I need to talk to them about that. He’s one of those brothers that you have to knock him upside the head to get him to listen.” (Respondent #25).

With respect to *community support*, the findings were very similar. Inmates expected emotional, financial, material, and religious support from their communities. Religious institutions were frequently mentioned by inmates as sources of support. Of particular interest to us was the fact that inmates looked at religious groups for material and emotional support in addition to spiritual guidance.

Also, inmates are very concerned about the fact that their old communities could be a threat to their freedom:

- I just think I need to know their intentions, know what they want, then I’m just gonna have to stay away from them. (Inmate #20).
- I’ll just avoid them, just say no. (Inmate #31).
- Just not associating with them. (Inmate #45).
- I’m going to try and avoid contact all costs...I’m going to avoid all the old people I knew. (Inmate #103).

Implications

There are several important conclusions that can be drawn as a result of this research:

- *Family* has many meanings to ex-mates (Biological Families vs. Non-biological Families);
- *Community* can at times be almost indistinguishable from *family*;
- Church and religious community can become *surrogate families*; and
- The family as a social institution plays an important role in the expectations of ex-mates.

References

- Bales, William D., and Daniel P. Mears. 2008. “Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 45:287-321.
- Beck, Allen J., and Bernard E. Shipley. 1989. *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Braman, D. 2004. *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Clear, Todd R., D. Rose, and J. Ryder. 2001. “Incarceration and the Community: The Problem of Removing and Returning Offenders.” *and Delinquency* 47: 337-351.
- Hagan, John, and James P. Coleman. 2001. “Returning Captives of the American War on Drugs: Issues of Community and Family Reentry.” *Crime and Delinquency* 47: 352-367.
- Petersilia, Joan. 2000. *When Prisoners Return to the Community: Political, Economic, and Social Consequences*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.
- Petersilia, Joan. 2003. *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Putnam, R. D. 1995. “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” *Journal of Democracy* 6(1): 65-78.
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice. 2009a. *TDCJ Summary Sheet November 2009*. Huntsville, TX: TDCJ.
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice. 2009b. *Fourth Quarter Fiscal Year 2009*. Huntsville, TX: TDCJ.
- Visher, Christy A., Vera Kachnowski, Nancy La Vigne, and Jeremy Travis. 2004. *Baltimore Prisoners’ Experiences Returning Home*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Dr. Jurg Gerber has been a member of the faculty of the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University since 1990. Formerly the university's Director of International Programs (2001-05), he has held a number of other administrative positions, including Associate Dean for Academic Administration (1998-2000), Assistant Dean for Graduate Programs (1997-98), and Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs (1994-97). In addition to being a Professor, Dr. Gerber serves as Director of International Initiatives for the College of Criminal Justice and as Chair of the Department of Security Studies. Dr. Gerber's specialty areas of expertise include criminology, white collar crime, drug policy, and comparative criminology. He has co-edited three books on drug policy and white collar crime, and has published on comparative criminology, police-corrections partnerships, and criminal justice education.

Dr. Gerber presented this paper at the III International Probation Seminar held in Wroclaw, Poland, on June 18-20, 2014.

Dr. Gaylene S. Armstrong serves as Chair of the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, and formerly served as the Research Director for the Correctional Management Institute of Texas and the Director of Criminal Justice and Criminology Graduate Programs. She focuses on the evaluation of correctional programs and policies in both institutional and community corrections settings. She is a recognized expert on both adult and juvenile offender populations as well as with specialized offender populations such as sex offenders and female offenders. In 2007 and 2012, Dr. Armstrong was recognized as one of the top Female Academic Stars in Criminology in an article published by the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*.



CSS OPTIMIZE

CORRECTIONS SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS YOUR CASE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

You will never wait for information again with our easy-to-use web-based application which is accessible via the internet 24/7. Improve workflow while streamlining and strengthening your operations. From daily chronologicals and assessments to collecting, disbursing and reconciling the financials, CSS streamlines and integrates every responsibility from the line officer to the administrative staff.

CORRECTIONS SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS, LP
 316 North Lamar | Austin, TX 78703
 877-272-5300 | info@correctionssoftware.com

OUR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Complete Case Management
- Adult, Juvenile and Juvenile Hall
- Browser Based and Cloud Hosted
- CSS Texting, Email and Signatures
- CSS Mobile and Intrastate Transfer
- Paperless Office with a complete Audit Trail
- Web Reporting
- Google Mapping and more

