



Investing in family ties

Reoffending and family visits to prisoners

NPC Research Insight

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Introduction

Prisoners need to maintain family ties yet little is done to ensure this happens. Consequently, close to half of prisoners lose contact with family while inside.

This creates enormous costs for society. Research shows that maintaining family ties while in prison reduces the risk of reoffending on release. Each prisoner who reoffends costs the taxpayer more than £110,000.

Helping prisoners keep in contact with family members is thus a sound investment. Steps that sustain family ties can produce extraordinary returns of over 1400%. This research insight outlines the calculation of the return on investing in family ties through supporting prison visitors' centres.

The costs of reoffending

Reoffending is horrendously expensive for the taxpayer. The average five offences committed by an ex-prisoner before conviction are estimated to cost the criminal justice system £65,000. This does not include the court costs of a conviction, estimated to be £30,500. If a prison sentence is imposed, this costs close to £38,000 a year on average.¹

The prison population is at an all-time high of 77,599 and the prison system is reaching capacity.² Statistics show reoffending is rife. Almost 60% of ex-prisoners are reconvicted within two years and over half of these are sent back to prison.³ This boosts the prison population.

Average sentences served by former inmates returning to prison are not published. NPC's calculations produce an estimated term for a reconvicted prisoner returning to prison of a

little over eight months. This represents a cost of £25,500 for the prisoner returning to prison.⁴

Combining these costs and the likelihood of returning to prison shows the average reoffender costing the taxpayer £111,300 through higher criminal justice costs.

Reoffending and family ties

Close to half (45%) of prisoners lose contact with family when in prison.⁴ A collapse in family visits might exacerbate this further in the future – family visits have fallen 40% per head in the past four years.⁵

Simple calculations illustrate the scale of the problem. Table 1 below shows the different probabilities for prisoners between maintaining family ties and being reconvicted.[†]

Table 1: Reoffending and family ties

		Reconvicted within two years	
		No	Yes
Family ties while in prison	Maintain	23%	32%
	Lose	19%	26%

^{*} This calculation draws on data from NOMS.³ Tables 7.3, 10.1 and 11.2 are used in the calculation. Details are available from the author.

[†] The figures are calculated using estimates of the percentage of prisoners who lose family contacts (45%) and the percentage who reoffend within two years (58%). For example, the bottom right quadrant is calculated as $0.45 \times 0.58 = 0.26$ (26%), and the top right is $(1 - 0.45) \times 0.58 = 0.32$ (32%). In statistical language, the figures from the calculations are the unconditional probabilities – the likelihood of both events occurring assuming they are unrelated.

Family ties and reoffending are linked. The importance of maintaining family ties is highlighted in academic research and is acknowledged in a series of government reports. Sustaining family ties makes it easier for a prisoner to reintegrate into society, and more able to get a job.

Most research on links between family ties and recidivism has been carried out in the US.⁶ Relatively little data exists for the UK. Nevertheless, the importance of links has been established in the UK and evidence from overseas provides useful insights.⁷

The strongest link was found in a study from the US in 1972 which showed a six-fold increase in reoffending when family ties were broken. This is widely quoted both by charities and in official studies but it probably presents an extreme. Most studies, though, show a marked link. The intensity of this varies, but maintaining family ties typically reduces reoffending rates considerably; a decline of 50% is not uncommon.

Initiatives to improve family ties so as to reduce reoffending aim to move prisoners from the bottom right quadrant to the top left in Table 1.⁶

Because of the links between family ties and reoffending, the figures in Table 1 are illustrative only as a baseline. Reflecting the links, true figures for the top left and bottom right quadrants would be higher. For example, the percentage of prisoners who lose family ties and go on to reoffend is more than the 26% shown in Table 1.^{*}

Correspondingly, true figures in the off-diagonal elements are lower. Losing family ties and reoffending is more common than raw data suggests, as is maintaining family ties and not reoffending.

This complicates the analysis a little. We are unable to make precise statements about the numbers of prisoners who lose contact with their family and reoffend. Nevertheless, we can base calculations on Table 1 knowing 26% to be an extremely conservative assumption about the true figure.

Table 1 also illustrates that not all prisoners who lose contact with their family reoffend. Factors contributing to reoffending are complex. That said, the importance of family ties has been established even allowing for other factors.

^{*} Of those 45% of prisoners who lose family ties, more than the average 58% go on to reoffend – producing a figure greater than 26%.

The role of visitors' centres and charities

Charities play an important supporting role in prisons and can provide the sort of pastoral care and help which reduces reoffending. One such role is facilitating family visits and contact with family members.

A visitors' centre is a facility that is located outside prisons and provides an entry point for all visitors. Basic services include the booking of prison visits and the provision of information. Some of the better resourced centres provide refreshments, emotional support, child care and counselling.

Running and maintaining prison visitors' centres is an important part of sustaining family ties. A survey of visitors' centres showed half were run by charities.⁸ Many others rely on support from charities or from volunteers.

Britain's 139 prisons house an average population of 558 each. On our conservative 26% baseline, therefore, 145 prisoners on average per prison lose family ties and reoffend.

Research suggests the average prison visitors' centre costs a little over £40,000 per annum.⁸ Visitors' centres differ according to a number of factors including funding. Lack of money is the most commonly cited constraint on the development of the centres. In turn, this reduces the number of visits. Studies highlight the positive role such centres can play in facilitating visits.⁸ The importance of visits as the basis for sustaining family ties is greater for the large proportion of prisoners who can neither read nor write.

Imagine the budget of the average visitors' centre was doubled with an extra £40,000 spent on facilities. This is equivalent to taking an average centre and putting it comfortably into the current top 20% in terms of resources.⁸ Such extra money might be spent improving booking facilities, expanding the number of spaces, or making the centre more hospitable for families bringing children. Any of these should make sustaining family ties easier. How profitable might such an investment be?

Return on investment

Recall that the average reoffender costs the taxpayer £111,300. If just one prisoner was deterred from reoffending through the extension of the visitors' centre and improved contact with his family, this would make the £40,000 investment worthwhile.

To illustrate the true potency of such an investment, we make the conservative assumption that one percentage point out of

the 26% who lose contact with family and reoffend could be helped. One percentage point represents almost six prisoners. By sustaining family ties, these six prisoners are helped to stay straight on release from prison.

Aggregate taxpayer savings from helping these six prisoners would be £621,500 net of the additional cost of £40,000 on the centre.

This represents a net return of 1454%. This is extraordinarily high compared to returns normally available from investments considered by government.

From the perspective of the criminal justice system alone there are fantastic returns to be made from boosting prisoner visits by families.

Based on these figures, doubling spending on the average visitors' centre represents an incredible bargain.

The real figure to society is likely to be even higher.^{*} It would be possible to include other factors in further calculations, but this exercise is not necessary. The quantitative exercise here suffices to make the qualitative point that investing in sustaining family ties can produce fantastically high returns.

Furthermore, we focus on the costs to the taxpayer only. The costs to the victims of crime would push the aggregate cost to society higher still. The cost savings outside of the criminal justice system of preventing reoffending are estimated to be £31,000 (this includes other taxpayer costs, such as the impact on the health service).¹

It is helpful to consider the timing of the spending and the savings. Again we stack the calculations to push the return down.

The average prisoner serves a sentence of 0.74 years based on NPC calculations using official data from NOMS.³ Therefore, we

^{*} First, as noted, research suggests that the change in offending when prisoners keep in touch with family is far greater than the small shift assumed here. Our assumption corresponds to assuming the reoffending rate falls 4%.

Second, we do not take into account future crimes committed after a second custodial sentence. Third, we do not take into account costs of enforcing non-custodial sentences.

Fourth, we consider only the impact on the taxpayer through the criminal justice system costs. We do not take into account the impact on other public bodies such as housing. This should take into account the impact felt through the prisoners' families including children.

One final consideration is that all cost items refer to old data. Indexing these for inflation would boost the net benefits a fraction further.

assume the outlay of £40,000 on the visitors' centre takes place in the first year. Reoffending figures refer to two years after release. Therefore we assume the benefits do not accrue until the third year. The total return translates into an estimated annual return of 140% a year. Just like any mortgage holder, the government incurs interest if it borrows money to invest. The cost of this borrowing is currently less than 4½%, indicating the enormous returns from borrowing to invest.

The cost of running a prison visitors' centre for a whole prison is approximately the same as the cost of locking up one prisoner for a whole year. This is absurdly imbalanced. The opportunity cost to the government – and therefore to the taxpayer – of ignoring the potential returns highlighted here is colossal.

Government failure, private opportunity

Charities run prison visitors' centres, support crèches in these centres, train prison staff on running these centres, as well as a myriad of related activities. For example, Kids VIP works to improve facilities and conditions for children's visits to prisons.

Such charities serve to sustain the family ties which can deliver such large savings to the taxpayer. Many of these charities are funded through a hodgepodge of confusing pots of money. Given the importance of this work funding should be extended and the services improved.

The analysis here highlights failures on at least two levels.

First, a government committed to reducing reoffending by 10% this decade should commit more resources to supporting prisoners maintain family ties. Rhetoric from government ministers in this area is commendable, but action has been poor.

Second, a government truly committed to efficient and effective allocation of taxpayers' money would recognise the phenomenal returns from allocating more spending to tackling the causes of reoffending.

Private funders can help in this regard. There are rich pickings to be had from expanding visitors' centres and supporting charities whose work helps prisoners keep in touch with the outside world. Simple analysis reveals financial returns from such investments which would make the commercial world green with envy and incredulous as to how they are ignored in the field of social policy.

A number of charities are active in this field. Besides charities running visitors' centres in individual prisons, several national charities work to improve the climate for family visits, such as the provision of children's play areas,

recognising the importance of these to effective rehabilitation of prisoners. Readers should refer to NPC's report on prisoners and ex-offenders for more information.⁴

Conclusion

Improving prison visits is good for the taxpayer. It represents sound investment of public money.

Current failures cost all taxpayers as well as individual prisoners and their families.

Collectively, society is failing to analyse and adequately understand problems such as prisoners and reoffending. If this was not the

case, the opportunities described here to save money would not exist; they are simply incompatible with a rational world.

As well as the opportunities for private funders of charities, this carries an important message for government. Ambitious efficiency savings are targeted to help sustain public spending increases on public services such as education and the NHS. Yet, government ignores some of the most glaring and proven inefficiencies such as the failure to take proper steps to reduce reoffending. Better funding of charities working in prisons to boost family visits is an easy step to large savings. It would also stop wasting taxpayers' money.

References

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