

Poor health increases chance of recidivism and reincarceration

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Poor physical or mental health increases the chance that formerly incarcerated individuals will commit more crimes and return to prison, according to a groundbreaking new Rutgers University-Camden study.

The study—conducted by Nathan Link and Richard Stansfield, assistant professors of criminal justice at Rutgers-Camden, and Jeffrey Ward, an associate professor of criminal justice at Temple University—advances a [health](#)-based model of desistance showing how both mental and [physical health](#) affect the chances of maintaining employment and [positive family relationships](#), and ultimately recidivism.

According to the researchers, the study, published in *Criminology* - the field's flagship journal—is the first known study to identify the indirect links between mental and physical health limitations and recidivism and reincarceration.

"We've flipped the script with this study," says Link. "Most researchers studying mental and physical health are showing how incarceration harms mental and physical health. We are seeing how mental and physical health affect one's ability to stop committing crimes and reenter society successfully."

Prior research, explains Link, has determined that certain structural factors keep people on the right course—employment and strong family relationships being chief among them.

"People term these structural factors as 'turning points,'" says Link. "For instance, a job pushes you away from a criminal lifestyle because your goals change. You also might define yourself differently as someone who has a job and supports a family."

In light of these known structural factors, the researchers examined longitudinal data from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), a comprehensive data set of former prisoners released in 12 states, to determine how physical and mental health at the time of release impact family conflict, employment, financial hardship, and two measures of recidivism: self-reported crime and reincarceration.

According to Link, they found that, consistent with expectations, physical health limitations decrease the chance of employment. They posit that, if one's physical health has been hampered, an individual is less likely to secure and maintain a job. To compound matters further, individuals reentering society are more likely to wind up working in physically taxing jobs, such as construction, landscaping, or warehouse work.

"For instance, if you have a bad leg, you may have trouble getting to your job, or have a lot of difficulty doing the work that is expected of you," says Link.

In turn, says Link, they found that individuals who have difficulty finding and maintaining employment are more likely to reoffend and be reincarcerated.

"From prior research, we already know that employment is a protective factor from committing crime," explains Link. "We see now how physical health strongly shapes [employment](#) prospects and ultimately affects recidivism."

In the same respect, says the Rutgers-Camden researcher, they found that those who report having depressive symptoms were subsequently more likely to report significant family conflict, which, in turn, is shown to be a strong predictor of criminal behavior and recidivism.

"As with physical health, you see a similar dynamic where [poor mental health](#) ultimately increases the chances of reoffending and getting reincarcerated through its adverse impact on family conflict," says Link.

From a policy standpoint, says the Rutgers-Camden researcher, the findings show the need to focus efforts on improving physical and [mental health](#) among the incarcerated population and avert health-related reentry failures.

"If we don't care about their physical and mental wellbeing, this research shows that these individuals are more likely to go out and commit crimes and get reincarcerated," says Link. "That doesn't benefit anyone, including their [family](#) members and taxpayers."

Link recommends several practical and realistic health measures that could be implemented, including ensuring incarcerated individuals have a proper diet and exercise.

He notes that opponents of the plan might argue that providing cheap, low-quality food is saving taxpayer dollars. However, this paper suggests that it is only cost saving in the short term.

"If you exacerbate or cause these health issues to emerge, you are setting in motion processes that are worse and not beneficial for anyone in the long run," he says.

More information: Nathan W. Link et al. Consequences of mental and physical health for reentry and recidivism: Toward a health-based

model of desistance*, *Criminology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12213](#)

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