

The Family AND RECIDIVISM



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Incarcerated men and women who maintain contact with supportive family members are more likely to succeed after their release. Although corrections practitioners and policymakers often understand the positive role families can play, they may not know how to involve the inmate's loved ones as a resource within a correctional setting. Research on people returning from prison shows that family members can be valuable sources of support during incarceration and after release. For example, prison inmates who had more contact with their families and who reported positive relationships overall are less likely to be re-incarcerated (Martinez & Christian, 2009). Families can motivate formerly incarcerated relatives to seek or continue drug treatment or mental health care, and they most frequently provide housing for newly released family members.

To date, most of the research and programming that discusses the use of family resources to aid reentry has focused on prisons. Because jails are substantially different, it is not clear which policies and practices can be applied successfully. To determine the effectiveness of family-support strategies for people in jail, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) launched the Close to Home project, which provided training and technical assistance to two jails in Maryland and one jail in Wisconsin.

The project’s name, Close to Home, reflects that jails are often located geographically close to the family and friends of inmates, and thus they can easily stay in contact with their families and friends. With funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Vera initiated a pilot study of the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT) in the three jails and provided complementary communication techniques intended to help the inmates plan for their return to society. It was developed with support from the National Institute of Corrections and in partnership with Safer Foundation and the Department of Corrections of Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and Oklahoma.

Relational Inquiry Tool

The staff of Vera’s Family Justice Program created RIT to help corrections staff identify the family resources of their inmates. (*Note:* The Family Justice Program interprets “family” broadly to include immediate, extended, and elected family members, such as romantic partners, friends, neighbors, and clergy.) RIT is a series of eight questions designed to introduce inmates to the idea of involving supportive family members as a resource. In particular, it was developed for case management and reentry planning, and as a complement to standard corrections risk and needs assessments. Case managers use the information from the eight questions to connect with family members who

Table 1. Characteristics of Jails Participating in the Close to Home Project.

Facility	Location	Capacity	Average Daily Population	Category
Green Lake County Correctional Facility, Green Lake, Wisconsin	Rural	108	66	Small (1–49 beds)
Montgomery County Pre-Release Center, Rockville, Maryland	Urban	177	170	Medium (50–249 beds)
Montgomery County Correctional Facility, Boyds, Maryland	Urban	1,028	760	Large (250+ beds)

could help them meet some of the inmate’s reentry needs. Those with family-based reentry resources may require fewer social service referrals. Moreover, conversations spurred by RIT could build rapport between staff and inmates. The aim was to improve long-term outcomes for former inmates, their families, and their communities.

Close to Home Project

Close to Home, launched in October 2009 and concluded in April 2011, proceeded along two tracks:

1. Personnel in three jails (two in Maryland and one in Wisconsin) were trained by Vera to provide the jail version of RIT to their inmates.
2. During RIT training, Vera staff conducted qualitative and quantitative research to gauge inmate and staff attitudes toward RIT.

Research

Vera staff had two goals for their research. The first goal was to assess RIT’s utility in facilities of varying size and location. The partnering jails were the Montgomery County Correctional Facility (MCCF) and the Montgomery County Pre-Release Center (Pre-Release Center) in Maryland, and the Green Lake County Correctional Facility (GLCCF) in Wisconsin. The three facilities differed in terms of size and setting (see Table 1).

The second research goal was to gather information about the inmates’ families and other sources of social support, their experience maintaining contact with family members while in jail, their thoughts about returning to the community, and the impact of their incarceration on loved ones. Vera staff conducted surveys with incarcerated men and women and gathered more in-depth information during interviews. Family members were surveyed with similar questions to learn about family members’ perspectives and opinions.

Implementation

Vera trained participating jail staff to use RIT to query incarcerated people about their strengths, challenges, and the supportive people in their lives. Jail staff were also trained on the benefits of family support for inmates, how to introduce the tool, and ways to follow up on the information that participants shared.

Before implementing the tool at each site, Vera held work group meetings of staff ranging from case managers to parole officers to identify policies and practices that could be more supportive of incarcerated people’s relationships. Vera staff gathered information about the utility of RIT by conducting interviews of randomly selected inmates who completed RIT. They also surveyed and interviewed jail personnel about the implementation and use of RIT.

Project Participants

MCCF was the largest jail that participated in the Close to Home project. Located in an urban Maryland county less than 20 miles outside Washington, D.C., it houses men and women awaiting trial and those who are serving sentences of up to 18 months. Ninety-five percent of people in the jurisdiction’s facilities are from the county and are not transferred to a State prison. People of color are overrepresented, and most individuals are under maximum-security supervision.

MCCF has created an environment that emphasizes what Warden Robert Green calls “reentry for all.” This ambitious goal signals a commitment to prepare everyone at the facility for reentry, even though some inmates will be transferred from MCCF to State or Federal prisons. MCCF provides educational and vocational opportunities, as well as programming and treatment for mental health and substance use. In addition, MCCF has a dedicated reentry case manager. Inmates who expect to be released within three months can voluntarily participate in case management services to prepare for reentry.

Like MCCF, the Pre-Release Center is located in an urban setting. People incarcerated at the 171-bed facility are scheduled for release within 12 months. The average length of stay is between three and five months, and most of the inmates return to the nearby community.

The environment at the Pre-Release Center is more like a residential step-down program than a jail. The Pre-Release Center provides a continuum of programming, has an open campus, and allows contact visits. Visiting is offered seven days a week, and as individuals achieve privileges, they can have unlimited visits. Case managers typically have caseloads of 18 to 25 men or women, allowing them to meet with inmates as needed. Families are included in case planning and can be trained as “sponsors.”

Table 2. Comparing Results from Vera’s Research in Jails and Prisons.

“Which people do you plan to rely on when you return to the community?”	Respondents in Jails	Respondents in Prisons
Family	82.1%	92%
Friends	73.8%	66%

GLCCF was the smallest jail in the Close to Home project. The jail is located in a small, rural county in east-central Wisconsin with a population of about 19,000. GLCCF has an average daily population of 60, and the majority of incarcerated individuals are Caucasian. During the Close to Home project, the jail moved from a 40-plus-bed, linear-style courthouse jail to a state-of-the-art facility with a 108-bed capacity. At the former facility, staff functioned merely as custodians; the education, mental-health, and substance-use needs of incarcerated men and women were not addressed. The sheriff and corrections administration used the change of facilities as an occasion to change the culture.

Findings

As noted earlier, information was gathered from the inmates through surveys and interviews, whereas information about families and staff came from surveys alone. The following three sections describe findings that pertain to each of these groups. The final section discusses the findings related to the implementation of RIT and corresponding training.

Inmate Responses. Among the inmates surveyed, 84 percent reported that their families were supportive during their incarceration. Most inmates planned to rely on their family (82%) and friends (74%) to help them meet their needs, with a much smaller percentage (40%) planning to rely on services from government agencies or non-profit organizations. In comparing the findings to similar project work with prison facilities, Vera staff found that a greater percentage of

people in jail than in prison reported that they rely on friends (diZerega & Agudelo, 2011).

Sixty-seven percent of incarcerated survey respondents were parents. Almost all of their children (97%) lived with a family member, and 66 percent of those children were living with their other parent. Eighty percent of respondents in jail reported having visitors, and 40 percent said they had a visit at least once a month. These visitation rates were higher than what Vera found in similar surveys of people in prison (diZerega & Agudelo, 2011). Among people incarcerated for up to two years, those in prison were visited an average of 9.5 times a year, whereas those in jail received an average of 16 visits a year (diZerega & Agudelo, 2011). Respondents who reported having close relationships with their mothers, fathers, and significant others also had higher numbers of visits. Table 2 shows a comparison of the results from Vera’s research in jails and prisons.

Vera also found that 59 percent of men and women inmates welcomed the opportunity to discuss their families with jail staff. This noteworthy finding runs counter to a common perception among corrections personnel that inmates are unwilling to discuss personal matters with them.

Family Responses. The majority of family members (85%) reported visiting at least once a week. Visiting family members listed numerous barriers to staying in contact with their loved one, including distance (29%); costs—such as gas, tolls, and for some, renting a car—(24%); and facility rules (23%). Family members drove an average of 30 miles each way to visit and also reported the

cost of phone calls as a significant barrier to communication (39%).

While a large majority of visiting family members reported that staff welcomed them when they visited (78%), almost as many said they did not receive any information about their loved one from staff (76%), and some said staff did not reach out to family members with concerns or questions they had about the incarcerated family member (68%).

Staff Responses. Most personnel (99%) said that families are an important resource for reentry, and that families can help find stable housing and employment, improve drug treatment outcomes, and reduce recidivism. However, only 64 percent of staff reported involving family members in case management or reentry planning, and 58 percent reported that families were involved in their facility's programming.

Facility Responses to RIT Project

The three facilities participating in Close to Home had different responses to RIT project. These responses stemmed from administrative challenges at the time of implementation, concurrent programming that complemented RIT, and the existence or implementation of a more family-focused culture at the facility. The two sites in Maryland chose case managers to pilot RIT. In Wisconsin, corrections officers were trained to administer RIT. Unexpectedly, the corrections officers—not case managers—had the most success integrating RIT into their standard case flow. Staff unanimously reported that RIT gave them a better understanding of the inmates at GLCCF. Further, 93 percent of staff reported that they would recommend RIT to other jail professionals. The inmates interviewed at GLCCF felt their experience completing RIT with corrections officers was beneficial. Because of the overwhelmingly positive response to the project, correctional officers at GLCCF will con-

tinue to use RIT with inmates who are held for more than two weeks.

Practitioners and policymakers who want to involve inmates' families in their programs should note that GLCCF leadership consistently expressed support for a family-focused approach and envisioned corrections staff as role models. Lt. Joel Gerth says this about RIT at GLCCF:

At GLCCF, RIT was originally administered by mental health staff. The enthusiasm and buy-in staff displayed during Vera's training, as well as the introduction of a new avenue of communication between staff and the men and women incarcerated in the facility, were key factors in the decision to shift this responsibility away from mental health practitioners. Vera's training and technical assistance helped staff feel confident in discussing these topics with incarcerated individuals and allowed staff to see positive changes in the incarcerated individuals they work with—a departure from the usual atmosphere of a correctional facility.... The more they understand why they do the job and the impact they are capable of having on another person's life, the greater the impact on morale.

Stefan LoBuglio, Chief of Pre-release and Reentry at Montgomery County's Pre-Release Center, believes wholeheartedly in a family-focused approach. "The commitment to work with families leads to an institutional culture that promotes respect and drives the rehabilitative focus of a facility," says LoBuglio. "The respect we show family members leads to cooperation and compliance with program rules."

The positive perception of family at the Pre-Release Center creates a markedly different environment from traditional correctional settings because the policies and procedures in place foster a family-oriented

environment that emphasizes people's strengths. The inmates at the Pre-Release Center welcomed RIT because it helped them create lists of potential visitors and reflect on people who had been supportive as well as those who are not invested in their success or may not influence them in a positive way.

In addition, RIT program revealed a need for corrections personnel to build rapport with residents. However, because of various constraints on the facility, the case managers were assigned to pilot RIT. Though corrections staff were trained by Vera on the value of integrating family information into their work, they have not yet administered RIT.

The size of MCCF made implementation of RIT more difficult than in the smaller facilities. Because of fiscal constraints, MCCF case managers were working on multiple housing units with caseloads of more than 100 people. These large caseloads hindered their ability to implement RIT effectively. Case managers reported feeling overwhelmed, resisted additional work (such as RIT), and often did not follow the recommended directions for administering the tool. For example, Vera staff trained case managers to use a script that explained the purpose of RIT and described the importance of family in reentry planning. During interviews, some inmates who had completed RIT told Vera staff that certain case managers rushed through the questions, did not explain how information about their families would be used, and complained about being forced to use the tool.

When MCCF staff administered RIT according to Vera's guidelines, incarcerated people responded positively. For example, a man motivated by his young daughter to deal with his drug addiction told researchers that completing RIT "helped pick me up and change my attitude," adding that the conversation changed his perception of his case manager and perhaps her perception of him.

He noted that after the conversation, she completed paperwork to transfer him to a unit where he could participate in drug treatment and return to the community—and his daughter—sooner.

Given the challenges at MCCF, it is notable that the reentry case manager, Wendy Miller-Cochran, chose to continue using RIT after the Close to Home project concluded. She says:

The Relational Inquiry Tool is a welcome addition to the reentry social work assessment procedures at MCCF, especially since family involvement complements the professional and community services available to individuals returning home. Family relationships can be the most powerful resource available to men and women in jail, and this tool enables me to explore family relationships

and identify other supportive people in the client's life. RIT allows me to assess the level of support available to the client, and, if appropriate, seek to involve the support person [or people] as part of an individual's reentry planning.

Conclusion

The overall results from this project suggest that inmates in jails, like those in prisons, rely on family members to support them during their incarceration, and also as they reenter the community. Because thousands of people cycle in and out of jail every year, it may be possible to reduce these numbers by testing and implementing ways for families to help reduce the negative impact of short-term incarceration on their loved ones and to help them reenter society successfully.

Moreover, it reveals that, at least in some jails, corrections personnel as well as case managers can be assigned to help incarcerated people connect with social supports. However, to access this potential, a shift in organizational culture toward a family-focused orientation may need to occur, as evidenced by the varying degrees of RIT acceptance in the three jail facilities. More work is needed to determine the most effective strategies for implementing RIT and whether proper implementation will yield the desired outcomes of positive behavioral change, a reduction in disciplinary infractions in facilities, and lower recidivism rates. The present results suggest, however, that jails are indeed a promising arena for developing family-focused reentry planning. ■

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Additional Resources

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