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Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society

Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?

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Despite increased scholarly and policy attention to prisoner reentry, much remains unknown about the factors that contribute to a successful transition from prison to society. The authors focused on a neglected but potentially critical factor, inmate visitation, that may reduce recidivism. The expectation of such an effect stems from prominent crime theories and an increasing body of work that stresses the importance of social ties to the reentry process. Using data from the Florida Department of Corrections, the authors tested hypotheses about the effects of visitation on recidivism. The measures of visitation included whether any visits occurred, the frequency and recency of visitation, and the type of visitor received (e.g., family member, friend). The authors also examined whether visitation effects varied by age, sex, race, type of instant offense, and prior incarceration. The findings indicate that visitation reduces and delays recidivism. Their implications for theory, research, and policy are discussed.

Keywords: *prisoner; visitation; recidivism*

The most comfortable prison is still a lonely place.

—Kenneth Kolb (1958)

Within the corrections field, it has long been held that contact with family is especially important for helping inmates both during and after confinement

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(Glaser 1964; Gordon and McConnell 1999; Hairston 1988; Ohlin 1951; Schafer 1994; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). Today, as attention increasingly has turned to studies of prisoner reentry (Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Petersilia 2003; Visher and Travis 2003), interest in family and community influences on the reentry experience has grown (La Vigne et al. 2005; Nevin and Stewart 2005). That interest, spurred in no small part by the fact that an estimated two thirds of released offenders are likely to be rearrested within three years (Langan and Levin 2002), has naturally led to scholarship on inmates' social ties to family and community (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2001; Hughes and Harrison-Thompson 2002; Lindquist 2000; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Visher et al. 2004). However, what Hairston (1988:48) observed 20 years ago, that empirical studies of the impact of family visitation on recidivism are rare, remains just as true today. Studies of the effects of both family and nonfamily visitation on recidivism are rarer still.

The relative inattention to this topic is anomalous given that many crime theories—including social bond, social capital, general strain, and labeling theories—anticipate that social ties can reduce offending, whether through increasing an individual's bonds with society or the resources he or she has either to succeed in life or to alleviate stressful situations. In addition, life-course theories emphasize the salience of factors that may contribute to certain transitions altering a given behavioral trajectory. Notably, release from prison constitutes a potentially critical transition, and social support stands as one of the likely factors that may facilitate a successful passage through this transition (Glaser 1964; Maruna and Toch 2005; Visher et al. 2004). There has been considerable growth in prison populations, including a quadrupling of individuals, now totaling 1.4 million, in state and federal facilities over the past 25 years (Harrison and Beck 2006; Harrison and Karberg 2003). That growth has given rise to a need for greater understanding of how best to improve the reentry of inmates back into society, creating a unique opportunity to test and extend criminological theories. Indeed, scholars have increasingly taken advantage of the focus on reentry to develop and test crime theory (Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Travis and Visher 2005; Uggen 2000). Yet little attention has been given to empirically examining the salience of social ties to the successful transition of inmates back into society.

Research on the effects of inmate visitation poses implications for theory and policy. If the assumption that visitation improves recidivism outcomes proves false, then questions arise about the generalizability of crime theories that emphasize such ties and the wisdom of visitation programs

and policies aimed at reducing offending. If, however, the assumption is supported by empirical research, then a foundation exists for investigating how exactly inmate social ties reduce offending. Support for the assumption would also lend credence to arguments for expanding visitation programs and policies and, by extension, for identifying ways to address the barriers, such as limited visitation hours and poorly designed or maintained visiting facilities, that preclude or negatively affect visitation (Schafer 1994; Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2001; Comfort 2003; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Solomon et al. 2006).

Building on these observations, the goal of this study was to advance scholarship on the relationship between social support and crime and to inform efforts to understand the experience of prisoner reentry and how to improve successful postrelease outcomes. To that end, we examined data on 7,000 inmates released by the Florida Department of Corrections to test hypotheses about the influence of visitation on two-year recidivism outcomes. We investigated potential links between several measures of visitation—including whether any visits occurred, the frequency and recency of visitation, and the type of visitor received (e.g., family member, friend)—and tested hypotheses about variation in the effects of visitation by age, sex, race, type of instant offense, and prior experiences with incarceration. Briefly, the findings underscore the importance of visitation in reducing and delaying recidivism, the salience of the amount and types of visitation inmates receive, and the need to investigate and theoretically explicate differential effects of social ties among inmate populations as they reenter society.

We begin by placing this study in context, focusing in particular on the prominence of prisoner reentry in recent years and the theoretical traditions that have contributed to and informed correctional emphases on visitation. Drawing on these traditions and on the literature on inmate visitation, we developed a series of hypotheses designed to systematically examine the relationship between inmate visitation and recidivism. The findings of our study are then presented, followed by a discussion of their implications for theory, research, and policy.

Background

Prisoner Reentry and Inmate Visitation

In the past decade, interest in and research on the experiences inmates have after release from prison, as well as the factors that contribute to recidivism and other outcomes, have dramatically increased. Reflecting

that fact is the mention of prisoner reentry in President Bush's 2004 state of the union address, funding for reentry initiatives, and an ever growing body of scholarship examining reentry (Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Lynch and Sabol 2001; Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005; Visher and Travis 2003; Zhang, Roberts, and Callanan 2006). The bulk of studies to date paint a bleak portrait of the prospect that inmates will or can successfully reintegrate into society. Not only is recidivism highly likely (Langan and Levin 2002) but so too are other adverse outcomes, including homelessness, unemployment, mental illness, and drug addiction (Petersilia 2005). Notwithstanding the fact that considerable advances have been made in understanding how to reduce recidivism (Cullen 2005; Cullen and Gendreau 2000), cause for concern remains given the dearth of knowledge about both effective reentry programs and the range of factors that might improve reentry outcomes (Farabee 2005; Kubrin and Stewart 2006).

Against this backdrop stands a curious fact: Visitation programs and policies have emerged as a central feature of most correctional systems, in no small part because of the belief that visitation can improve reentry outcomes (Schafer 1994), yet relatively little is known about the impact of visitation on reentry and, in particular, recidivism. Hairston, Rollin, and Jo (2004) emphasized the centrality of visitation to reentry discussions, noting,

Although most reentry policies and programs focus on the roles and functions of formal organizations, there is an underlying assumption that prisoners' families and friends, not the state, will be the major sources of concrete aid and social and emotional support. (p. 1)

Of course, inmates' social ties to such individuals do not necessarily begin only after release from prison but rather are likely to have been forged before or during incarceration (La Vigne et al. 2005). In both instances, many challenges confront inmates in their attempts to sustain existing relationships with people outside of prison or to develop new ones. As Sykes (1958) observed 50 years ago, "imprisonment means that the inmate is cut off from family, relatives, and friends, not in the self-isolation of the hermit or misanthrope, but in the involuntary seclusion of the outlaw" (p. 65).

The assumption that family, friend, and community ties improve prisoner reentry represents a central pillar of support for furlough programs, which ascended into prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, just prior to the rapid growth in incarceration. Notably, arguments for these programs essentially constitute the same ones that can be and have been applied to efforts more generally to promote visitation. As LeClair (1978:250) emphasized, the

functions of such efforts can include reinforcing family ties, reinforcing the self-esteem of inmates, helping inmates' children, assisting with reentry through the development of community linkages, and, more generally, supporting other rehabilitation and crime prevention efforts (see Markley 1973; Burstein 1977).

Criminological Theory and Inmate Visitation

A focus on visitation and recidivism affords an opportunity to investigate a potentially important contributor to offending and, at the same time, to test a key expectation consonant with several prominent criminological theories. Indeed, these theories implicitly or explicitly have frequently served as the justification for visitation programs and policies (Adams and Fischer 1976; Glaser 1964; Hairston 1988; Hairston et al. 2004; Schafer 1994). Here, we discuss the theoretical foundation on which one might anticipate a visitation-crime relationship.

Perhaps the most obvious theoretical justification for expecting that inmate visitation should reduce recidivism stems from Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory, which argues that strong bonds to family, friends, and community serves to constrain tendencies to commit crime. This idea is implicit in many justifications for prisoner visitation. For example, in discussing the importance of visitation, and inmate social support generally, Glaser (1964) emphasized that "man is a social animal. . . . His strongest motivations may come from his ties to other persons" (p. 362). More recently, Maruna and Toch (2005:166), as well as others, have emphasized the importance of visitation for prison management and increasing the postrelease success of inmates: "Visitations offer inmates the only face-to-face opportunities they have to preserve or restore relationships that have been severed by imprisonment" (p. 167).

Social capital, including family social capital, has been a mainstay of contemporary criminological theory (Sampson and Laub 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997) and many contemporary studies of offending (e.g., Wright, Cullen, and Miller 2001). Yet it has not been systematically investigated in studies of recidivism despite its prominent mention in works as far back as Ohlin's (1951) pioneering study of parole, wherein he observed that "parole workers have often observed the controlling and supporting effect of close family ties" (p. 49). Descriptions of the benefits of visitation frequently reference the idea that social capital, in the form of support from family and friends, can provide assistance both during and after release from prison, including providing housing, money, and assistance

gaining employment and accessing drug treatment, mental health, and other services (Hairston 1988; Jiang and Winfree 2006). Of course, although family ties may constitute an important, if not the most important source of support to inmates (Visher et al. 2004), just as clearly, other types of ties, including those with friends, may serve as a critical aid in the transition to society (Adams and Fischer 1976).

In a similar vein, life-course approaches to understanding criminal behavior point to the salience of social relationships (Lilly, Cullen, and Ball 2007). Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, which emphasizes the importance of life transitions and social supports in negotiating these transitions, stands as one of the most prominent. Certainly, release from prison constitutes an important life event for inmates (Glaser 1964; Maruna and Toch 2005; Travis 2005). Indeed, that premise forms the foundation of visitation programs, which assume—correctly, if recent studies are any indication (e.g., Visher et al. 2004)—that release from prison constitutes a potentially traumatic event, one entailing a transition not only into freedom but also into myriad challenges and strains (Hairston 1988; Schafer 1994). Here, again, the expectation is that social supports during and after prison can serve as the critical differentiating factor between those who desist from offending and those who persist (Maruna and Toch 2005).

General strain theory offers another foundation through which visitation is held to reduce recidivism. The theory posits, in part, that a critical factor in whether strain leads to offending is the type and extent of coping resources and social supports individuals possess (Agnew 2006). The expectation echoes that of social capital theories, but the precise theoretical mechanism differs in that the emphasis is on social supports as sources that prevent or reduce strain or allow it to be addressed through noncriminal means. Hairston's (1988) account of how visitation can help reduce inmate recidivism—"the presence of a social network . . . protects the individual from a variety of negative stimuli" (p. 50)—is typical. More generally, the expectation is that individuals with support networks, including ties to family, friends, and community, may have more, and more prosocial, coping strategies for managing the many challenges associated with reentry into society (Howser, Grossman, and Macdonald 1984; Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001). More simply, it may be that associating with others or believing that others care about them helps released prisoners feel more willing and able to cope with the challenges of reentry (see, generally, Maruna 2001).

Finally, labeling theory offers yet another possibility for how inmate visitation might reduce recidivism. One variant of the theory centers around

the notion that individuals may come to accept certain labels (e.g., *offender*) and in turn act in ways that accord with that label (Paternoster and Iovanni 1989). For example, inmates may come to believe that they are, at their core, deviants, a process termed "role engulfment" (p. 380). Visitation may serve to provide an important counter to such labels and processes, and it may cement relations that facilitate entry into support social networks after release from prison, networks that help promote a more positive sense of personal identity (Maruna 2001).

Each of these different theoretical perspectives anticipates that inmate social ties can prevent or reduce offending, though the precise ways in which these ties contribute to it differ (e.g., social bonds, social capital and support, labeling). However, few studies have examined this idea using adult populations, much less those facing such a critical life transition as release from prison. Finding that visitation is negatively associated with recidivism would not constitute a formal test of the different theoretical mechanisms any more than a finding that marriage reduces offending would constitute a test of how exactly such an effect arises (Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). It represents, however, a critical first step; the next step would be to determine what precise causal pathway produces any observed effect. Here, we focus on the first step and emphasize that should a visitation-recidivism association be identified, opportunities exist to test which theories best account for the association and how they may need to be modified to improve our understanding of it. At the same time, it also should be emphasized that visitation might increase offending. For example, if inmates are visited by family or friends engaged in criminal activity, they may become more likely to engage in crime after release, because, for instance, of differential association processes (Sutherland 1947). In the conclusion, we discuss this issue and the implications of it and our findings for future research.

Prior Research on Inmate Visitation

A sizable literature examines factors that influence visitation and the hypothesis, largely supported, that prison visits can improve inmates' behavior while incarcerated (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2001; Schafer 1994; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Wooldredge 1999). Yet this literature rarely has included a focus on postrelease outcomes, such as offending. Interestingly, the few studies on a visitation-recidivism link have almost invariably focused on male inmates and the influence of receiving family, especially spousal, visitation (Adams and Fischer 1976). By contrast, studies

of the factors that contribute to visitation and of the experience of visitation have focused primarily on female inmates, especially those with children (Casey-Acevedo, Bakken, and Karle 2004; Hobler 2001; Houck and Loper 2002; Howser et al. 1984; Hughes and Harrison-Thompson 2002; Moses 1995; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005).

Extant studies that examined the visitation-recidivism hypothesis suffered from methodological limitations that preclude any firm statement concerning visitation effects. Ohlin's (1951) study is frequently cited as identifying a visitation effect. However, he focused not on visitation per se but rather on "family interest," operationalized as ranging from "very active" ("inmates receive five or more letters a month from relatives") to "none" ("inmate receives no letters from relatives") (p. 126). Relatives, rather than a spectrum of social ties, were the focus, and visitation featured only indirectly: "one visit is arbitrarily set as the equivalent of two letters" (p. 126). He found that inmates classified as having no family interest were more likely to violate parole (pp. 50-51), but multivariate models were not used to control for factors that might bias the effects of social ties. Following a similar methodology, Glaser (1964), in a revisiting of his dissertation (Glaser 1954), found that inmates with "very active" family interest were more likely to enjoy "parole success" (p. 366), defined to include individuals who avoided prison or acquired no further criminal records or felony or non-felony arrests with no convictions (p. 20). Here again, nonfamily ties were not systematically examined, nor were multivariate analyses used.

Ohlin's (1951) and Glaser's (1964) studies have been cited to the effect that visitation reduces recidivism and that the effect is moderate to strong and robust (Hairston 1988; Holt and Miller 1972). Yet neither study separated visitation from other measures of social support. Holt and Miller (1972) provided one of the only direct empirical tests of the hypothesized visitation-recidivism link: Bivariate analyses indicated that inmates who were visited more frequently had fewer parole violations or arrests. Once again, however, there were no controls for factors that might have contributed to the identified relationship. In addition, the study sample consisted only of male inmates released from a single minimum-security institution. A similar study, which also used bivariate analyses of data on male inmates from one prison in Hawaii, notably found no effect of visitation on recidivism (Adams and Fischer 1976).

LeClair's (1978) evaluation of a home furlough program in Massachusetts, which was shown to contribute to lower rates of recidivism, is sometimes discussed in the context of studies of visitation. Certainly, the logic broadly comports with what one might expect concerning the influence of social

ties during a period of incarceration. The results, although suggestive, nonetheless stem from a study of a highly unique subpopulation of the inmate population (namely, inmates deemed to be safe enough to be allowed to temporarily go home), whose experiences are qualitatively different from what most inmates experience in prison.

More recent studies have intimated that visitation may reduce recidivism but have not directly tested this hypothesis. For example, Visher et al.'s (2004) interviews with inmates who returned to Baltimore revealed that "social connections that are maintained during the period of incarceration can be an important resource in helping released prisoners achieve positive post-release outcomes" (p. 2). Similarly, in a study of inmates released to Cleveland, Visher and Courtney (2006) found that "families were an important source of emotional and family support: after release, 78 percent of former prisoners received support from families and 80 percent lived with a relative" (p. 2). Put differently, released inmates reported that social ties were important to them, but it remains unknown whether such ties and, more pointedly, the ties that existed or emerged while the inmates were incarcerated reduced their recidivism.

In short, empirical research on the effects of inmate visitation on recidivism remains scant and is mixed, with some studies suggesting that inmates who are visited recidivate less and one study identifying no such effect. Any such assessment rests, however, on research that, to date, has suffered from such shortcomings as relying primarily on bivariate analyses, focusing only on male inmates, examining inmates released from a single and/or minimum-security prison or from special programs, investigating only one type of visitation (family), and operationalizing visitation in only one way (i.e., visited or not).

Hypotheses

Drawing on prior theory and research, we developed and tested a series of hypotheses about the effects of visitation on recidivism. The progression of the hypotheses was designed to systematically examine the effects of different dimensions of visitation (e.g., receiving any vs. no visitation, the frequency of visitation) and types of visitation (parent, spouse, significant other, child, relative, friend, or other) on both recidivism and the timing of recidivism, as well as the effect of the recency of visitation on recidivism.

Hypothesis 1: Inmates who are visited in the 12 months preceding release will be less likely to recidivate.

This hypothesis stems directly from prior theoretical and empirical research pointing to the crime-reducing influence of social ties.

Hypothesis 2: Inmates who are visited more frequently in the 12 months preceding release will be less likely to recidivate compared with inmates who are visited less frequently.

The theoretical premise here is that “more is better,” namely, it is not only the presence but also the intensity of social ties that may influence recidivism.

Hypothesis 3: Among inmates who are visited, the onset of recidivism will be delayed relative to that of inmates who are not visited.

The theoretical logic of social ties rests in part on the idea that these ties provide supports that enable released inmates to more successfully transition into society and cope with hardships. Successful transitions, such as obtaining housing in the first days and weeks after release, should help inmates avoid lapsing or falling into criminal activity. In short, both recidivism and a delay in the onset of recidivism should be associated with visitation. Identifying such an effect is important because if indeed visitation not only reduces visitation but also delays its onset, a greater window of opportunity may exist in which to take steps to provide reentry assistance that might further reduce recidivism.

Hypothesis 4: Given prior research and correctional system emphases on family and especially spousal visitation, compared with nonfamily visits (friends, others), family visitation (parents, spouses, significant others, children, and relatives) will be associated with lower rates of recidivism, and the effect will be more pronounced for spousal visits.

Family visitation is consistently highlighted in prior studies as being most salient for inmate behavior, and spousal visitation even more so (see, e.g., Adams and Fischer 1976; Hairston 1988; Holt and Miller 1972; LeClair 1978; Schafer 1994).

Hypothesis 5: Inmates who experience greater amounts of each type of visitation (parent, spouse, significant other, child, relative, friend, other) will be less likely to recidivate.

Here again, the central notion is that more is better (i.e., more visitation will reduce recidivism), regardless of the type of visitation.

Hypothesis 6: Among inmates who receive various types of visitation, the onset of recidivism will be delayed relative to inmates who are not visited, and this effect will be more pronounced (i.e., the delay will be greater) for family, especially spousal, visitation.

The logic here and the reason for investigating a timing effect parallel those for hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 7: Inmates visited in the months closer to the time of release will be less likely to recidivate than those visited in later months (i.e., in the months further from the time of release).

Here, following the lead of other researchers (e.g., Adams and Fischer 1976), we speculated that visitation in the months immediately preceding release may be more salient for inmates and also provide a more reliable source of support after release, thus contributing to a lower rate of recidivism.

Hypothesis 8: Finally, we anticipated that visitation would exert a differential effect across segments of the general inmate population.

Agnew (2005) drew attention to the need for more systematic exploration of interaction effects, and recent scholarship on prisoner reentry has taken heed of this call (e.g., Kubrin and Stewart 2006). Given the prominence of age, sex, and race and ethnicity to criminological and recidivism analyses, we focused on these dimensions as well as whether inmates committed violent offenses and inmates' histories of incarceration. Although we take seriously the need to investigate interactive effects of visitation and to draw on theory and research to guide our expectations, it must be emphasized that, to our knowledge, no studies have systematically investigated or developed theoretical foundations for precisely predicting particular effects. Thus, the following aspects of hypothesis 8 should be viewed as exploratory efforts aimed at laying the groundwork for future work on visitation and recidivism.

First, we hypothesized that visitation may exert a greater recidivism-reducing effect among younger inmates, for whom relationships may have more salience than they do for older inmates. The expectation flows in part from research showing that peer relations appear to matter more during adolescence and less so as individuals age (Warr 1998).

Second, we hypothesized that visitation may more strongly reduce recidivism among women, for whom relationships may have greater salience than they do among men (Gilligan 1982; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Umberson et al. 1996). This idea has been explored

although rarely empirically tested in a prison setting. Recently, however, Jiang and Winfree (2006) examined the social support networks of inmates in a nationally representative study of state prisons and found that women indeed typically had more social ties and support from "outside" the prison walls relative to men, with some of the analyses suggesting that the effects of such support and ties in reducing institutional misconduct were greater.

Third, we hypothesized that any recidivism-reducing effect of visitation may be greater among non-Whites, for whom relationships may have greater salience than they do among Whites (see, e.g., Giordano 2003:262). To be clear, there is no strong theoretical basis to anticipate this differential effect. Nonetheless, a large and diverse body of research suggests that social networks differ among Whites and non-Whites (Ajrouch, Antonucci, and Janevic 2001; McPherson et al. 2001; Snowden 2001; Stack 1974). Given such differences, it is possible that if social ties are more salient for non-Whites, the effects of such ties may be a stronger. It bears mention that any identification of sex or race interactions would be noteworthy given the disproportionate representation of men and non-Whites in prisons nationally (Petersilia 2003).

Fourth, we hypothesized that visitation may have a stronger effect in reducing recidivism among released inmates who were incarcerated for a violent offense. Our reasoning is that visitation may assume greater importance among such individuals because the seriousness of their crimes may sever or substantially weaken their relationships with others, thereby increasing the salience of any that remain or emerge.

Fifth, we hypothesized that visitation may be more strongly associated with a lower rate of recidivism among inmates with more extensive histories of prison commitments. The reasoning is similar to that for violent offenders: Specifically, inmates with histories of incarceration may be more likely to have severed or weakened their relationships with others. In turn, any social ties may assume greater importance after release and contribute to a relatively lower rate of recidivism compared with individuals with lesser histories of incarceration.

Data and Methods

Our goal was to advance theoretical and empirical work on prisoner reentry, in particular to contribute to efforts to understand how social ties may contribute to improved success after release from prison. To this end, we overcame many of the limitations in prior work on visitation by examining male and female inmates released from multiple types of prisons and

by investigating the relationship between recidivism and several operationalizations and types of visitation. The data for this study were obtained from the Florida Department of Corrections Offender-Based Information System (OBIS), which contains information on all movements in and out of prison, offenders' demographic characteristics, disciplinary actions, and detailed conviction and imprisonment events before and after incarceration. In addition, and unique among most correctional databases, each inmate visitation event is entered into OBIS, including the date of the visit and the relationship between the inmate and the visitor(s). All inmates released between November 2001 and March 2002 who served at least 12 months in prison were followed for a 24-month follow-up period ($N = 7,000$). The visitation data were readily available for this cohort, and the cutoff point enabled us to obtain complete recidivism data for all inmates for the entire two-year postrelease period. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics on each of the variables used in our analyses and also describes the coding. Below, we discuss each variable.

Dependent Variable

Recidivism was defined as whether released inmates were convicted of new felonies resulting in sentences to local jails, state prisons, or community supervision any time within the two years following release. The date of a new offense was used to determine if the recidivism occurred within the follow-up period and to create a time-to-recidivism measure. Table 1 shows that 31 percent of inmates released from prison reoffended within two years, a percentage roughly comparable with that of prisoners examined in Langan and Levin's (2002:3) widely cited 15-state study, which found that 36 percent of inmates were reconvicted over a two-year time span. Reconviction is most commonly used as a measure of recidivism in other studies (Villettaz, Killias, and Zoder 2006:8) and ensured that our focus attended primarily to more serious offending (e.g., Baumer 1997; Davies and Dedel 2006; Langan and Levin 2002; Maltz 1984; Smith and Akers 1993; Wilson 2005). We reran all analyses using reincarceration as the dependent variable, and the results (available on request) were largely the same.

Independent Variables

Visitation, our main independent variable, was operationalized in four ways. First, we created a measure of whether an inmate was visited one or more times within the 12 months prior to release. A second, related measure was

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics (N = 7,000)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Dependent variable		
Recidivism (reconviction), two years after release from prison (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.31	.46
Independent variables		
Visitation within 12 months of release from prison		
Whether visited (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.42	.49
Number of times visited (among all inmates)	4.28	9.57
Number of times visited (among inmates who were visited)	10.21	12.58
Visited by		
Parent (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.27	.44
Spouse (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.05	.21
Significant other (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.08	.28
Child (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.06	.23
Relative (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.22	.41
Friend (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.12	.32
Other person (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.01	.10
Number of times visited by		
Parent	2.36	7.22
Spouse	.66	4.48
Significant other	.97	5.38
Child	.26	1.74
Relative	1.14	3.72
Friend	.76	3.73
Other person	.39	.73
Recency of visitation	1.06	1.77
Control variables		
Male (0 = female, 1 = male)	.92	.27
Non-White (0 = White, 1 = non-White)	.62	.49
Age at release	34.5	9.7
Months in prison	39.9	31.2
Number of disciplinary infractions in prison	3.9	7.1
Current offense		
Violent (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.38	.48
Property (0 = no, 1 = yes) (omitted reference category)	.28	.45
Drug (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.26	.44
Other (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.08	.28
Number of prior felony convictions	4.8	2.9
Number of prior prison commitments	1.8	.87

created, namely, the number of times inmates were visited (in the 12 months prior to release). This measure represented the number of occurrences of visitation, regardless of the number of visitors in each instance. To prevent

outliers from biasing the visitation frequency effect estimates, we truncated the number of visits to 12. (The coding affected few individuals; of those inmates who were visited, 11.3 percent received 13 or more visits.)

The third measure captured the relationship between an inmate and the person visiting the inmate. The inmate-visitor relationship recorded in OBIS is specific, including whether the visitor was, for example, a grandfather or grandmother, father or mother, sibling, spouse, daughter, son, other relative, or friend. We categorized the relationships into seven broader categories to capture a diverse range of possible family and nonfamily relationships. The categories are presented in Table 1. For each category, we created two measures, whether an inmate was visited and the frequency of visitation, to parallel the general visitation measures. (Inmates can be visited by more than one person during a visitation event; thus, the percentages of the types of visitation in Table 1 exceed the total percentage of inmates visited.)

A fourth measure of visitation reflected the recency of visitation prior to an inmate's release date. The summed weighted variable, which was created using the truncated version of total visits per month, gave greater weight to visits that occurred in the months closer to the time of release. Specifically, for the month prior to release, one or more visits was coded 1, and if one or more visits occurred in that month, full weight was given (i.e., a visit score of 1 was assigned). For month 2, a visit received 11/12th weight (i.e., $1 \times [11/12]$), and so on, until for month 12, a visit received 1/12th weight (i.e., $1 \times [1/12]$). The 12 weighted values then were summed to derive the recency measure, which ranged from 0 to 6.5 and captured the extent to which visitation occurred primarily in the months closer to the day of release. (For similar approaches to assigning varying weights to events that occur later in time, see Visher, Lattimore, and Linster 1991.) Reanalyses in which the number of visits per month was introduced as a control produced similar results.

Control Variables

We introduced several control variables to increase our confidence that the estimates of the effects of our various visitation measures were unbiased. The controls included those typically used in other studies because they have been found to be significant predictors of recidivism (Anderson, Schumacker, and Anderson 1991; Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Langan and Levin 2002; Uggen 2000). For example, demographic characteristics—sex, race, and age—were included in the analytic models, along with the length of time an inmate was incarcerated. We also controlled for the type of offense for which an individual was incarcerated (e.g., violent, property,

drug, or other). Prior criminal record is also an important predictor of future offending. Here, we used two measures of an inmate's prior record. First, we included the total number of prior convictions for felony crimes. Second, we included the number of prior prison commitments, which, although serving as a measure of past criminality, also captures whether an individual has been separated from society in the past. This dimension was relevant for our purposes because it enabled us to investigate whether visitation exerted a greater effect among individuals who had previously been incarcerated.

Despite the inclusion of these variables, omitted variable bias remained a potential concern. It may be the case, for example, that visitation merely serves as a proxy for a social bond effect (e.g., inmates may have prior social bonds that cause both visitation and reduced recidivism). A few points bear mention. First, inmates frequently reside in prison for many years, and the notion that a previously existing criminogenic factor, one related to visitation, remains stable seems questionable. Certainly, self-control theory assumes a consistently stable criminogenic factor (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), but there is nothing to suggest that it influences visitation.

Perhaps the most plausible possibility is that visitation merely stems from a prior social bond. However, for the estimated effect of visitation to be substantially biased, the social bond would need to be stable and be the primary cause of visitation. Both assumptions, too, are questionable, not least because the prisoner visitation literature points to a constellation of factors that can influence visitation. On a similar front, it may be the case that visitation serves a critical role in sustaining a prior social bond, in which case it enables a social bond effect to emerge.

One reviewer wondered if perhaps the larger effect associated with visitation from spouses, which we discuss below, might be due to a particular type of selection bias, namely, being married. It bears emphasizing, however, that we identified nonspousal visitation effects, and we controlled for a number of factors, such as prior record, that arguably should address any such selection effect. The issue is an important one, regardless. We had at our disposal a measure of marital status, but for 35 percent of the cases, the data for this measure were missing. Even so, in separate analyses (available on request), we reran models that controlled for whether an inmate was married. Statistically and substantively, the effects were largely the same. The main difference was that the odds ratio for the spousal visitation effect in Table 2, model 1, changed from .543 to .461 (i.e., there was a greater reduction in the odds of recidivism among those who experienced spousal visitation compared with the odds of recidivism among those who had no spousal visitation). There was no statistically significant effect of marriage.

Table 2
Logistic Regression of Recidivism on Inmate Visitation (whether visited and number of times visited), by Type of Visitor (N = 7,000)

Variable	Model 1: Whether Visited			Model 2: Number of Times Visited		
	β	SE	Odds Ratio	β	SE	Odds Ratio
Visitor type						
Parent	-.145	.079	.865	-.009	.005	.982
Spouse	-.611 [†]	.158	.543	-.026***	.009	.933
Significant other	-.243**	.103	.785	-.009	.006	.979
Child	.205	.135	1.227	.038**	.018	1.051
Relative	-.229***	.085	.796	-.009	.009	.971
Friend	-.228**	.096	.796	-.016	.009	.968
Other	.057	.294	1.059	.021	.037	1.035
Male	.433 [†]	.109	1.541	.433 [†]	.109	1.542
Non-White	.375 [†]	.062	1.454	.383 [†]	.062	1.458
Age at release	-.041 [†]	.004	.959	.039 [†]	.004	.961
Months in prison	-.008 [†]	.001	.992	.008 [†]	.001	.992
Disciplinary infractions	.028 [†]	.004	1.028	.030 [†]	.004	1.029
Violent offense	-.433 [†]	.073	.649	.435 [†]	.073	.648
Drug offense	-.105	.074	.892	-.129	.074	.884
Other offense	-.101	.105	.904	-.131	.105	.887
Prior felony convictions	.140 [†]	.013	1.150	.139 [†]	.013	1.151
Prior prison commitments	.236 [†]	.043	1.266	.256 [†]	.043	1.277
Intercept	-.661 [†]	.171		-.848 [†]	.166	
Model χ^2 (df)		824.3 (17) [†]			791.7 (17) [†]	
Nagelkerke R ²		.156			.150	

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. [†] $p < .001$.

Two additional observations merit discussion. In our analyses, we found that the timing of visitation (e.g., visitation in the months immediately preceding release) was consequential, which runs counter to the idea that a prior bond or some other factor is the true cause of any observed reduction in recidivism. Also, and not least, the inclusion of prior offending and prison infractions as variables provided relatively strong controls for the influence of any of a range of factors that might influence both visitation and offending. Ultimately, more theoretical and empirical research on the issue will be needed to determine whether omitted variable bias substantially influences estimates of visitation in studies such as ours, so the results presented here perform should be interpreted with caution.

Analytic Strategy

We used binary logistic regression analyses given that our dependent variable consisted of a dichotomous variable (Allison 1991; DeMaris 1992; Menard 1995). Several hypotheses anticipated differential effects of visitation across several subpopulations of released prisoners. In these instances, we conducted interactional analyses to assess whether such effects were statistically significant (Jaccard 2001). For the statistically significant interactions, we provide predicted probabilities to help illustrate the underlying pattern for each of the interactions (Menard 1995). In addition, we used Cox proportional-hazards regression (survival) analyses, commonly used in recidivism studies (e.g., DeJong 1997; Joo, Ekland-Olson, and Kelly 1995; Kurlychek and Kempinen 2006; Maltz 1984; Padgett, Bales, and Blomberg 2006), to examine the effects of visitation on the time to recidivism while controlling for other variables (Hinde 1998; Blossfeld and Rohwer 2002). This semiparametric method was chosen over parametric methods because it is considered more robust and does not require specification of a “particular probability distribution to represent survival time” (Allison 1995:112). In addition, as noted by Kurlychek and Kempinen (2006), “this model is popular in the social sciences as the type of transition rates studied rarely fit the assumptions underlying full parametric models (e.g., Weibull, Sickle, Gomperts, and Makeham)” (p. 375). Parametric survival methods are, however, sometimes used in recidivism analyses (e.g., DeJong 1997; Joo et al. 1995). Therefore, we reran the analyses using a lognormal parametric method, and the results were statistically and substantively the same.

Findings

We begin by noting that, as has been found in prior studies, the majority of inmates were not visited. As inspection of Table 1 indicates, 58 percent of inmates released from Florida prisons during the study period received no visitors in the year prior to release. The most common types of visitation were from parents (27 percent), relatives (22 percent), friends (12 percent), and significant others (8 percent) or spouses (5 percent). Among all inmates, the average number of visits in the 12 months prior to release was 4.28; among inmates who were visited in the 12 months prior to release, the average number of visits was 10.21.

Turning to our first two hypotheses, we see that the results in Table 3 support the view that visitation and the amount of visitation reduce recidivism. Specifically, among inmates who were visited, the odds of recidivism were 30.7 percent lower than the odds for those who were not visited

Table 3
Logistic Regression of Recidivism on Inmate Visitation (whether
visited and number of times visited; $N = 7,000$)

Variable	Model 1: Whether Visited			Model 2: Number of Times Visited		
	β	<i>SE</i>	Odds Ratio	β	<i>SE</i>	Odds Ratio
Visitation	-.366 [†]	.059	.693	-.039 [†]	.008	.962
Male	.406 [†]	.109	1.479	.404 [†]	.108	1.498
Non-White	.373 [†]	.062	1.437	.371 [†]	.062	1.449
Age at release	-.041 [†]	.004	.959	-.040 [†]	.004	.961
Months in prison	-.008 [†]	.001	.992	-.008 [†]	.001	.992
Disciplinary infractions	.028 [†]	.004	1.028	.029 [†]	.004	1.029
Violent offense	-.440 [†]	.073	.647	-.438 [†]	.073	.645
Drug offense	-.123	.074	.887	-.121	.074	.886
Other offense	-.010	.105	.907	-.111	.105	.895
Prior felony convictions	.141 [†]	.013	1.144	.141 [†]	.013	1.151
Prior prison commitments	.237 [†]	.043	1.222	.243 [†]	.043	1.276
Intercept	-.642 [†]	.170		-.735 [†]	.167	
Model χ^2 (<i>df</i>)		804.8 (11) [†]			796.2 (11) [†]	
Nagelkerke R^2		.153			.151	

[†] $p < .001$.

(model 1). The amount of visitation was also associated with reduced recidivism: For each additional visit an inmate received, the odds of recidivism declined by 3.8 percent (model 2). Although the latter effect appears relatively small, the effects of multiple visits can accumulate into a substantial impact. For example, an inmate visited 10 times (the average among inmates who were visited) would have an odds of recidivating that would be 32.3 percent (i.e., $1 - \exp[10 \times -.039]$) lower than for an inmate who was never visited.

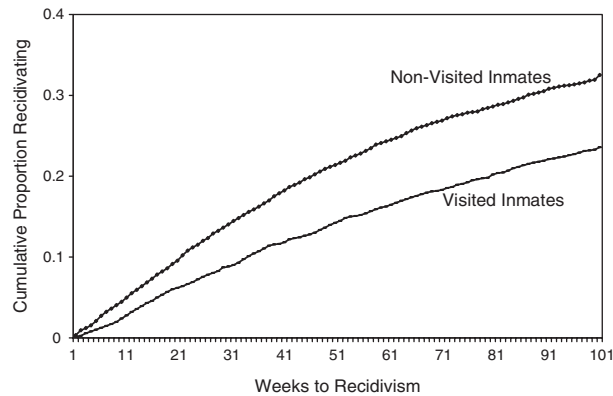
Ancillary analyses that used other codings to examine the influence of visitation all support the view that the amount of visitation is in fact consequential. The results of the analyses (available on request) bear brief mention. First, we created a measure that captured visitation across different months. Specifically, the measure ran from 0 to 12, with 0 indicating no visits, 1 indicating a visit in one month, 2 indicating a visit in at least two different months, and so on, with, ultimately, 12 indicating visitation in each of the separate 12 months prior to release. This variable was also statistically significant and negative. Each additional month visited was associated with a 4.8 percent reduction in the odds of recidivating compared with the odds of not recidivating, showing that visitation over many different,

though not necessarily continuous, months has a significant effect in reducing recidivism. Second, we created a measure built on four 3-month intervals (0 = no visits over the prior year, 1 = visited in one quarter, 2 = visited in two quarters, 3 = visited in three quarters, and 4 = visited in all four quarters). Again, the results were statistically significant in the expected direction: For each additional 3-month quarter in which visitation occurred, there was an 11.6 percent reduction in the odds of recidivating compared with the odds of not recidivating. Third, we found evidence of diminishing returns in which the initial few visits had slightly greater impacts than additional visits. To illustrate, we found evidence of nonlinearity in analyses using one, two, and three or more of one, two, three, four, or five or more visit dummy variables; in each instance, the marginal effects of additional visits were lower than for the first few visits. Collectively, these analyses serve to support the general contention that greater amounts of visitation, whether over different or continuous months or quarters, have greater effects in reducing recidivism but that the first few visits may exert a greater effect than subsequent ones.

Further support for a visitation-recidivism relationship is shown in Figure 1, which illustrates a test of the third hypothesis, namely, that visitation not only reduces recidivism but delays its onset. The figure shows the cumulative survival curves for inmates who were visited compared with those who were not, net of the controls shown in Table 1 and used in Table 3. Observe that at any given point in time, the cumulative percentage of visited inmates who recidivated was less than for nonvisited inmates. Put differently, inmates who were visited not only were less likely than those who were not visited to recidivate but also, on average, were less likely to recidivate at a later time.

Table 2 provides analyses that test our fourth and fifth hypotheses, respectively. In support of hypothesis 4, the findings from model 1 suggest that, indeed, different types of visitation—spousal, significant other, relative, and friend—were associated with reduced recidivism and that the spousal visitation effect was stronger. However, there was no evidence of an effect of parental visitation, and the effect of visitation from friends was largely the same as for nonspousal family visitation (e.g., receiving visits from significant others or relatives). The findings of model 2 suggest limited support for hypothesis 5. Indeed, only the frequency of spousal visitation was associated with reduced recidivism, and the frequency of child visitation was actually associated with an increased risk for recidivism. We anticipated that spousal visitation would exert the strongest effect, but we also anticipated that the frequency of other types of visitation would also be associated with less recidivism, and we did not expect that child visitation would increase it.

Figure 1
Cumulative Recidivism Rates of Visited Versus Nonvisited Inmates



Returning to the survival analyses, we now address the sixth hypothesis. The results in Figure 2 show that, as expected, different types of visitation were associated with both a reduction and a delay in recidivism, and the effect was most pronounced for spousal visitation. As the bottom curve indicates, at any given time, the cumulative percentage of inmates who recidivated was markedly lower for those visited by spouses compared with those visited by anyone else or no one, an effect that became more pronounced over time. However, in contrast to our hypothesis, the results suggest that the effects of nonspousal family visitation (significant others, parents, children, relatives) and nonfamily visitation (friends, others) did not appreciably differ from each other. In short, except for spousal visitation, which exerts the strongest influence on recidivism, most types of visitation were more or less comparable in the extent to which they were associated with a reduced likelihood of recidivism at any given point. In addition, in each instance, the cumulative recidivism rates of inmates who experienced visitation of any kind fell below that of inmates who experienced no type of visitation.

The seventh hypothesis was that during the 12-month period prior to release, visitation in the months immediately preceding release would exert a greater influence than visitation in the months further removed from the date of release (e.g., months 11 and 12). Table 4 presents the

Figure 2
Cumulative Recidivism Rates of Visited Versus Nonvisited Inmates, by Type of Visitor

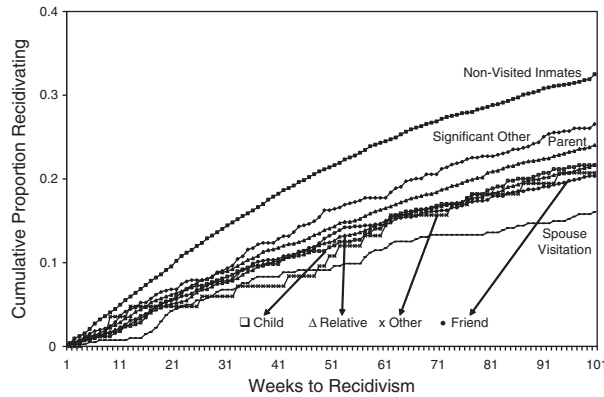


Table 4
Logistic Regression of Recidivism on the Recency of Inmate Visitation (N = 7,000)

Variable	β	SE	Odds Ratio
Recency of visits	-.084 [†]	.017	.920
Male	.403 [†]	.108	1.497
Non-White	.378 [†]	.062	1.459
Age at release	-.040 [†]	.004	.961
Months in prison	-.008 [†]	.001	.992
Disciplinary infractions	.029 [†]	.004	1.029
Violent offense	-.437 [†]	.073	.646
Drug offense	-.125	.074	.883
Other offense	-.114	.105	.892
Prior felony convictions	.140 [†]	.013	1.151
Prior prison commitments	.247 [†]	.043	1.280
Intercept	-.771 [†]	.166	
Model χ^2 (df)		790.2 (11) [†]	
Nagelkerke R^2		.150	

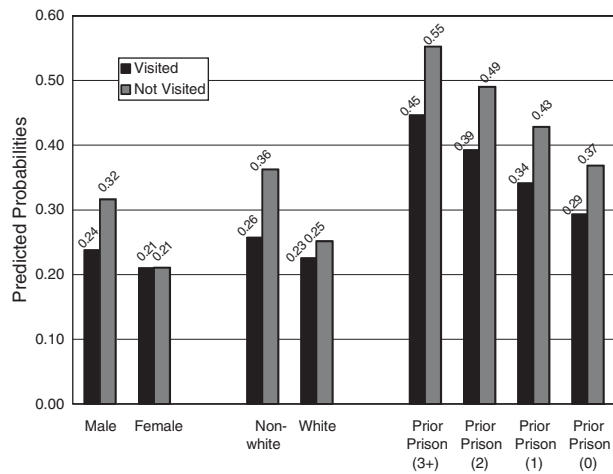
[†] $p < .001$.

Table 5
Logistic Regression of Recidivism on the Interaction of Inmate Visitation with Age, Sex, Race, Sex, Race, Violence,
and Prior Incarceration (N = 7,000)

Variable	Model 1: Age		Model 2: Sex		Model 3: Race		Model 4: Violent Offense		Model 5: Prior Prison	
	β	Odds Ratio	β	Odds Ratio	β	Odds Ratio	β	Odds Ratio	β	Odds Ratio
Visitation	-.139	0.870	-.001	0.999	-.139	0.870	-.331 [†]	0.718	-.339 [†]	0.713
Male	.403 [†]	1.496	.551 [†]	1.736	.414 [†]	1.513	.405 [†]	1.499	.406 [†]	1.501
Non-White	.372 [†]	1.450	.375 [†]	1.456	.527 [†]	1.694	.373 [†]	1.452	.373 [†]	1.452
Age at release	-.039 [†]	0.962	-.041 [†]	0.960	-.041 [†]	0.960	-.041 [†]	0.960	-.041 [†]	0.960
Months in prison	-.008 [†]	0.992	-.008 [†]	0.992	-.008 [†]	0.992	-.008 [†]	0.992	-.008 [†]	0.992
Disciplinary infractions	.029 [†]	1.029	.028 [†]	1.029	.028 [†]	1.029	.028 [†]	1.029	.028 [†]	1.029
Violent offense	-.438 [†]	0.645	-.440 [†]	0.644	-.439 [†]	0.645	-.398 [†]	0.672	-.439 [†]	0.644
Drug offense	-.123	0.884	-.120	0.887	-.122	0.885	-.122	0.885	-.123	0.884
Other offense	-.099	0.906	-.101	0.904	-.098	0.907	-.105	0.900	-.101	0.904
Prior felony convictions	.141 [†]	1.152	.141 [†]	1.151	.141 [†]	1.151	.141 [†]	1.151	.141 [†]	1.151
Prior prison commitments	.237 [†]	1.268	.239 [†]	1.270	.236 [†]	1.266	.239 [†]	1.270	.250 [†]	1.284
Age at Release × Visitation	-.007	0.993								
Male × Visitation			-.393*	0.675						
Non-White × Visitation					-.354***	0.702				
Violent Offense × Visitation							-.111	0.895		
Prior Prison × Visitation									-.028**	0.972
Intercept	-.721 [†]		-.775 [†]		-.757 [†]		-.657 [†]		-.668 [†]	
Model χ^2 (df)	806.0 (12) [†]		808.2 (12) [†]		813.8 (12) [†]		805.7 (12) [†]		805.1 (12) [†]	
Nagelkerke R ²	.153		.153		.154		.153		.153	

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. [†] $p < .001$.

Figure 3
Effects of Visitation on Recidivism by Sex, Race, and
Prior Prison Commitments



same baseline model used in the other regression analyses but this time including a measure of the recency of visitation in the year prior to release. The measure was statistically significant and indicates that visits more temporally proximate to the release date were associated with a lower likelihood of recidivating. Specifically, every unit increase in the recency scale was associated with an 8 percent reduction in the odds of recidivating. Reanalysis using the number of visits as a control produced similar results (available on request).

Finally, Table 5 provides mixed results concerning the eighth hypothesis. There was no statistically significant interaction effect of visitation and age or visitation and violent offense. However, a marginally statistically significant visitation-sex interaction surfaced, and both the visitation-race and the visitation-prior prison interactions were statistically significant. Because there is no intuitive interpretation of interaction terms, we present predicted probabilities in Figure 3, showing the differential effects of visitation on recidivism for these different segments of the released inmate population. The first set of bars shows the predicted probabilities for men compared

with women: The effect was contrary to what we hypothesized. Specifically, visitation exerted a greater effect in reducing recidivism among men, whereas it exerted no effect among women. The second set of bars indicates support for the view that visitation may result in a greater reduction in recidivism among non-Whites. In fact, for both women and Whites, visitation appeared to produce no substantial reduction in recidivism. Finally, the third set of bars suggests modest support for the idea that visitation exerts a greater influence among inmates with histories of incarceration. Although the interaction term was statistically significant (Table 5, model 5), the substantive effect was not especially large. For example, among inmates with no records of incarceration, those who were visited had a probability of recidivating 7.5 percent lower than that of those who were not visited (29.3 percent vs. 36.8 percent, respectively). Among inmates with three or more prior prison experiences, those who were visited had a probability of recidivating 10.5 percent lower than that of those who were not visited (44.7 percent vs. 55.2 percent, respectively).

Conclusion

Summary

Although several criminological theories point to social ties and supports as central factors that should reduce offending, and although correctional systems have long stressed prisoner visitation as a means by which to help inmates successfully transition back into society, few empirical studies have rigorously examined the question of whether visitation in fact is associated with lower rates of recidivism. Investigation of this question affords an opportunity not only to inform policy debates about the importance of visitation and, more generally, ways to improve prisoner reentry but also to test and develop criminological theory, including those focused on the salience of critical life events or transitions.

Using Florida prisoner data that overcome many of the limitations of prior studies—which typically have focused only on men, inmates from a single facility, a single and often indirect measure of visitation, bivariate analyses with no statistical controls, and limited (e.g., one year or less) postrelease follow-up—we tested a series of hypotheses concerning the relationship between visitation and recidivism. Briefly, we found that only 42 percent of inmates received any visitation in the year prior to release, reinforcing the notion that incarceration indeed severs individuals' ties to society. Our central overarching hypothesis was that visitation reduces

recidivism, and, save for a few exceptions, the analyses largely supported this expectation. Specifically, and consonant with the few extant empirical studies of the topic (e.g., Adams and Fischer 1976; Holt and Miller 1972; Ohlin 1951), any visitation and more frequent visitation were both associated with a lower likelihood of recidivism. Additionally, more nuanced analyses conveyed similar findings, such as the notion that visitation over many different months exerts a greater effect than visits over fewer months. Visitation was also associated with delaying the onset, or timing, of recidivism. In addition, visitation of many types, including both family and friends, was associated with reduced and delayed onset of recidivism, with spousal visitation producing a more pronounced reduction in recidivism. A notable exception was that no statistically significant association surfaced between recidivism and receiving any child visitation. Indeed, receiving more frequent child visitation was associated with an increased risk for recidivating. Visitation that occurred closer to the time of release from prison was more strongly associated with reduced recidivism than visitation that occurred further back in time. And finally, visitation exerted a stronger effect among men, non-Whites, and individuals with longer histories of incarceration.

Whether the results here generalize to other states is unknown, though they echo the findings of studies in California, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and New Jersey (Adams and Fischer 1976; Holt and Miller 1972; LeClair 1978; Ohlin 1951), and there is little a priori reason to anticipate that the findings should differ from state to state. Of some relevance, too, is the fact that the age, sex, racial and ethnic, and educational characteristics of Florida, the fourth largest state in the country (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a), are similar to those of the country as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau 2006b). In addition, Florida's incarceration rate, although higher than the national average among states, is nonetheless below that of many other states, including a number of southern states. Specifically, in 2005, Florida incarcerated 499 adult offenders for every 100,000 residents, compared with a national (state) adult incarceration rate of 435 and a southern state average of 539 (Harrison and Beck 2006:4).

Theory and Research Implications

If visitation indeed influences recidivism, the finding poses important implications for such crime theories as social bond (Hirschi 1969), social capital (Sampson and Laub 1993; Sampson et al. 1997), and general strain (Agnew 2006), which directly or indirectly place emphasis on ties to family

and community. Tests of these theories typically, although not exclusively, have focused on juvenile or young adult populations (Akers and Sellers 2004), yet the logic of the theories clearly extends to adult populations. Moreover, in each instance, important conceptual questions arise for which the study of visitation and reentry might be uniquely suited to answer. For example, if social ties constitute a type of social capital, how exactly do they serve as a support, and must they be especially strong to produce a crime-reducing effect? Given that many inmates have long histories of offending, it would seem reasonable to anticipate that intense social ties would be required to contribute to desistance, but perhaps “weak ties” are sufficient.

Turning to strain theory, we can, as the theory contemplates, expect that social supports may provide a foundation for coping with strain. Although research has not yielded consistent support for this view (see, e.g., Capowich, Mazerolle, and Piquero 2001), it is possible that the extent to which social ties serve as a coping strategy may vary depending on particular social circumstances. For released prisoners, social ties may well constitute a critical vehicle through which to reduce or manage the strains associated with the unique circumstances of reentry (Travis 2005).

Finally, but not least, consistent with the increased interest in studies of desistance, labeling processes, and life-course theories, support for an influence of social ties on recidivism would suggest that such ties may help individuals successfully negotiate difficult life transitions and events (Sampson and Laub 1993, 2005). It also would suggest that, contrary to self-control theory (Gottfredson 2006; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), offending can be influenced by social conditions and changes in perceptions of the self as “criminal” (Maruna 2001), regardless of one’s age. Here again, critical questions remain to be addressed, including that of how exactly social ties aid released inmates in the transition back into society and whether the effect is tempered by their levels of social capital or such factors as self-control.

On a more empirical level, there is a need for research that develops more nuanced measures of visitation (e.g., visitation patterns across the entire period of incarceration, visitation by criminal associates, contact vs. noncontact visitation) and of what happens during visitation (e.g., length of visit, any apparent conflict) (Schafer 1994). Such measures might help adjudicate among theories concerning the pathways (e.g., social bonds, social capital, social support, reduced strain, labeling) through which visitation may contribute to reduced recidivism. For example, were information available concerning the criminal activity of visitors, it would be possible

to test whether visitation from criminal associates actually increases rather than decreases recidivism.

In addition, despite the emphasis on family visitation, little is known about the effects of specific types of “family” visitation. Our analyses indicate that greater attention to disaggregating types of family members (e.g., parents, spouses or significant others, children, relatives) is needed. Conceivably, for example, some types of visitation may produce a greater reduction in recidivism or may even an increase in recidivism. For example, visitation by prosocial friends might reduce recidivism, but visitation by friends actively engaged in crime may increase it (Glaser 1964; Schafer 1994). In our study, we found that a greater amount of child visitation was modestly associated with increased rather than decreased recidivism. It may be that such visitation imposes greater strain on inmates by leading them to become more viscerally aware of their inability to parent their children, leading to increased offending. Future studies using more refined or additional measures, such as the nature and duration of visits, might help explain why such effects arise, if they do. It is possible, for example, that child visitation in which overt conflict is evident (e.g., a parent yelling at his or her child or vice versa) may be associated with increased recidivism.

Policy Implications

Further work is needed to determine if and how visitation reduces recidivism. In the meantime, the results of our study should be interpreted with caution. That said, if visitation—any, more, recent, family and nonfamily— influences recidivism, the clear policy implication is that correctional systems should consider ways to increase visitation and, more generally, to create and cement ties to friends, families, and communities (Hairston et al. 2004). Even if any observed visitation effect reflects strong preexisting ties to family, friends, and community, the findings support the ideas that (1) continuing the maintenance of these ties is important for reducing recidivism, and (2) developing such ties where they are not already present may also be important, perhaps even more so, for reducing recidivism. One particularly attractive feature of this implication is that conservatives and liberals alike may find it equally appealing. In addition, policymakers may find it reassuring that the public strongly supports visitation, at least when it involves family. Applegate (2001:260) found, for example, that, of 26 types of programs, services, and privileges, family visitation was second only to psychological counseling in the support it received from the public. In addition, visitation holds the potential to improve other outcomes, such as

employment and stable housing (Hairston et al. 2004), prison system order (Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005), and the lives of inmates' children (Reed and Reed 1997). Our findings suggest that many types of visitors, including both family and friends, may facilitate improved reentry outcomes.

The majority of inmates are not visited, so considerable room for improvement, and possible crime-reducing effects, exists. Although a reliable body of empirical estimates has not yet emerged, extant studies echo our finding that visitation occurs infrequently. Sykes (1958), for example, found that over a one-year time period "41 percent of the prisoners in the New Jersey State Prison had received no visits from the outside world" (p. 65). More recently, in a national survey undertaken in 1997 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, only one third of inmates reported receiving visitors in the month prior to the survey (Hairston et al. 2004:2).

In many prisons, visitation is not an easy task to achieve (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2002; Maruna and Toch 2005; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). Indeed, inmates may find it difficult to maintain any type of contact with others. Consider, for example, that the "rates at which families pay to receive collect phone calls from their imprisoned relatives are often as much as 200 times the going rates for phone calls made outside the institution" (Hairston et al. 2004:3). Visitation can be especially difficult given that inmates often reside in prisons far from where their families and friends reside. And the conditions under which visitation occur can pose a significant obstacle. Austin and Hardyman (2004) have observed, for example, that "most prison's visitation areas are makeshift areas . . . [that] are loud and crowded and the opportunity for meaningful conversations is virtually non-existent" (pp. 23-24). In examining the issue, Schafer (1994) noted more succinctly that "prison visitation is not pleasant" (p. 19).

However, many relatively low cost steps to improve visitation can be taken, which Glaser (1964:404-06) documented many years ago. Such steps include attempting to place inmates in prisons as close to their home communities as possible, encouraging community service agencies and organizations to visit inmates, ensuring that parking is available to visitors, extending visiting hours, reducing bureaucratic barriers to visitation, increasing the professionalization and cultural sensitivity of staff members who supervise or monitor visitation areas, and creating visitation rooms that are clean, comfortable, and hospitable, especially for young children (Arditti 2005; Austin and Hardyman 2004; Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2001, 2002; Christian 2005; Comfort 2003; Hairston 1988; Hairston et al. 2004; Schafer 1994; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005).

Two final policy considerations bear mention. Our analyses suggest that visitation may delay the timing of recidivism. That finding suggests that visitation can create an important window of opportunity in the months immediately following release to provide postrelease supervision and services, which in turn may further reduce the likelihood of recidivism. In addition, the analyses indicate that visitation may exert a greater influence among men and minorities. Given the disproportionate representation of men and minorities in U.S. prisons, it is at least conceivable that efforts to promote increased visitation might contribute, however modestly, to reducing such overrepresentation.

In short, the findings of this study suggest that support for policies that improve visitation may be warranted, but any such efforts should be coupled with systematic evaluations of these efforts (Farabee 2005), especially given the potential for some reentry-related efforts to have no or harmful effects on recidivism (Wilson 2007). At the same time, should a body of evidence emerge that consistently points to visitation's improving prisoner reentry across a range of dimensions, policymakers and correctional systems may want to consider developing a diverse set of policies and programs that collectively can serve to increase visitation.

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