

Family Support: What It Means To Male Inmates

Leigh-Anna Fournelle and Staci Hofferber

Undergraduate Students: Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Keywords: family, inmates, support, incarceration

Abstract

Family support for incarcerated individuals is an important issue that receives little consideration in society even though it may be one of the greatest factors for change in the jail system for combating recidivism rates. This study investigated the attitudes of 44 male inmates regarding family support while incarcerated in a Midwestern Wisconsin jail. It was hypothesized that increased family support of inmates while incarcerated would have a positive effect on the inmates and their behavior. Survey data was analyzed using frequencies and a reliability analysis. Results indicated that family support had significant effects on inmates while incarcerated. It was also found that overall conditions of the family interactions for the individuals that are incarcerated were unsatisfactory. Based on these findings, it is important for people to recognize that incarcerated individuals benefit from support from their family and jail environment while incarcerated. Implications for practitioners and future researchers include a need for greater efforts towards awareness and education of family involvement with inmates. It would also be helpful to improve the incorporation of family support for jail systems.

We get to visit our family 20 min. only 3 times a week. Now do you think that is enough time to spend with your family? The environment we visit our family in is very disturbing and has no privacy. We can hear other family's conversations and we have to yell just to hear one another. My family has a big influence and should be able to have more visiting time. It would help time a lot more.

- (Anonymous inmate from authors' study)

According to Homer (1979) and Jorgensen (1986), incarceration causes traumatic separation leading to family estrangement, and theorists assert that the loss of a family member to prison is even more demoralizing to wives and children than a loss resulting from death (as cited in Carlson and Cervera 1991). According to Arditti (2003), the United States held the record for the highest number of incarcerated individuals, and at least ten million children in the year 2003 had a parent involved in the criminal justice system (as cited in Reed & Reed, 1998; Seymour, 2001). For the purpose of this study, family support is defined, as "the relationship between individuals where contact is frequent through in person interactions, phone calls, letters, and emotional support is an important and significant factor." The relationship must be beneficial to both parties (DeGenova & Rice, 2002). The authors researched the literature regarding family involvement with inmates and how that relationship affected the behavior of inmates. The

authors also surveyed the male inmate perspective, ages 18 and above, regarding this issue. The purpose of this study was to examine the male inmate perspectives on family support during the incarceration period.

In researching what environmental effects may have on incarcerated individuals upon release, the authors looked at the extent of family involvement during the incarceration period. Concerning family involvement in the corrections system, it is essential to utilize other researchers' findings in order to build further accurate research. Relevant literature focused on social support as an important factor for incarcerated individuals, especially when referred to as "family." The literature suggested that there was more clarity and information needed in relation to social support for incarcerated individuals. The articles researched discussed family involvement as being a large factor in rehabilitation. Therefore, the authors' rationale for using the Carlson and Cervera article was that there is little research surrounding the research question and this article had the main idea that a family thrives when they can adapt to stress with competent coping skills (Staton-Tindall, Royse, & Luekfled, 2007; Freudenberg, Daniels, Crum, Perkins, & Richie, 2005; Arditti, 2003; Carlson & Cervera, 1991).

Staton-Tindall, Royse, and Luekfled (2007) found that incarcerated women's view of social support was not dependent upon their criminal behavior but actually on the length of time they are incarcerated and away from their family. Staton-Tindall, Royse, and Luekfled concluded that, because a majority of incarcerated women may not have solid supportive relationships, steps need to be taken to better understand the difference of perception regarding social support. These steps are important because it is likely that social support is associated with negative behaviors.

Freudenberg, Daniels, Crum, Perkins, and Richie (2005) found that in adult women, peer support has a positive influence on the decision toward further drug use/re-offenses. These findings were not the same when compared to adolescent males; researchers found that the more peer support an adolescent male has, the more negative influences they have on their behaviors.

Arditti (2003) found that visitation seems to have both negative and positive effects for families. It provides an outlet for connection as well as a barrier to feelings of separation. The authors also suggested that contact visiting was essential for maintaining bonds with incarcerated individuals and their families. Contact visiting includes face-to-face and physical contact. Carlson and Cervera (1991) found that the best predictor of a successful release from prison (not re-offending) was having a stable and supportive family environment to which the inmate will return. The study found that the incarceration period is an extremely stressful experience, and the stress is best alleviated through support from significant others. Although couples in this study coped fairly well, there were signs they could have used some further assistance (as cited in Carlson & Cervera 1991).

According to the literature, social support was a major factor for incarcerated individuals regarding their success upon release. Family is the most influential type of social support. As a result, further research is needed on this topic; the incarcerated population is underrepresented in today's society. It is important to have and utilize this information in an effort to keep jails safe and decrease the number of inmates. It is important in further research to work with the inmates directly because this gives an

opportunity for inmates to voice their needs and concerns regarding family relationships and the affect it has on them during their incarceration.

Family Systems Theory, as described by Broderick and Smith (1979), describes the different subsystems that exist in the family, for example the role of mother, father, sister, brother, etc. Within the family, each of these subsystems has an effect on the other subsystems because the family is a unit of interrelated parts (as cited in DeGenova and Rice, 2002). Homeostasis is the main goal for the family in order to achieve and maintain harmony according to the Family Systems Theory (as cited in DeGenova and Rice, 2002). This study predicts that the actions of the other family members toward the incarcerated individual will have an effect on the inmate's perception of their sentence and chance of re-offending.

The purpose of this study was to examine the male inmate perspectives on family support during the incarceration period. The male population of the jail the authors' surveyed was considerably greater than the female population. It is the authors' hope that correction officers, correction program coordinators, jail administrators, social workers, and students will use the results from this study to improve the conditions in jails, to facilitate family support, and ultimately to decrease the recidivism rate. The central research question in this study was: "What is the male inmate perspective of family support during the period of incarceration"? The authors hypothesized that inmates would score higher on variables with a general family support emphasis and score lower on variables having to do with jail environmental support for visitation. We predicted these outcomes because, according to the Family Systems theory, the subsystem's actions have an effect on the entire system. Literature also found some positive evidence regarding strong social support and rehabilitation.

Method

Participants

The site of this study was at a Midwestern Wisconsin county jail. The participants included 44 male inmates ranging from 18 through 65 years of age. Of the 44 participants 17 were between the ages of 18 and 25, 12 were between the ages of 26 and 35, 12 were between the ages of 36 and 45, three were between the ages of 46 and 65, and zero were 66 or older.

Research Design

The purpose of this survey was to generalize the results of this analysis to a larger population. . This study utilized a cross-sectional design and employed purposive sampling in order to gather information from a specific set of individuals who were incarcerated. Data was collected via self-administered questionnaires because this method allowed for quick return of data. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; our study was approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

In order to collect information regarding family support and inmates, the authors designed a survey. The survey included a cover letter with an implied consent statement, a description of the study, definitions of any terms not commonly known, potential risks

and benefits, estimated time commitment, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation information, contact information of the research team and the supervisor, and instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of one demographic question relating to age. Participants were then given ten closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were based on literature and theory regarding what factors relate to attitudes regarding family support and inmates.

The survey instrument had both face validity and content validity. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey were literature inspired, the authors felt the questions clearly connected to the larger issue of family support and inmates, and the authors feel this demonstrates adequate face validity. The questions addressed a broad range of issues regarding family support and inmates and demonstrate adequate content validity. To ensure the survey was understandable, it was piloted to five undergraduate students. Feedback indicated that the survey was clear and ready for distribution.

Procedure

The authors initially contacted the Jail Administrator to ask for permission to collect data but were referred to a second Sergeant contact who acted as the liaison throughout the research process. The Sergeant at the jail asked inmates if they would like to voluntarily participate in the survey prior to the authors' arrival and then gathered willing participants together at the predetermined date and time. The authors introduced themselves and read the consent form, emphasizing that inmates' participation was not mandatory and that they could withdraw at any time. The authors offered reading assistance when needed, discussed the importance of their participation, and thanked them for their time. The authors instructed participants to detach and keep the informed consent information and answer the survey. When finished, participants were instructed to hand in their surveys, pens, and staples to ensure safety and to cooperate with the jail's regulations. The authors then thanked participants again for their time and reminded them that they could withdraw at anytime. Completed surveys were stored in a secure location until data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

The first question on the survey was a demographic variable: age. The data was first cleaned and then coded using acronyms for each variable as given in the following figure:

REL	to determine if the inmate's relationship with his family was important during his incarceration period
TIM	if the amount of time spent each week with the inmate's family while incarcerated was satisfactory
CON	if the area provided for visitation was adequate for the inmate's family and his needs
PVY	if family visits were in a confidential setting

BEV	if being able to interact with his family while incarcerated improved his behavior
TRT	if he and his family were treated respectfully during visiting opportunities
EMN	if after interacting with his family he was more hopeful
AJS	if he appreciated the assistance offered by the jail staff to help him and his family cope with the separation
NUM	if the number of family members he gets to see at any one time was acceptable
QUA	and if the time he spent with his family was found to be worthwhile quality time

Figure 1. Variable abbreviations and definitions

The individual was used as our level of analysis. Data analysis included a frequency analysis and a reliability analysis.

Results

Each variable was subjected to frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated that there was no missing data. A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the ten questions were a reliable index to measure the major concept: family support during the period of incarceration. A Chronbach's Alpha value of .66 indicated that the survey questions were a reliable measure of male inmates' perspectives of family support during the period of incarceration. We received qualitative comments at the end of a number of our surveys. These comments will be analyzed and themes determined in our Discussion section.

Table 1

Inmate Responses by Percentage

Information	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Inmate's relationship with his family during his incarceration period	2.3%	4.5%	4.5%	15.9%	72.7%
The amount of time spent each week with the inmate's family while incarcerated was satisfactory	36.4%	20.5%	15.9%	15.9%	11.4%
The area provided for visitation was adequate for the inmate's family and his needs	22.7%	20.5%	31.8%	20.5%	4.5%
Family visits were in a confidential	18.2%	22.7%	29.5%	25.0%	4.5%

setting					
Being able to interact with his family while incarcerated improved his behavior	4.5%	0.0%	6.8%	25.0%	63.6%
He and his family were treated respectfully during visiting opportunities	2.3%	2.3%	27.3%	34.1%	34.1%
After interacting with his family he was more hopeful	0.0%	2.3%	13.6%	31.8%	52.3%
He appreciated the assistance offered by the jail staff to help him and his family cope with the separation	9.1%	15.9%	38.6%	27.3%	9.1%
The number of family members he gets to see at any one time was acceptable	20.5%	31.8%	15.9%	18.2%	13.6%
The time he spent with his family was found to be worthwhile quality time	2.3%	11.4%	15.9%	22.7%	47.7%

Discussion

Overall, results supported the hypothesis that inmates would report higher/ positive statements regarding family support variables and report lower/ negative statements towards variables having to do with jail environmental support for visitation.. This could be the result of a variety of factors such as funding, space in facility, and staff knowledge and training. The authors will first discuss each dependent variable in terms of how the results either agreed or disagreed with the literature and/ theoretical framework and then address limitations to the study, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and concluding remarks.

Results showed that more respondents agreed than disagreed that their relationship with their family was important to them during their incarceration period; this supported literature indicating that a solid family relationship is the best predictor of successful release from prison (Carlson & Cervera, 1991).

A majority of respondents disagreed that the amount of time spent each week with their family while incarcerated was satisfactory. This correlated with literature that found that lack of physical contact, lack of privacy, long waits, short visits, poor environmental conditions, and disrespectful treatment by jail staff contributed to the small number and low quality of visitations (Arditti, 2003). Mixed support was shown regarding the area provided for visitation meeting the inmates' needs. The Literature indicated that the environment provided for visitation was not adequate. The authors found that the majority of the inmates surveyed were satisfied with the conditions the visitations were held in. Researchers within the literature found that the area was not conducive for physical touching of the inmate and that privacy was not up to standards of the family and inmate (Arditti, 2003).

This mixed support may be due to the language used in the question, particularly regarding the word “adequate.” The authors feel that some additional help with the definition of the words may have been needed. These conclusions were made after observing the inmates during the survey and communicating with jail staff. Mixed support was also shown regarding the visits being in a confidential setting, and again literature found that the family and inmates felt discomfort with the privacy of the setting (Arditti, 2003). This mixed support may have been due to the language used in the question, particularly regarding the words “confidential setting” and the understanding of their meaning. A majority of our respondents agreed that being able to interact with their family while incarcerated improved their behavior, which was supported in the literature (Staton-Tindall, Royse, & Luekfeld, 2007). Interestingly, results showed that more respondents agreed that they and their family were treated respectfully during visits. This finding was not in agreement with literature, which indicated that participants felt as though they were not treated respectfully while in the facility. A majority of respondents agreed that, after interacting with their family, they were more hopeful. This finding support literature as well (Carlson & Cervera, 1991).

There was mixed support regarding the assistance offered by the jail staff to help the inmates and their families cope with the separation 25% either strongly disagreed or disagreed while 36% strongly agreed or agreed. The literature found that the relationship between the family and inmate was essential to their success (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). This mixed support may have been due to the language used in the question particularly regarding the word “assistance” and the understanding of its meaning. The authors felt as though they could have given a definition and example as to what “assistance” from the staff they were referring to that would have given the inmates an idea of how to better express their answers. A majority of respondents disagreed that the number of family members they get to see at any one time is acceptable. Lastly, a majority of the respondents agreed that the time spent with their family was worthwhile, quality time. This was supported in the literature which found that 18% of potential visitors did not want to visit at all because the visiting conditions and the lack of actual physical contact decreased the quality of the visits too much (Arditti, 2003).

Qualitative comments targeted visitation time and the amount of family members allowed, age limitations of visitors, and other special requests. Regarding amount of time allotted for visitation, inmates expressed the need for extended time - especially involving family members that had to travel great distances in order to visit. The number of family members allowed on the inmates list was reported to be too few. The inmates also stated that the age limit for visitors (12 years of age) sometimes prohibited them from seeing their own children. A few other requests included internet conferences with family members who are overseas fighting in Iraq and for visitors unable to travel for visitations.

Limitations

A small sample size inhibits the authors’ ability to generalize to the larger population of male inmates in county jails across the country. Another limitation was the authors’ inability to randomly select participants due to the limited number of eligible participants. Other limitations of this study were due to the location of the jail, being that it is in a small rural county in Wisconsin.

Implications for Practitioners

Results showed that there is a need to inform correction officers, correction program coordinators, jail administrators, social workers, the justice system, and students about family support and what it means to male inmates. Practitioners should be aware of the positive effects of family visitation and the likelihood that positive family support both in and out of jail could potentially lead to lower rates of recidivism. Practitioners can learn about these issues via conferences, seminars, educational programs, university classes. Group demonstrations with jail staff that allow for hands on learning regarding inmate care and create a conducive atmosphere for family interactions. Education will support the inmates' relationship with their families and improve behavior while incarcerated. The authors also recommend specific training regarding family support and its effect on the inmate.

Implications for Future Research

The authors recommend that the next step of research use a larger and more random sample in order to generalize to the larger population. In addition, it would be beneficial to compare male inmates with female inmates in order to see differences that may exist between genders. If differences are found, this might imply different approaches to the issue would be needed. Given that this population is vulnerable and inaccessible, research would greatly benefit from a qualitative study that would allow in-depth, specialized information allowing the inmates to expand on their answers giving them a stronger voice. If this study were to be replicated, the authors suggest rewording or giving examples of and better defining words found in *CON*, *PVY*, and *AJS*.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, the authors hope that correction officers, correction program coordinators, jail administrators, the justice system, social workers, and students will recognize the need for family support and the need for jail environmental support regarding visitation. This is an issue that both inmates and literature indicate needs to be improved, studied, and addressed. In conclusion, the authors believe one of the participants of this study said it best:

Without family support majority of the hope one has fades over time. Family also does the time with you and sometimes it is harder for them even though there (sic) not behind the bars. I believe there should be more programs/ interactions with family/community in order to successfully reintegrate out.

- (Anonymous inmate)

References

- Arditti, J. A. (2003). Locked doors and glass walls: Family visiting at a local jail. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 8, 115-138.
- Babbie, E. (1990). *Survey research methods*. (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

- Broderick, C., & Smith, J. (1979). *The contemporary theories about the family* (vol.2, pp.112-129). New York: Free Press
- Carlson, B. E., & Cervera, N. J. (1991). Incarceration, coping, and support. *National Association of Social Workers*, 36(4), 279-285.
- DeGenova, M.K., Rice, F.P. (2002). *Intimate relationships, marriages, & families* (5th ed., text rev.). Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Freudenberg, N., Daniels, J., Crum, M., Perkins, T., & Richie, B.E. (2005). Coming home from jail: The social and health consequences of community reentry for women, male adolescents, and their families and communities. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95, 1725-1736.
- Homer, E. (1979). Inmate-family ties: Desirable but difficult. *Federal Probation*, 43, 47-52.
- Jorgenson, J.F., Hernandez, S.H., & Warren, R.C. (1986). Addressing the social needs for families of prisoners: A tool for inmate rehabilitation. *Federal Probation*, 50, 47-52.
- Reed, D. F., & Reed, E. L. (1998). Children of incarcerated parents. *Social Justice*, 24, 152-169.
- Seymour, C. (2001). *Children with parents in prison: Child welfare policy, program, and practice issues*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Staton-Tindall, M., Royse, D., & Luekfeld, C. (2007). Substance use criminality and social support: An exploratory analysis with incarcerated women. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 33, 237-243.