

Incarcerated men's religious beliefs did not improve their reentry-related outcomes

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Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

Studies suggest that religion can help prisoners cope with prison life and that it may affect the likelihood of recidivism. A new longitudinal study examined how male prisoners' religious beliefs affected their reentry into the community. The study found that men with stable or increasing religious beliefs did not have better reentry-related outcomes than men with decreasing religious beliefs.

The study, by researchers at the Pennsylvania State University and Florida State University (FSU), appears in *Justice Quarterly*, a publication of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"Numerous barriers, including finding and maintaining jobs, securing housing, renewing ties with family and others, prevent religion from effectively supporting the reentry process for many incarcerated men, which can encourage relapse," says Iman Said, a doctoral candidate in sociology and criminology at Penn State, who led the study. "Our findings call into question prison-based [religious programs](#) as the sole way to reduce recidivism and boost post-release success and suggest a lack of a relationship between [religious beliefs](#) and recidivism."

Studies on religion and prisoners have focused on religion as a possible catalyst for transforming identity—helping individuals come to terms with their prior criminal self and move toward an aspirational future self, which inspires them to not reoffend. Other studies have looked at religion as a source of informal social control, with its influence stemming from being part of a religious group and having religious friends, which can lessen the likelihood of reoffending.

Scholars have begun merging these two pathways, recognizing that network ties are often the impetus for transforming identity and that the influence of informal social control relies on some degree of agency and identity change.

In this study, researchers used longitudinal data from men in a therapeutic community (a program for men with substance-use disorders) in a Pennsylvania prison, as well as information from in-prison and post-[prison life](#), to explore the impact of religion on reentry (for the [quantitative analysis](#), 174 men were studied; for the qualitative, 51). They examined how religion acts on behavior in and out of prison, the protective effect of religion on recidivism, and the usefulness of

religion in surmounting structural barriers upon reentry.

Religiosity was measured through interviews that included questions about frequency of participation in religious activities before, during, and after prison.

The relationship between religion and desistance (stopping offending or other antisocial behavior) may be complicated by structural barriers to reentry and high rates of substance use among incarcerated populations. The study also examined the effect of substance use among incarcerated populations and the difficulty of simultaneous reentry and recovery, an important issue given the prevalence of religion in recovery programs. At various points in the history of the U.S. criminal justice system, faith-based programming accounted for most programs; the men in this study had regular access to religious services, faith-based programs, and a full-time chaplain.

The study found that incarcerated people with stable or increasing religious beliefs used religion to reconcile past mistakes and create an aspirational future self; this is consistent with studies that have identified religion as a potential catalyst for transforming identity. Many respondents said they practiced religion independent of organized programs, with some spending time reading the Bible or engaging in self-reflection, for example.

Incarcerated people with decreasing religious beliefs had a more despairing attitude toward their imprisonment and did not trust other incarcerated people. They tended not to see religion as a personal experience but as something that could be used to fill time. Therefore, religion's role during prison may depend on individuals' initial openness to positive change, the authors suggest.

Regarding post-release outcomes, the potential for religion to spur

identity transformation lies in its use as a signal to family members that the individual is ready to change and as a driver that motivates the individual to stick to his goals—but even this becomes insufficient over time, the study found.

Despite the importance of religious beliefs in motivating incarcerated people to transform their identity and lead a more prosocial life, religion was insufficient for overcoming barriers to successful reentry and recovery, the study found. Thus, contrary to expectations, individuals who reported increasing or stable religious beliefs did not have better reentry outcomes than individuals who reported decreasing religious beliefs. Many found they did not have time to attend religious services or take part in self-reflection, and many returned to substance use.

The study also identified some prisoners as stably nonreligious. These men were more likely to be White and younger, to report opioid use, and to recidivate. They had lower levels of engagement in their prison-based treatment program and had a fatalistic view of their capacity to change. Coming of age in the opioid crisis, suggest the authors, made these men lose their faith in the capacity for effective intervention.

Although analyses showed that increased or stable religiosity could reduce the likelihood of recidivism, these categories did not reach statistical significance in this study. In contrast, men in the stably nonreligious group had a greater likelihood of recidivating, and this relationship was the only one that was statistically significant. But in other analyses, none of the men in the religious group had a strong statistical relationship with recidivism, suggesting that there is no relationship between religion and reoffending.

"The study's findings have implications for prison-based programming," according to Kim Davidson, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice at FSU, who coauthored the study. "Religious programs

are popular with the public and with policymakers, many of whom believe that [religion](#) can change the disposition of incarcerated people, resulting in a prosocial person who will successfully reenter society. But these programs may not improve individuals' reentry into the community."

Among the study's limitations are that its data come from one institution and from a small number of participants in a therapeutic community, and that it did not address potential differences between religiosity and spirituality.

More information: Iman Said et al, A Mixed-Method Evaluation of the Role of Religion in Desistance and Reentry, *Justice Quarterly* (2022).

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