

Study finds social support key

May 1 2009

It is not uncommon for prison inmates to experience religious conversions. Now a new University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) study, out in the April issue of the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, suggests that inmates who have positive social support networks are more likely to maintain their religious conversions.

UAB researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 63 inmates, all of whom were actively involved in at least one religious program at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. UAB Assistant Professor of Justice Sciences Kent R. Kerley, Ph.D., was the study's principal investigator. UAB Associate Professor of Justice Sciences J. Heith Copes, Ph.D., co-authored the article. Seventy-eight percent of those interviewed were African-Americans and 22 percent were white. The participants' average prison sentence was 27 years. Researchers asked inmates about their faith and how religion affected their self-image and ability to cope with prison life.

The study found that the strategies inmates used to maintain their religious conversions included developing close bonds with mentors, chaplains, religious family members and other religious inmates; avoiding people who are negative influences; attending religious activities at the prison; and sharing their faith with others. In addition, the overwhelming majority of those interviewed said they spent time in daily prayer and meditation.

The study suggests that prison administrators should consider the

potential for religious programs to help inmates adjust to [prison](#) life. In addition, chaplains could consider focusing not solely on the conversion experience, but also on providing social support networks for religious inmates.

But the researchers stressed that evidence also suggests that secular programs that focus on literacy, the GED and college training, life skills or substance abuse treatment may also be effective. Future research might determine if inmates who participate in educational or vocational programs feel similarly about making positive connections with their teachers and program sponsors, the UAB researchers said.

Source: University of Alabama at Birmingham ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Study finds social support key (2009, May 1) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-05-social-key.html>

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