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Intermediate outcomes of family and intimate relationship interventions: a rapid evidence assessment

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This report summarises the findings from a rapid evidence assessment (REA) examining how interventions targeting offenders' family and intimate relationships can have an impact on reoffending through achievement of intermediate outcomes.¹ The REA was the first stage in a wider project to develop a framework for outcome measurement which can be adopted by organisations that deliver family and intimate relationship interventions to offenders.

Key points

- The importance of family is well-established both in terms of the creation of social bonds as key to desistance and family support as material and emotional help in the transition from custody to community.
- 29 studies evaluating 26 family interventions for offenders were identified. These included parenting education, relationship counselling, family education, home leave, prison visits, family support services, and mother and baby units. The quality of evidence was fairly limited.
- Many interventions focused on improving or maintaining pre-existing relationships with partners and/or children whilst the offender was incarcerated in order to disrupt social ties as little as possible.
- A wide range of intermediate outcomes were identified, including improved communication and problem solving skills and reduced levels of substance misuse. The skills learnt may be useful for addressing a range of resettlement needs that contribute to reducing reoffending.
- There was some evidence that interventions targeting family and intimate relationships could help towards reducing reoffending, although this evidence was mainly in relation to family visits and home leave.
- It is recommended that consultation is carried out with providers of services offering offender family and relationship interventions to better understand the outcomes they aim to achieve and how best to measure these.

¹ The full report is available on request from national.research@noms.gsi.gov.uk

Context

There are high levels of family disadvantage amongst offenders compared to the general population, and offenders' families face emotional and financial pressures as family relationships can be disrupted by prison (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). In addition, poor visitor facilities in prison and lack of routine information about prisoners' families can militate against maintaining family ties whilst incarcerated (Home Office, 2006).

Strong family relationships are considered crucial to desistance.² Investing in family relationships (including parenthood) in adulthood, has been associated with reduced criminal behaviour (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Farrall, 2004). Families can provide emotional care and practical and financial support when offenders return to the community and can help motivate offenders to make positive changes in their lives (McNeil and Weaver, 2010; Mills and Codd, 2008). Offenders value the support they receive from their family. Reductions in reoffending have been reported for those who maintain family contact during imprisonment (May *et al*, 2008; Williams *et al*, 2012).

This rapid evidence assessment (REA) aimed to identify potential intermediate outcomes achieved by interventions targeting offenders' family and intimate relationships, and sought evidence of their impact on reoffending. Intermediate outcomes in this context are those that may be linked to reductions in reoffending or desistance from crime. Demonstrating effectiveness (in other ways than reconviction analysis), such as through robust evidence of achievement of outcomes related to reduced reoffending, can help providers ensure they are focusing resources in the right areas. Additionally, it can give commissioners confidence that services delivered as part of a package of interventions are contributing to reducing reoffending.

Approach

The REA is a quick, structured and transparent method to review what is already known about a narrowly defined policy or research issue (Davies, 2003). It is based on the principles of a systematic

review, but with greater exclusion criteria, usually due to time constraints.

Key search terms for interventions with family and intimate partners were used to search a range of bibliometric databases, criminal justice journals, government websites and websites of relevant charities for qualitative and quantitative outcome focused studies published since 1992 in the English language. Although qualitative studies cannot be used to demonstrate impact, they were included as it was expected that evidence would be limited, and they could provide further information about the types of intermediate outcomes that could be examined empirically.

Data were extracted in a consistent, structured manner. Information was recorded on aims, content, dosage, implementation details, participants, and the theory of change on which the intervention was based. Methodological details on sampling, controls and points in time outcomes were measured, and statistical validity data (where appropriate) were also collected. Additional details on how intermediate outcomes were operationalised and measured were extracted from source material.

Studies were reviewed where possible using an adapted scientific methods scale (SMS) and agreed assessment criteria for qualitative studies (Sherman *et al*, 1997; Harper and Chitty, 2005; Spencer *et al.*, 2003).³

Results

29 studies that met the inclusion criteria were identified, focusing on 26 different family interventions (see Table 1). The majority of interventions were parenting interventions or family education services. General findings regarding the evaluations were as follows:

- Evidence from high quality studies was fairly limited. Only eight studies were scalable on the SMS, with five including pre and post test

³ Level 1: Correlation between a crime prevention program and a measure of crime or crime risk factors at a single point in time. Level 2: Temporal sequence between the program and the crime or risk outcome clearly observed, or the presence of a comparison group without demonstrated comparability to the treatment group. Level 3: A comparison between two or more comparable units of analysis, one with and one without the program. Level 4: Comparison between multiple units with and without the program, controlling for other factors or using comparison units that evidence only minor differences. Level 5: Random assignment and analysis of comparable units to program and comparison groups.

² See 'Transforming Rehabilitation. A summary of evidence on reducing reoffending', Ministry of Justice, 2013.

elements with no comparison group (level 2) and three with unmatched comparison groups (level three).

- Most of the studies were based on very small samples.
- Few studies looked beyond prison in examining effects; therefore evidence on applicability to community settings is limited.
- Few studies sought the views of the families about offenders' self-reported changes in attitude and behaviour.
- The majority of studies were from the UK (13) or the US (nine). Studies from the US and other countries may not be generalisable due to differences in practice, demographics and culture.
- Interventions in the US tended to be based on well-established and validated models. In the UK this did not appear to be the case, as best practice for offender family programmes is less well established.
- Most evaluations were based on single-establishment programmes. Some US studies sought to repeat programme evaluations.
- The majority of UK studies were qualitative service evaluations focused on evaluating implementation and throughput rather than impact. They did however collect feedback on perceptions of impact from service users.

were noted in the higher quality studies. See appendix A for a list of studies and references.

Parenting programmes aimed to improve parenting practice and thus maintain or re-establish what could often be 'broken' or disrupted family relationships. Some studies reported that participation in parenting programmes was associated with enhanced parenting knowledge and skills, improved parental satisfaction, improved communication skills and increased self-esteem.

Interventions focused on the relationships with the child involved some interactive element of contact between the offender and child in order to apply learning from parenting education. Some studies reported an association with developing a more positive relationship with children, and/or improved prison behaviour.

The importance of sustaining a stable partner relationship to enable desistance from crime has been well established. Some studies reported that interventions aimed at strengthening these relationships were associated with a positive impact on confidence in and dedication to partner relationships, improved communication, and reduced levels of negative interactions in prison.

The need for a holistic approach towards resettlement is well established. Progress in one area, such as substance misuse, can affect other areas of life such as family functioning, and contribute to reductions in reoffending. One level three study evaluated a family support intervention focused on offenders with substance misuse problems. It found reductions in substance misuse for participants, as well as perceptions of increased emotional and material support in social relationships.

Table 1. Types and numbers of family/relationship interventions (and SMS levels)

Parenting intervention (two level 3, three level 2)	8
Partner/relationship intervention (one level 2)	2
Family education (one level 2)	5
Resettlement service (one level 3)	3
Family support service (none scalable)	3
Mother and baby unit (none scalable)	2
Temporary home leave from custody (secondary data analysis)	1
Family visits in custody (both secondary data analysis)	2

Intermediate outcomes

A range of intermediate outcomes were found across the interventions. Those mentioned below

Reoffending

Evidence for links with reoffending mainly came from studies examining family visits or home leave. Secondary data analysis of offenders receiving visits in the UK (May *et al.* 2008) and the US (Bale and Mears, 2008) showed a strong association between visits (particularly from partners) and reductions in reoffending. Baumer *et al.* (2009) analysed national data to examine the impact of temporary home leave on re-imprisonment in Ireland. Offenders receiving home leave were significantly less likely to be re-imprisoned within four years than those who did not (by a difference of 5 percentage points).

However, access to home leave depended on having a home and family to return to, and likelihood of reoffending was a key factor in refusal of this privilege. Therefore, it may be that some factors related to how settled the offender was on release may not have been accounted for in the analysis.

Implications

There is relatively little available evidence to demonstrate that interventions aimed at changing offenders' family and intimate relationships result in lower rates of reoffending. In general, studies were not able to control properly for the many confounding factors involved. In particular, no studies were able to fully address selection bias as interventions involved either voluntary participation, or eligibility based on factors related to quality of family relationships or propensity to reoffend. Consideration should be given to conducting more robust studies on impact in this area. In particular, there is a lack of evidence in relation to programmes in the community.

A range of interventions aim to address family and intimate relationships, with outcomes most commonly around improving or maintaining pre-existing relationships with partners or children. Improving these relationships seemed to be associated with increased confidence and better communication skills and in-prison behaviour among offenders. Additionally, some interventions supported increased contacts with children for either mothers or fathers in prison.

The outcomes achieved can have an impact on resettlement more generally. For example, improving family relationships can allow the offender to have the additional support required, as well as the skills needed, to deal with other issues more effectively. Such an example is reported in the US study evaluating a substance misuse intervention that included family members. Although sample sizes were small, those in the intervention had greater reductions in drug use than controls, and felt better supported, both emotionally and materially, by their families.

Currently, the evidence presents an inconclusive picture of the outcomes that family and intimate relationship interventions can achieve. These may need to be considered in the context of wider holistic support, or as part of a 'package' of interventions. The development of tools aimed at measuring the

effectiveness of family and intimate relationship interventions could help commissioners as well as service providers understand which interventions work best. Collation of data on intermediate outcomes could later be used to test the link with reoffending outcomes.

When considering the effectiveness of interventions focused on family and intimate relationships, achieving the types of outcomes identified above should be considered. In particular, it seems that such interventions could potentially affect a wide variety of resettlement needs and so services may wish to consider how best to target interventions to achieve these outcomes. Further consultation with providers of services, to better understand how these different outcomes could be measured, is recommended.

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Appendix A. List of intermediate outcomes and studies

Intermediate outcomes	Number of studies	References
Family-related outcomes		
Increased knowledge about parenting/ parenting skills	3	Wilczak & Markstrom (1999); Sandifer <i>et al</i> (2008); Wilson <i>et al</i> (2010)
Improved relationship with child	4	Prinsloo (2007); Sandifer (2008); Frye and Dawe, (2008) Rodrigues, <i>et al</i> (2010)
Improved communication with family/child via visits letters	3	Halsey <i>et al</i> , (2002); Wilson <i>et al</i> , (2010) Boswell and Poland (2011)
Decreased parenting stress	1	Frye and Dawe (2008)
Improved relationship with partner (or improved relationship skills)	3	Meek, (2007); Einhorn <i>et al</i> , (2008); Boswell & Poland (2011)
Increased family support	1	Sullivan <i>et al</i> , (2002)
General outcomes		
Improved problem solving skills	2	Klein and Bahr (1996); Klein, Bartholomew and Bahr (1999)
Increased self-esteem	2	Thompson & Harm, (2010); Wilson <i>et al</i> , (2010)
Improved behaviour in custody	1	Carlson (2001)
Decreased substance misuse	2	Carlson (2001); Sullivan <i>et al</i> (2002)
Engagement in education in prison	2	Halsey (2002); Boswell & Poland (2004)
Reoffending	6	Carlson (2001); Sullivan <i>et al</i> (2002); May <i>et al</i> (2008); Bale and Mears (2008); Boswell and Poland, (2008); Baumer, O'Donnell and Hughes (2009)