

Does the experience of imprisonment affect optimism about reentry?

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## Abstract

Desistance research has linked prisoner expectations with positive outcomes after release, but very little research addresses what makes prisoners optimistic about their future. Using data from a representative sample of prisoners this paper analyzes the way in which a prison sentence is served impacts the expectations about reentry. Results show that experiencing harsh prison conditions makes prisoners more pessimistic about reentry, while receiving family support during imprisonment has the opposite effect. Given that the mission of the prison system is to prepare prisoners for a successful reentry, this study has several implications for correctional agencies.

*Keywords:* expectations of reentry, optimism, prison conditions, family support, desistance

## Introduction

The desistance literature has underlined that being optimistic about the perspectives of reentry after having served a prison sentence is an important aspect for achieving a positive reintegration into society. Grounded in the concepts of Bandura (1977) of self-efficacy – the idea that the perception about the capacity to achieve an aim affects the possibilities of succeeding—and on those of Seligman (1990) of learned optimism – a psychological construct based on the attribution of adversity to specific, circumstantial and non-personal factors – desistance scholars, such Maruna (2001), have applied them to understand the process of desistance, stating that one of the fundamental ways in which the narratives of desisters differ from those of active offenders is “an optimistic perception (some might say useful ‘illusion’) of personal control over their own destiny” (p. 88). Authors that have shown the importance of these subjective states in the reentry process do not deny the importance of social factors, such as homelessness, substance addiction, mental illness, poverty and unemployment, but argue that “...such as neutral and positive attitudes to the prospect of imprisonment (and therefore a preparedness to go back to prison) act as a mediating variable, whereby people are less likely to strive for change (just as optimism and a sense of being in control prompt people to try different things following failures—to look for alternatives and to persevere).” (Howerton, Burnett, Byng, & Campbell, 2009, p. 456). Previous research, although generally focused on one dimension of the reentry process—recidivism—confirms that prisoners who are more optimistic about their prospects of successful reentry are those who are better able to be successful upon release as shown by the pioneering research of Burnett (1992) and by other authors afterwards (Doeckhie, Dirkzwager, & Nieuwebeerta, 2017; Howerton et al., 2009; Martí & Cid, 2015; Souza, Lösel, Makson, & Lanskey, 2015).

If prisoners’ expectations about a successful reentry are to be an important aim for the prison and parole systems, a relevant question for research to ask is what elements of the

imprisonment experience may foster optimistic expectations. The research on this issue is rather limited and it refers to the investigation conducted by Visher and O'Connell (2012) as part of the *Returning home* project. Visher and O'Connell (2012) surveyed a sample of US prisoners to explore which factors explained optimism about successful reentry and concluded that "...it is the external ties to family through perceived support and ties to their children that we believe helps orient prisoners to a future-looking optimistic perspective about how difficult it will be to return to the community" (p. 192).

The aim of this paper is to increase the knowledge on the factors that affect the optimism of prisoners about their perspective on reentry. Our point of view is that the optimism of prisoners is not only affected by external factors, such as social support and social bonds, that have been long established as a catalyst in the desistance process within the framework of social control and social support theories (Bales & Mears, 2008; Sampson & Laub 1993; Visher & O'Connell, 2012), but also by experiences directly linked to the prison sentence – such as the harshness of the sentence and the participation in rehabilitation programs – that may affect optimism as a consequence of strain and learning.

### **Theoretical framework**

A prison sentence is an experience that criminological research has analyzed in order to understand future outcomes in social life. The factors that have been highlighted in the research can be grouped in three main categories: harshness of the prison sentence, participation in rehabilitation programs and social support.

#### **Harshness while serving a prison sentence**

The severity of imprisonment may be understood as the level of pain that a person experiences during the serving of a prison sentence (Sykes, 1958/2007). Two types of pain can be distinguished: pain linked to the prison regime and pain linked to victimization.

A prison regime may be relatively painful when individuals who serve long prison sentences do not achieve classifications (such as being classified as open regime) or privileges (like benefiting from home leave) that other prisoners achieve and therefore there may be a distance between their expectations and their achievements (Blevins, Listwan, Cullen & Jonson, 2010). Some of the imprisonment conditions that have been linked to recidivism are: classification regime (Gaes & Camp, 2009); submission to sanctions for misbehavior (Cochran, Mears, Bales, & Stewart, 2014) and the types of release (early release with supervision or release at the expiration of the sentence without supervision) (Luque, Ferrer & Capdevila, 2005; Schlager & Robbins, 2008). These painful regimes may prompt pessimism in prisoners. Aspects that may lead to being more pessimistic are the generation of hostility as a consequence of experiencing more severe regimes, suffering sanctions or not benefiting from early release. This feeling of hostility may reduce the perception of being able to avoid conflicts in the future (Cochran et al., 2014). Another mechanism that may produce pessimism is the labeling effect in which the classification of the individual in more severe regimes makes it harder for prisoners to assume a conventional identity which desistance scholars have identified as a main mechanism to desistance and reintegration (Cochran et al., 2014; Maruna, 2001). Moreover, the prisoner who does not progress towards early release may not develop a feeling of self-efficacy that makes prisoners more optimistic about reentry (Cid & Martí, 2012). Finally, although the effects of the length of imprisonment on reoffending and other reentry issues do not seem to be conclusive in the direction of a criminogenic effect (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009), qualitative research suggest that “institutionalized personality traits” among persons who have served long prison sentences may reduce their perception of being able to have a successful release (Liem & Kunst, 2013, p. 336).

With respect to victimization, a distinction has been made between direct victimization—being a victim of criminal offences by other inmates or a victim of criminal offences or unfair treatment by prison staff—and indirect (or vicarious) victimization—a perception of living in a setting in which criminal victimization by inmates or staff and unfair treatment exists (Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen, & Colvin, 2011). Both types of victimization may be considered as noxious stimuli and possess some of the characteristics that according to strain scholars may lead to crime. They will normally be intense, perceived as unjust and give reasons to commit crime (e.g. revenge) (Agnew 2002; 2006). Recent research confirms that victimization during imprisonment is associated with recidivism (Daquin, Daigle, & Listwan, 2016; Listwan et al., 2011; Zweig, Yahner, Visher, & Lattimore, 2015),

Strain theorists have suggested that victimization may lead to crime through different subjective influences that we think may reduce the optimism of the person about successful reentry. Victimization, on the one hand, may increase anger or hostility (Zweig et al., 2015) provoking a mental state in the person about not being able to avoid being immersed in fights and other conflicts in order to prevent attacks (Agnew, 2002), or to satisfy a desire for revenge (Listwan et al., 2011). Another possible consequence of victimization is depression (Zweig et al., 2015). Victimization may make individuals feel their lack of power to prevent the production of noxious stimuli (Daquin et al., 2016) and it may reduce their confidence in being able to achieve a successful reentry in the future.

### **Participation in rehabilitation programs**

Correctional institutions usually offer inmates opportunities to participate in programs oriented to confront some deficits that may be related with their offending. Examples of such programs are academic programs, vocational training, cognitive-behavioral programs to confront criminogenic needs (such as antisocial attitudes or negative emotionality), drug

treatment, or work release programs (Mackenzie, 2006). Some of these programs—such as academic education, vocational education, some behavioral programs and drug-treatment—are effective in preventing recidivism (MacKenzie, 2006).

Most of these programs aimed at promoting an individual change-enhancing academic and vocational skills, improving cognitive skills, learning how to control negative emotions, overcoming the dependence on drugs—may be seen as a part of the process of cognitive transformation that some scholars see as an essential part of the desistance process. For some prisoners, these programs may be a hook for change, providing them with skills that reinforce openness to change (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002) and prepare them for a successful reentry, as stated by MacKenzie (2006): “To get along with family, keep a job, support children, or form strong positive ties with other institutions, the person must change in cognitive reasoning, attitudes towards drug use, antisocial attitudes, reading level or vocational skills” (p. 337).

Cognitive transformation theory may explain the link between program participation and optimism about reentry. In this process, prisoners may learn cognitive skills and increase their feeling of self-efficacy about being able to overcome problems that they may face at reentry. As Bandura (2007) says: “It is exceedingly difficult to maintain hope and optimism if one is plagued by self-doubts in one’s ability to influence events and convinced of the futility of effort” (p. 167).

### **Social support**

Social support has been defined as “... the aid—the supply of tangible or intangible resources—individuals gain from their network members” (Song, Son, & Lin, 2011, p. 118) and has been divided into several dimensions such as “emotional support (liking, love, empathy); instrumental support (goods and services); or appraisal support (information relevant to self-evaluation)” (Song et al, 2011, pp. 118-119).

The source of support that is probably the more relevant and has been more studied is the one that comes from family members—partners, parents and other relatives. Family members may provide social support through visits or other contacts with their incarcerated relatives and it has been researched whether the fact of receiving visits prevents recidivism, with mainly positive results (Bales & Mears 2008; Mitchell, Spooner, & Zhang, 2016). Another source of support is the one that comes from prison staff and parole officers, in particular, in the preparation for the process of reentry and once in the community in helping individuals with the obstacles (jobs, accommodations, health and other relevant issues) they may face. This source of support has been less considered in research, but in a recent paper the support of parole officers appears to prevent recidivism (Chamberlain, Gricius, Wallace, Borjas, & Ware, 2018). Finally, another source of support that may be relevant is the one that comes from community members who engage in volunteer work to promote desistance and reentry. Although most of these practices of reentry seem to remain under-evaluated (Jonson & Cullen, 2015), some evidence exists that underlines the positive role prison visits from volunteers has for preventing recidivism (Duwe & Clark, 2013) and also the positive role mentors have in helping with the process of reentry (Garcia, 2016; Lewis, Maguire, Raynor, Vanstone, & Vennaard, 2007).

Scholars have provided different mechanisms that may link social support while serving the prison sentence with positive expectations about reentry.

Firstly, grounded on Agnew, (1992) Cullen (1994) has underlined that “...the ability to cope with criminogenic strains is contingent on access to supports” (p. 541). Facing the same stressful reentry situation, individuals that anticipate social support—both in the instrumental dimension (such as housing, economical help, support finding a job) and in the emotional dimension (such as love, advice, reinforcement of plans or actions of change)—may feel more confident to overcome strain than others who may not be able to count on the help

of relevant others to provide the instrumental and emotional resources that facilitate successful reentry.

Secondly, different authors have emphasized that social support may be relevant for identity transformation and perception of self-efficacy, and these cognitive transformations may increase the optimism of the person about his/her prospects of successful reentry. On the one hand, social support may generate a feeling of moral compensation in inmates and parolees in which they wish to change as a way of returning or giving something back, or not disappointing the persons that may have provided support during incarceration. This willingness to change seems to produce confidence in successful reentry (Calverley, 2013; Cid & Martí, 2017; Schroeder Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2010). On the other hand, other sources of identity transformation may come from identification with the positive values of the persons that provide support (Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007) or with the positive social roles in which prisoners and parolees may be expected to adopt (Maruna, 2001). As with the previous mechanism, this new identity reinforces the willingness to change and logically it would seem to increase the optimism of the person about his/her reentry.

### **Aims and Hypotheses**

With the aim of extending the knowledge about prisoners' expectations about reentry that was developed by Visher and O'Connell (2012), we have consider several dimensions of the experience of serving a prison sentence that according to different theories may increase the optimism of prisoners and parolees about their successful reentry into society Our hypotheses are:

1. Experiencing harsh conditions while serving the prison sentence will decrease optimism about reentry.

2. Taking part in rehabilitation programs and working while serving the prison sentence will increase optimism about reentry.

3. Receiving social support while serving the prison sentence will increase optimism about reentry.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Data for the present study was collected as the main part of a research project devoted to increasing the knowledge on the relationship between imprisonment and recidivism. The aim of the sampling procedure was to obtain a representative sample of prisoners that fulfilled their prison sentence in one year in Catalonia (Spain). Participants were recruited in 10 ordinary prisons<sup>1</sup>, 6 open prisons<sup>2</sup> and 4 parole offices, covering all correctional institutions of the region. The sample was obtained in four stages between April 2016 and July 2017. The prison directorate compiled a list of inmates who were going to complete their prison sentences in each of the correctional institutions within a 6-month period and we approached inmates and parolees in the final months of serving a prison sentence (4 months before the expiration of the prison sentence on average).

Prison staff distributed a letter from the research team to prisoners and parolees which explained the aim of the research. Inmates and parolees were invited to attend a meeting in which trained researchers asked for informed consent and those consenting filled out a self-administered questionnaire, with the help of the researchers when required. Questionnaires were mostly completed in the correctional facilities' (prisons and parole centers) education rooms without the supervision of prison staff.

In total we obtained a list of 1394 inmates and parolees. Prison staff contacted 1072 individuals to invite them to participate in the research. The remaining 322 had been transferred to a different institution or for other reasons—illness, home leaves, work—were

considered by prison staff not to be available to participate in the research. From the 1072 that been invited to participate in the research, 538 (50.2%) agreed to participate. The response rate was higher in ordinary prisons (57.5%) and open prisons (58.3%) than in parole centers (33.7%); this different rate seems to be due to the fact that parolees needed to be contacted on an individual basis and agree on a day to attend the parole center in order to fill out the questionnaire. Questionnaires took an average of 75 minutes to be completed and participants were given 10€ as compensation for their time.

Table 1 shows the population distribution and the sample regarding sex, age, nationality and the type of release.

## **Measures**

Table 2 summarizes the means and distribution of the variables used in the analysis.

[Table 1 about here]

**Dependent variable.** The dependent variable of the research is optimism concerning expectations of successful reentry. We used, with minor adaptations, the scale developed by Visher & O'Connell (2012) in the pre-release interview of the *Returning Home* research. The scale assesses the individual' expectations about life after the expiration of their sentence in a set of 14 items which are related to five dimensions: relationships with family, social acceptance, health, income, and deviant and illegal behaviors. With a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87 a variable of optimism was constructed ranging from 0 to 3. Higher scores indicate that the participants do not perceive problems in these dimensions, thereby being more optimistic, and lower scores indicate that individuals recognize problems in most of these domains, thereby being more pessimistic. The mean of the variable was 2.3<sup>3</sup>.

## **Independent variables**

***Harsh conditions during serving the prison sentence.*** In order to test the first hypothesis of the research—suffering relatively harsh conditions while serving the prison

sentence will decrease optimism—we have constructed five variables that we think may reflect this dimension: length of the prison sentence, serving the entire sentence (without benefiting from early release), frequently being the object of disciplinary sanctions, direct victimization from other inmates, and the perception of living in a negative prison environment.

Concerning the first variable, the number of months served ranged from 2 to 504, with an average of 39.4. The second variable used concerned whether participants had not received early release. At the moment of the interview—an average of 4 months before the expiration of the sentence—63% of the sample had not received early release, meaning that they were serving the sentence in an ordinary prison. Concerning the third variable—frequently being the object of disciplinary sanctions—13% of the sample reported having been sanctioned frequently while serving their sentence and the remaining 87% reported never or only occasionally having been sanctioned. For the fourth variable, direct victimization, we have constructed a 4-item scale asking about the frequency participants had been humiliated assaulted, threatened and stolen from by other inmates. The scale has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.79. The final variable is indirect victimization. To construct this variable we adapted the scale of "Negative environment scale" developed by Listwan et al. (2011, p. 24) in which participants were asked to report about the frequency of violence and other offences among inmates. Taking into account that the quality of life in prison may depend on both interpersonal violence among inmates and on the treatment of inmates by staff (Bottoms, 1999; Liebling, 2004) we aggregated questions to reflect whether participants had perceived unfair treatment by staff to other inmates. The final scale has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87<sup>4</sup>.

***Participation in rehabilitation programs.*** Taking part in programs directed to overcome criminogenic need may increase the perception of participants about being able to face difficult issues of reentry. We asked participants to report about the programs—educative, vocational, cognitive-behavioral (violence control management), mental health

and drug treatment—in which they took part. Instead of using Visher and O’Connell’s (2012) measure of hours per week involved in these programs, we thought it would be easier for participants to report the number of programs in which they took part while serving their prison sentences<sup>5</sup>. Similar to Visher and O’Connell we have used a second dimension of rehabilitation in prison, namely working while serving the prison sentence; a circumstance that may increase the optimism of participants about their skills to get a job at reentry. However, similar to program participation, we didn’t collect, as Visher and O’Connell (2012) did, the number of hours worked. Instead we used whether participants reported some work while incarcerated, with 25% of the sample reporting no employment during incarceration.

***Social support during imprisonment.*** Concerning family support, Visher and O’Connell (2012), used a scale to measure the level of closeness, mutual support and peaceful relationships between participants and family members while serving the prison sentence. We believed that in order to measure the impact of family support on subjective desistance it was also important to include a dimension on whether the family expected a change in attitudes and behavior of the participant. With this aim, we created a 7-item scale that measured emotional support, instrumental support, and the commitment of the family to the participant’s change. Scores ranged from 0 to 3, higher scores indicating a higher level of conventional support, with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.86.

Concerning staff or volunteer support, we asked participants to identify the more relevant person belonging to the staff or to a volunteer organization that helped the participant in preparing for the reentry process. 63% of participants reported that some member of the staff played this role, 3% reported that the role was played by a volunteer, while the remaining 34% answered that that no one belonging to the staff or to volunteers had been a reference person in their reentry process<sup>6</sup>.

### **Control variables**

We used similar variables to those used by Visher and O'Connell (2012) as control variables, with some adaptations to the Spanish context.

The demographics include age, sex and nationality. We used the category of being a foreigner instead of using ethnicity because in Spain, similar to other European countries, foreign inmates face legal barriers on reentry<sup>7</sup>.

As background variables that may reduce the optimism of the participants, we used the number of prior incarcerations, pre-prison drug use, and negative family environment. The average of previous incarcerations was 1.44. Concerning previous drug-use, we measured the frequency of the use of 10 drugs 6 months prior to being admitted to the current imprisonment. The possible answers ranged to 0 (no use) to 5 (daily use) and the final value is the aggregation of the value for the frequency of using the 10 drugs. The mean is 3.34 and the alpha .79. Finally, concerning the negative family environment we used the same scale of Visher and O'Connell (2012) to measure whether a family member had been convicted, incarcerated or had problems with drugs or alcohol. The scale ranged from 0 to 3, with a mean of 1.02 and alpha of .73.

With respect to personal bonds during imprisonment that may increase optimism, we used, similar to Visher and O'Connell (2012), marriage and number of children.

With respect to being married, given that within the European context a stable romantic relationship may have a similar impact as marriage in terms of bonds and support (Savolainen, 2008), we used a measure of being married or in a stable romantic relationship. 38% of the sample was in this situation.

Similar to Visher and O'Connell (2012) we used the number of children as a variable that could have made participants feel more attached to others and therefore increased optimism about their expectations of desistance and successful reentry. 60.2% of the sample had children and the mean was 1.36.

Finally Visher and O’Connell (2012) used two control variables of a different nature: level of self-esteem and the safety of the neighborhood to which the participants planned to reenter. With respect to the level of self-esteem, which may be seen as an individual trait that is a source of optimism (Seligman, 1999), we used the same scale as Visher and O’Connell, based on the Client Evaluation of Self (CEST). The scale ranged from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating more self-esteem, with a mean of 2.06. In this case the Cronbach’s Alpha was not high (.60). Concerning the neighborhood of reentry, although we asked the same questions as Visher and O’Connell (2012) about the safety of the neighborhood of return, we discarded the use of this scale in the analysis due to the relevant number of participants who did not know where they were going to live after serving their prison sentence. In order to have an alternative measure of the community dimension of reentry, we used the variable of participants not knowing where they planned to live after reentry. This situation, which we labelled as homelessness, which we expected would reduce optimism, was reported by 8% of the participants.

[Table 2 about here]

### **Analytical plan**

We have conducted bivariate analysis to explore the correlations between the variables and OLS regression analysis to test the hypotheses of the research.

### **Results**

The results obtained in bivariate correlations were, in general, similar to those obtained in Visher and O’Connell (2012). Optimism decreased for some of the measures related to participants having a more problematic background—like previous incarcerations, pre-prison drug use and negative family environment—and optimism increased for measures of family support, having a stable partner during imprisonment and having children. Similar to Visher and O’Connell (2012), variables related to rehabilitation in prisons –such as

participation in education and vocational programs and work- were not correlated with optimism. Finally, similar to Visher and O'Connell (2012) we obtained high correlations of optimism with self-esteem. The alternative measure to neighborhood safety we used (homelessness) was also negatively correlated with optimism. However, unlike Visher and O'Connell (2012) we did not find significant correlations of optimism with the following variables: demographic factors (nationality, gender and age), and receiving drug-treatment while incarcerated.

In order to test the hypothesis of the research, we conducted OLS regression analysis. A significant model, with no multicollineality issues, is shown at Table 3. In particular, we obtained the following results:

Hypothesis 1 (suffering harsh conditions while serving the prison sentence will decrease optimism) is partially confirmed. Two of the variables in the dimension of the experience of imprisonment (perceiving a more negative prison environment and frequently being the object of disciplinary sanctions) reduces the optimism of the participants. The other three aspects (length of imprisonment, not being early released and suffering direct victimization) are not significant.

Hypothesis 2 (taking part in rehabilitation programs and working while serving the prison sentence will increase optimism) is not confirmed. According to the results of this research none of these elements affects the optimism of the participants about their reentry expectations.

Hypothesis 3 (receiving social support while serving the prison sentence will increase optimism) is partially confirmed. Benefiting from family support during serving the prison sentence increases optimism about reentry. However the support received from professional staff or from volunteers does not increase the optimism of participants.

Finally, although not part of the hypotheses of the research, the relevance of some of the control factors should be noted. Background factors (such pre-prison drug use and prior incarcerations) reduce optimism; a personality trait (self-esteem) strongly increases optimism and a social factor related with reentry (the fact of being homeless) reduces optimism. Finally males are more optimistic than females and age is associated with a reduction of optimism.

[Table 3 about here]

### **Discussion**

The aim of this research has been to expand the knowledge on the impact of the experience of serving the prison sentence on optimism about reentry. Taking into account the literature that has studied the effects of imprisonment on future life we have selected three main dimensions of the experience of imprisonment to analyse their impact on expectations about reentry: harsh conditions of the prison sentence, participation in rehabilitation activities and social support received during the prison sentence.

Previous research has confirmed the relevance of vicarious victimization to explain recidivism and well-being after serving a prison sentence (Daquin et al., 2016; Listwan, Colvin, Hanley, & Flannery, 2010; Listwan et al., 2011; Schappell, Docherty, & Boxer, 2016). However taking into account prison research that shows that the harshness of the prison experience is due both to the relationships among prisoners and the relationships between prisoners and staff (Bottoms, 1999; Liebling, 2004), we elaborated a scale of “negative prison environment” that includes both the perception of victimization among prisoners and the perception of unfair treatment by staff. The positive results suggest that living in a relatively negative prison environment might elicit some feelings of hostility and hopelessness (Agnew, 2002; Zweig et al., 2015) that may increase the perception of obstacles and problems when facing the reentry process. The fact that direct victimization is not relevant to explain optimism is probably due to the fact that the scale of “negative prison

environment” is better able to capture the perception of suffering in prison than the experience of direct victimization<sup>8</sup>.

The positive results with respect to disciplinary sanctions are in line with previous research that has linked restrictive prison classification and recidivism (Gaes & Camp, 2009). Disciplinary sanctions may generate hostility among prisoners and increase self-labelling. Both possible processes may reduce the participants’ perception about desisting at reentry.

We did not expect that the type of release was irrelevant for optimism. Previous research in Spain reveals that the fact of being released on parole reduces the risk of recidivism (Luque, Ferrer, & Capdevila, 2005), and illustrates how the progression to advanced prison regimes (such as an open regime) contributes to the feeling of self-efficacy about being successful in reentry (Cid & Martí, 2012). Given that in the bivariate results the lack of early release and optimism are correlated in the expected direction, our results suggest that prisoners are selected for early release when they present some characteristics that increase optimism.

Our second hypothesis—that predicts that taking part in rehabilitation programs will increase optimism—has not been confirmed. Neither participating in programs to deal with criminogenic needs—educational, vocational, cognitive-behavioral, drug treatment, and mental health treatment—nor working during the prison sentence affects the level of optimism. Given the evidence from the literature that some of these programs work to prevent recidivism and the theoretical idea that the mechanism which may explain these results is the cognitive transformation that makes participants self-confident about being able to solve their reentry issues in a conventional way (Mackenzie, 2006), it seems also counter-intuitive that taking part in these rehabilitation programs is irrelevant for optimism. The results obtained mainly reproduced those of Visher and O’Connell (2012),-which argue that it may not be the quantity of hours devoted to programs and work but the quality of the experience. In order to

test this idea we analyzed whether the participants who gave a positive evaluation of participation in the program were more optimistic than those that did not take part or those who negatively assessed their participation, but the results were negative in this respect<sup>9</sup>. At the present stage, the research seems to suggest that the positive effect of some rehabilitation programs on recidivism is not mediated by increasing optimism.

Finally, our last hypothesis states that receiving social support during the prison sentence will increase the optimism of participants about their expectations of successful reentry. Concerning family support the results have been positive. In order to discuss this specific result it is important to underline that what we have measured is a scale of conventional support, which includes the dimension of promoting change in participants. We think this way of measuring family support is appropriate when taking into account recent literature that reported unexpected results in the relationship between family support during imprisonment and recidivism. Literature has shown that family relationships may be counter-productive to desistance when they are a source of conflict (Cobbina, 2010; Mowen & Visher, 2015), when they elicit strain on participants to obtain money (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong, 2010; Martí & Cid, 2015; Cobbina, 2010), or when relatives are not conventional (Cobbina, 2010). We suggest that when the family was committed to the change of the participant during the prison period, the participant is less likely at reentry to experience the strain of conflictive family relations that may lead to recidivism.

However, the confirmation of the third hypothesis was also partial because we did not find, as expected, that staff and volunteer support has, similar to family support, the effect of increasing optimism. We constructed this hypothesis taking into account some literature that shows the relevance of staff or volunteer support in preventing recidivism (Chamberlain et al, 2018; Duwe & Clark, 2013, Garcia, 2016, Lewis, 2007) and we thought this support may have an impact on optimism. Our failure to confirm the hypothesis may be due to the fact that

that professional or volunteer support is more limited in terms of time than the family support and it may have less impact on some future event like reentry.

### **Limitations**

These results have some limitations. First, it presents the problem of causal inference in cross-sectional designs; particularly, it is possible that more optimistic persons give a more positive assessment of the harshness of the prison sentence and of family support. However, we believe that the objective nature of most of the questions in the independent variables scales reduces the risk of this possible effect. A second issue is that the research has analysed the factors that increase optimism about reentry without testing the explanatory mechanisms suggested in the literature, such as hostility and depression; this issue should be considered in further research. Finally, the fact that participation in treatment and professional support programs is not relevant to optimism may be due to the fact that the link created between professionals and inmates has not been measured, and this is something that should be considered in future research.

### **Implications**

In an ideal prison system prisoners should end their sentences with positive expectations about their reentry. The present research suggests ways to improve this optimism. First, it may be useful to strengthen the relationship of inmates with their conventional families and to help families to provide this supportive role when they are willing to do so (Travis, 2005; Naser & Visser, 2006). Some experiences such as “La bodega de la Familia” (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001; Travis, 2005) in which families are involved in the process of reentry and are helped with doing their supportive role may be an example of the kinds of policies that may be adopted to increase the involvement of families.

Second, policies oriented to prevent victimization, to promote fair treatment and to use alternative measures to deal with disciplinary infractions are advisable (Listwan et al.,

2011), and may be effective in increasing optimism about reentry. After decades of research on prison climate, we know that prisons differ in their quality of life, and it seems that prisons that receive the best assessment from prisoners and staff assume some values (rehabilitation, fair treatment and family participation) as aims of the institution and have strong leadership to achieve these aims and can count on experienced and motivated staff (Liebling et al., 2019). These more successful prisons should guide innovation in prison life in order to increase the optimism of prisoner about their future.

### **Conclusion**

Expectations seem to be an important aspect of having a successful reentry but little research has been done on the way in which the prison sentence is served affects these expectations. With the present research we confirm, within a Southern European context, the finding of Visher and O'Connell (2012) about the relevance of family support for facing the reentry process with optimism. Furthermore, we have new evidence about the negative impact of serving the prison sentence in a relatively adverse environment, where victimization between inmates and unfair treatment by staff is more perceived, and being the object of frequent disciplinary sanctions have on optimism about reentry.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ordinary prisons in Spain are institutions in which prisoners spend the whole day in prison and may participate in work, vocational training and treatment activities inside prison.

However, some prisoners may benefit from temporary community leaves and some may leave the prison to work some hours per day. In ordinary prisons there is a maximum-security unit (called closed regime) in which prisoners spend more time isolated in the cell, are submitted to a more intense surveillance, and participate in a reduced number of activities.

<sup>2</sup> Open prisons in Spain are institutions usually located in the community in which prisoners are deprived of their freedom only at night, and during the day they live in the community; working or doing other treatment activities.

<sup>3</sup> Participants were asked to respond how likely these situations were after the expiration of the sentence: (i) That a family member or a person you planned to live with threatened, harassed, or physically hurt you; (ii) That you do not have relationships with your family; (iii)..That you do not have relationships with your children; (iv) That you will not be accepted after having being in prison; (v). That you will not have financial means to provide for your needs; (vi).That you will not remain in good health; (vii) That you will not manage to make enough money to support yourself; (viii) That you will not find a place to live; (ix) That you will not find or keep a job; (x).That you will not be able to support your children under 18; (xi) That you will not be able to pay off debts ;(xii).That you use illegal drugs; (xiii) That you reoffend; (xiv). That you return to prison. The responses to the two questions of the scale that ask about relationships with children were only included in the calculations for those participants who have children.

<sup>4</sup> Participants were asked to report how often the following things occur: (i) Inmates were afraid of being assaulted by other inmates; (ii) Weak inmates become someone else's property; (iii) People being threatened when they come first to prison; (iv) Inmates being

beaten up by other inmates; (v) Gang fights between inmates; (vi) Lack of respect towards inmates by staff; (vii) Threats made to inmates by staff; (viii) Assaults committed by staff to inmates; (ix) Unfair staff decisions.

<sup>5</sup> Once the participants reported to have taken part in one program, we asked about the perception of the utility of this program in overcoming criminogenic needs and also about whether life in prison had improved as a consequence of taking part in these programs. We have constructed different variables in order to reflect the subjective perception about the utility of the program, but the results (not reported) were not significant for the explanation of optimism.

<sup>6</sup> Once participants answered that someone from the staff or from the volunteers had been a reference person for them to prepare for the reentry process, we asked participants to evaluate different dimensions of the support the reference person had provided, and we constructed a variable with three categories (lack of person of reference, person of reference that did not give useful advice and person of reference that gave useful advice). Results (not reported) were not significant to explain optimism.

<sup>7</sup> Most of the foreign participants in the research were non-European Union citizens, who are excluded from regular work until they have expunged their criminal record. In order to seal the criminal records ex-convicts need to spend a relevant time—between 2 and 5 years—without committing a further criminal offence (among other requirements), and they are also in danger of being deported.

<sup>8</sup> If the variable of “negative prison environment” is excluded from the model of analysis, direct victimization becomes relevant (results not shown).

<sup>9</sup> Results not shown.

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Table 1

*Comparison between population and sample*

	Population whose sentence expired in 2016		Sample		Difference
	N	%	N	%	Percent points
Sex					
Men	2833	92.0	488	90.9	-1.1
Women	247	8.0	50	9.1	1.1
Age					
Up to 35	1236	40.1	206	38.3	-1.8
Older than 35	1844	59.9	332	61.7	1.8
Nationality					
Spanish	1842	59.8	328	61.0	1.2
Foreigner	1239	40.2	210	39.0	-1.2
Release					
Max/ordinary prison	1737	56.4	337	62.6	6.2
Open regime	566	18.4	100	18.6	0.2
Parole	778	25.3	101	18.8	-6.4
Total	3080	100.0	538	100.0	

Table 2

*Descriptive statistics*

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Dependent variable				
Optimism	.50	3	2.30	.55
Control variables				
Spanish	0	1	.61	.48
Male	0	1	.91	.29
Age	19	76	39.77	10.98
Prior incarcerations	0	55	1.44	3.90
Pre-prison drug use	2	10	3.34	1.54
Negative family environment	0	3	1.02	1.15
Number of children	0	13	1.46	1.60
Married or stable partner	0	1	.43	.49
Homelessness	0	1	.08	.27
Self esteem	.33	3	2.06	.56
Independent variables (Harshness)				
Months served	2	504	43.90	44.32
Lack of early release	0	1	.63	.48
Disciplinary sanctions (frequent)	0	1	.13	.34
Direct victimization	0	3	.48	.63
Negative prison environment	0	3	1.54	.72
Independent variables (Rehabilitation)				
Program participation	0	5	2.17	1.37
Work in prison	0	1	.75	.43
Independent variables (Support)				
Family support	0	3	2.10	.92
Professional or volunteer support	0	1	.66	.47

Table 3

*OLS Regression Estimates for Optimism*

	B	S.E	Std (b)	t	Sig.
Dependent variable = Optimism					
Constant	1.583	0.144		10.995	0.000
Control variables					
Spanish	0.011	0.046	0.010	0.239	0.811
Male	0.144	0.071	0.077	2.022	0.044
Age	-0.005	0.002	-0.093	-2.085	0.038
Prior incarcerations	-0.015	0.006	-0.105	-2.686	0.007
Pre-prison drug use	-0.040	0.017	-0.112	-2.438	0.015
Negative family environment	-0.003	0.019	-0.005	-0.138	0.891
Number of children	0.014	0.014	0.039	0.955	0.340
Married or stable partner	0.060	0.043	0.054	1.405	0.161
Homelessness	-0.311	0.081	-0.148	-3.858	0.000
Self esteem	0.369	0.039	0.370	9.585	0.000
Independent variables (Harshness)					
Months served	0.001	0.001	0.078	1.875	0.061
Lack of early release	0.034	0.048	0.029	0.694	0.488
Disciplinary sanctions (frequent)	-0.156	0.071	-0.093	-2.197	0.029
Direct victimization	-0.037	0.036	-0.043	-1.025	0.306
Negative prison environment	-0.110	0.034	-0.144	-3.270	0.001
Independent variables (Rehabilitation)					
Program participation	-0.013	0.017	-0.031	-0.770	0.442
Work in prison	-0.01	0.049	-0.008	-0.203	0.839
Independent variables (Support)					
Family support	0.081	0.024	0.135	3.430	0.001
Professional or volunteer support	0.000	0.044	0.000	0.004	0.997

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .353

F=15.400 (p&lt;0.001)

n = 501