

Prison no bar to inmates' generosity, research shows

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(Phys.org) -- Prisoners tend to be more generous than the general public because they could be looking for ways to atone for their crimes, research has shown.

A ground-breaking study by academics at Plymouth University showed [inmates](#) are prepared to make greater financial sacrifices than members of the public.

The research, published in the scientific journal *Social Justice Research*, was conducted by Dr. Michaela Gummerum and Dr. Yaniv Hanoach, both lecturers in the University's School of Psychology.

They now hope it could be developed by policy makers, saying they believe it could form part of a wider drive to reduce the nation's

reoffending rates.

Dr. Gummerum said: “There are a lot of stereotypes surrounding prisoners, principally that because they have committed crimes they are inherently bad.

“Reports in the past have shown that inmates can show genuine generosity and a willingness to volunteer for tasks and help others. This is the first time a study has used experimental methods to look at that, and we believe it shows those reports are not wide of the mark.”

To carry out their research, the academics used a sample of 50 inmates and 50 members of the public, using three basic tests to come to their conclusions.

One measured financial generosity, handing both groups a set amount of money and seeing how much they were prepared to give to an anonymous recipient. A questionnaire then assessed the two groups’ belief in a just world (BJW), looking at whether they felt everyone gets what they deserve in society, while another looked at their empathy and perspective taking.

The tests showed inmates had higher empathy and perspective taking scores than non-inmates, while being in prison could have been a constant reminder that they had received justice for their previous actions. But the most surprising results came in the financial test, with the prisoners on average willing to hand over almost half of the money they were given, whereas the public were willing to part with less than a third.

Dr. Hanoch said: “In some cases, the inmates were willing to give away 5 or 10 per cent of their monthly salary, something we did not see mirrored among the general public. It obviously does not mean they will

automatically behave in such a manner when they are released, but it shows they have the capacity to behave in a way we might not expect of criminals.

“Creating the opportunities for [prisoners](#) to volunteer, or accommodating those who express a desire to help, could be a way for prisons to encourage constructive behavior. It would be a win-win situation for all involved.

“There are studies on the general population which show volunteering is highly associated with wellbeing and happiness. We believe it could have an impact on inmates’ future behavior, and possibly have a chance of bringing down reoffending rates.”

Provided by University of Plymouth

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