Faith-based efforts to improve prisoner reentry: Assessing the logic and evidence

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Abstract

Prisoner reentry constitutes one of the central criminal justice challenges confronting U.S. society. Coinciding with this emerging social problem has been increased policymaker interest in faith-based programs to improve outcomes for vulnerable populations, including released prisoners. Critical questions about the nature and effects of faith-based reentry programs remain largely unaddressed, however: (1) What is a "faith-based" program? (2) How does or could such a program reduce recidivism and improve other behavioral outcomes among released offenders? (3) What is the evidence concerning the impacts of faith-based reentry programs? (4) What are critical implementation issues that may affect the operations and impacts of such programs? This article examines each of these questions and identifies critical conceptual, theoretical, and research gaps in the literature. It highlights that the term "faith-based" is used inconsistently, that the precise causal relationship, if any, between various measures of faith and crime remains in question, and that few rigorous evaluations of faith-based reentry programs exist. It then discusses recommendations for improving knowledge and practice.

Introduction

Over the past decade, prisoner reentry has become a pressing social problem and policy challenge nationally, with over 600,000 inmates released from state and federal prisons annually (Harrison & Karberg, 2004; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). If juvenile offenders are included, approximately 700,000 individuals with educational, vocational, physical, mental health, and drug treatment needs enter communities across the country each year (Mears & Travis, 2004). The magnitude of this challenge is especially sobering given that prison populations continue to increase (Harrison & Beck, 2005). It is all the

more sobering given that more than two-thirds of released prisoners will likely be rearrested within three years of release, and over half will be reincarcerated, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Langan & Levin, 2002).

While prison populations have burgeoned, policy-makers—including current and past presidential administrations, Democratic and Republican alike—increasingly have expressed interest in faith-based programs to ameliorate a range of social problems (Chaves, 2004; Harris, Hutchison, & Cairns, 2005; Hodge & Pittman, 2003; Kramer, Finegold, De Vita, & Wherry, 2005; Kramer, Nightingale, Trutko, Spaulding, & Barnow, 2002; McDaniel, Davis, & Neff, 2005; O'Connor & Pallone, 2002). Not surprisingly, there also has been increased interest in faith-based efforts to improve reentry outcomes for released prisoners (Johnson & Larson, 2003; Kerley, Matthews, & Schulz, 2005; O'Connor, 2004,

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2005; Roman, Whitby, Zweig, & Rico, 2004). Despite this interest, critical questions remain largely unaddressed: (1) What is a "faith-based" program? (2) How does or could such a program reduce recidivism and improve other behavioral outcomes among released offenders? (3) What is the evidence concerning the impacts of faith-based reentry programs? (4) What are critical implementation issues that may affect the operations and impacts of such programs?

Answers to such questions can help inform criminological theory and faith-based efforts to improve outcomes among thousands of inmates released from prisons each year. For criminologists, research on faith-based programs provides an opportunity to develop more nuanced theories of the relationship between "faith" and crime. Perhaps, for example, certain conceptualizations, and thus measurements, of faith yield a stronger relationship with crime and recidivism than others. Similarly, the influence of faith on crime may be mediated or moderated by other traditional crime variables, or, conversely, faith may mediate or moderate the influence of such variables. For policymakers and practitioners, theoretical advances can provide the groundwork for developing more coherent and consistent programs, including identification of the critical dimensions that these programs must address to be effective. Research shows that programs with strong theoretical foundations tend to produce better outcomes (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 2003), and so such advances assume particular importance.

Without theoretical advances, backed by empirical research, policymakers and practitioners may continue to advocate for faith-based programs, but with little understanding about how best to structure such programs so that they have the greatest likelihood of being effective. Answers to the questions are also important more generally because they can provide the justification for supporting (or not) faith-based programs. If, for example, research shows that reentry programs can effectively reduce recidivism, a stronger argument in support of them can be made. Not least, by systematically identifying critical implementation issues, faith-based programs can increase the likelihood that they will achieve their desired goals.

This article addresses each of these four questions and then explores several critical policy and research implications raised by the answers. The central argument is that better definitions of "faith-based" programs are needed; that the causal logic of such programs needs to be better developed both to facilitate appropriate evaluation efforts and to improve theory, research, and practice; that considerably more basic and applied research is needed to place support for faith-based programs on solid scientific footing; and that a range of implementation issues must be addressed to increase the chances that faith-based programs can in fact be effective. Work along these lines not only can improve theory and practice, but also can facilitate empirically-grounded debates about the merits of faith-based programs.

What is a "faith-based" program?

Discussions of faith-based initiatives often assume that there is a commonly accepted definition of a "faith-based" program. There is not. Indeed, researchers and policymakers express different views on how to characterize faith-based programs or they simply use the terminology without providing any definition. For example, although the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives provides examples of efforts deemed to be faith-based, it offers no precise definition of a faith-based program or what criteria have to be met to be viewed as one.[1] This situation creates confusion about what exactly faith-based programs are, and in turn, how most appropriately to generalize the results of studies of specific faith-based initiatives.

By some accounts, faith-based programs are funded and administered by a particular religion, focus on the faith and religiosity of clients, and "fully express faith in the way they deliver services" (Smith & Sosin, 2001, p. 652; see also Burke, Fossett, & Gais, 2004; DiIulio, 1997; Wolpert, 1997). Others take a broader view, focusing instead on "faith-related" agencies, defined by Smith and Sosin (2001, p. 652) as

social service organizations that have any of the following: a formal funding or administrative arrangement with a religious authority or authorities; a historical tie of this kind; a specific commitment to act within the dictates of a particular established faith; or a commitment to work together that stems from a common religion.

Following the lead of researchers who employed the terms "religious-based" and "faith-based service agencies" (e.g., Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 2000), Smith and Sosin (2001) advocated using "faith-related" terminology because it is more encompassing, including "large traditional providers, mission shelters that do not have formal ties to a denomination, interfaith organizations, and many others" (p. 653). By contrast, use of the term "faith-based" incorrectly, in Smith and Sosin's (2001) view, "assumes that faith can be represented by a readily identifiable set of practices," and, "when taken literally," the term faith-based organizations "excludes all but the few agencies that act on faith" (p. 653).

Such distinctions are far from academic. To illustrate, Hodge and Pittman (2003) found that organizations described as "faith-based" were so designated even when their funding came from a wide variety of sources and when their programming varied dramatically, from activities that clearly were "religious" or "spiritual" (e.g., Bible studies) to those that were clearly secular (e.g., cognitive-behavioral counseling) (Branch, 2002; DiIulio, 1998; McGarrell, Brinker, & Etindi, 1999; Sundt, Dammer, & Cullen, 2002). One recent account found that many agencies that were classified by the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives as faith-based actually disavowed that terminology, and in some cases were confused, given their lack of religious affiliation or programming, as to why they were so described (Stern, 2006).

The result of such definitional ambiguity is that when researchers, practitioners, and policymakers talk about "faith-based programs," they in reality are talking about a diverse set of programs or volunteer-centered efforts. Many of these efforts provide no obvious faith-oriented or faith-specific services, such as assistance with rent and clothing, transportation, legal and consumer debt counseling, and child care, to name but a few (Branch, 2002; Burke et al., 2004; Chaves, 2004; Cnaan et al., 2000; Hodge & Pittman, 2003; Kramer et al., 2005; Leventhal & Mears, 2002; O'Connor, 2004).

Within the realm of criminal justice, programs described as faith-based have encompassed a similar range of services and activities. These programs have been a ubiquitous feature of American prisons—indeed, the first penitentiaries were founded on such religious ideas as penitence for one's sins—and thus indirectly have focused on prisoner reentry, the subject of this article (Johnson, Larson, & Pitts, 1997; McGarrell et al., 1999; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002).

Precise statistics on faith-based programs in the criminal justice system do not exist, in part because relatively little attention has been given to them by the research community (see Clear & Sumter, 2002; Johnson et al., 1997; O'Connor, 2004, 2005). According to one survey, however, approximately one-third of all prison inmates participate in worship services and other religious activities (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993). A recent *Corrections Compendium* ("Faith-based programming," 2003) study suggested an even greater prevalence of such programming. Based on survey responses from forty-four states, the study found that "instructional faith-based programs and worship services are being offered by 100 percent of the U.S. [correctional] systems"; "93 percent of [these] systems offer prayer groups"; "more than 70 percent…include

personal development and parenting classes in their faith-based programming"; "68 percent…include meditation groups and marriage classes"; "39 percent…have peer mentors to aid with religious studies"; other programs mentioned by states, as well as six Canadian systems that were also surveyed, included "revivals, life skills, Bible study, family religious festivals, anger management, musical choirs and bands, prerelease mentoring, and several religion-specific programs such as Yokefellow or Kairos"; and "seven of the U.S. [correctional] systems [Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Minnesota, and Texas] maintain separate residential housing units specifically for certain faiths" (p. 8). At the time of the survey, five other states— Hawaii, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington— were planning to build such units ("Faith-based programming," 2003, p. 13).

Just as there is definitional ambiguity surrounding efforts to describe faith-based social service programs, so, too, with faith-based criminal justice programs. Some have been described as faith-based because they are run by faith-related agencies. Others have been so described because of their focus on promoting a particular faith among participants or the development of individuals' personal faith (e.g., twelve-step programs, which emphasize turning one's care over to a "higher power"). Many of the programs focus on prevention or early intervention, but even more focus on assisting prisoners during and after release through the support of faith communities and volunteers.

It must be emphasized, however, that faith-based programs in the criminal justice system may or may not have an obvious faith focus (McGarrell et al., 1999). For example, some programs may be faith-based in that they are operated by churches or specific denominations, but faith is not necessarily a component of the programming (Stemen, 2002). Rather, the programs simply provide or refer offenders to a range of services, including shelter, job training, mentoring, and drug treatment (Roman et al., 2004, pp. 19–20). Sundt et al. (2002, p. 72) illustrated the point in their study of prison chaplains, which found that 40 percent "did not select religion as the best method of treatment" and instead "feel that secular methods are better suited to bringing about inmate change."

Of course, faith may be interwoven with or constitute a focus of these programs. In the course of assisting with, say, family reunification or linkages to aftercare services, released offenders might be exposed to "faith" through the attitudes or behaviors of volunteers (DiIulio, 1998; O'Connor, 2004). For example, an account of the fifteen-site National Faith-Based Initiative for High-Risk Youth, which involved a partnering of faith-based organizations

with the justice system and the provision of services (e.g., education, employment, and mentoring), noted:

> Faith is a salient factor in the majority of the programs; it is highly salient in a significant minority of them…Faith is manifested in the faith-based staff and volunteers who work with the participants, in the prayers that are likely to be said in any gathering of two or more, in Bible study and the reading of other sacred texts, in the religious music that is played in the background, and in the incorporation of religious content into the substantive curricula of the program… In spite of this, few overt attempts are made to convert youth or to get them to join a particular denomination or faith (Branch, 2002, p. 56).

As the Corrections Compendium ("Faith-based programming," 2003) study showed, even when the programming is faith-oriented, the specific services and activities can be wide-ranging, including "worship services, Bible studies, religious seminars and retreats, alcoholics and narcotics anonymous, and fellowship gatherings," and can be offered by diverse denominations (O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002, p. 21). Moreover, specific activities can be faith-oriented or not, depending on the organization and its emphasis. For example, in writing about mentoring programs for youth in the juvenile justice system, Fulop (2003, p. 2) emphasized:

> Mentoring in faith-based settings ranges across many programmatic dimensions based on the intentional choices of the specific faith institution that sponsors the mentoring program. This spectrum of mentoring programs ranges from secular to faith-secular, faith-centered, or "faith-saturated."

Inconsistency in the definition or meaning of "faith-based" creates confusion not only about what is putatively common across diverse faith-based programs, but also about what kinds of faith-based programs are effective. This confusion in turn directly bears on any discussion of the external validity of program evaluations—that is, the extent to which findings from a study are generalizable to other settings (Farrington, 2003, p. 54). If, for example, an evaluation finds that a faith-based program that requires participation in Christian religious activities effectively reduces recidivism (Johnson & Larson, 2003), that does not necessarily mean that other "faith-based" programs, secular in nature but sponsored by religious organizations, are also effective. In short, to facilitate appropriate comparisons of truly "like" faith-based programs, clear, operational definitions are needed (Smith & Sosin, 2001).

What is the logic of faith-based prisoner reentry programs?

The question of how faith-based prisoner reentry programs are supposed to work—that is, identifying what it is that makes them effective—is largely unknown, and thus subject to considerable ad hoc and post hoc theorizing. To highlight the importance of this question and to answer it, this article examines three inter-related issues here. The first focus is on the types of comparisons that are appropriate and needed for assessing the effectiveness of faith-based reentry programs. The second is on three types of possible program-level effects associated with these comparisons. The third focus centers around a discussion of a range of specific causal effects associated with faith-oriented programming and the importance of identifying the mechanisms through which such effects may arise.

Appropriate comparisons for assessing the effectiveness of faith-based reentry programs

To determine whether a program is effective, a basis of comparison—a counterfactual situation—is needed. What outcomes would be observed among a given population if, for example, a given program had not been offered? With respect to faith-based programs, there is confusion, evident after even a cursory review of research and advocacy publications, about what comparisons are appropriate. It is not sufficient, for example, simply to state that faith-based reentry programs can be effective. The question is, effective as compared to what?

At least three distinct counterfactual scenarios exist. In one, it is expected that a faith-based program creates better recidivism and behavioral outcomes as compared to a situation in which released prisoners receive no programming. In the second, it is expected that a program produces as good or better outcomes than "business as usual" (i.e., the de facto set of services that released prisoners may typically access). In the third, it is expected that the outcomes will be as good or better than those associated with other reentry programs. Which scenario is appropriate to use as a basis of comparison may well vary depending on the nature of the program and a given criminal justice system's current state of practice.

For example, on the one hand, using "no programming" as a comparison may be appropriate. Indeed, the lack of reentry programming constitutes a common criticism of reentry practices to date (Travis et al., 2001). On the other hand, the reality is that many released prisoners may in fact participate in one or more community-based services, even if the intensity of these services may be nominal (Solomon, Waul, van

Ness, & Travis, 2004). In this case, the use of "no programming" as a comparison is inappropriate (see Heckman & Smith, 1995).[2]

Using "business as usual" as a comparison may seem appropriate. Identifying what that means, however, can be challenging. For example, one must compile and somehow weight each of the different types and amounts of services received. Moreover, since "business as usual" will vary from one place or state to another, as well as over time, the results of any comparison may be of limited utility to others wishing to adopt a faith-based program that has been found to be effective in one place or state or at one point in time.

Finally, it rarely, if ever, is the case that most or all released prisoners will participate in fully developed, well-tested programs. Thus, using specific reentry programs as a point of comparison for evaluating faith-based reentry programs generally will produce results of questionable use. If, for example, a faith-based program is found to be as if not more effective than another reentry program, the question arises as to how relevant the findings will be when thinking about programming for the general reentry population, most of whom receive either no programming or a potpourri of diverse services. Indeed, it may not even be the case that the faith-based or comparison reentry programs produce better outcomes than "business as usual" (assuming the latter does not include participation in fully developed and tested programs).

In selecting what the appropriate comparison should be for determining whether a faith-based program is effective, an additional complication arises. What if a faith-based program provides secular services (e.g., cognitive-behavioral counseling) that are already known to be effective? In that case, to determine if the "faith" aspect of the program is effective, a comparison is needed between the program and a situation in which only the known-to-be-effective secular services are provided. The bar now is raised, however—that is, a faith-based program is being compared to one that is already known to be effective. In such a situation, it generally will be more difficult to isolate a specific net effect of a particular program activity, such as faith-related services.

A related complication lies in the fact that there is little empirical foundation to anticipate that faith-based programs will have a substantial effect. Consider, for example, that research consistently points to a modest relationship between religion and crime (Baier & Wright, 2001; Clear & Sumter, 2002). Thus, under ideal conditions, and ignoring the potential implementation issues that affect any program, one might at best achieve small reductions in offending. Add to this consideration the fact that faith-based programs generally offer a range of services (Branch, 2002; Sundt et al., 2002), and questions arise as to whether it is reasonable to expect evaluations to uncover a "faith" effect. Typically, for example, one would attempt to isolate the net effect of faith after controlling, whether through an experimental or quasi-experimental design, for participation in such services. Under this approach, however—where the expected faith effects may be slight, other programming efforts come into play, and implementation issues may be substantial—it may be unrealistic for anything but the most rigorous research designs to uncover a faith effect, especially if the effect is small (Farabee, 2005).

Types of faith-based program-level effects that might create improved reentry outcomes

Faith-based programs are often described as somehow obviously leading to improved outcomes. As noted earlier, however, what a "faith-based" program is remains open to debate, as does the appropriate basis of comparison for assessing effectiveness. Assume, however, that "faith-based" programs may encompass a range of activities, including—but not necessarily limited to—increasing the salience of religion to individuals, encouraging affiliation and participation in specific religious denominations, promoting adherence to specific directives associated with different faiths, and, more generally, emphasizing the importance of spirituality in one's daily life. Similarly, assume that some programs may simply be self-designated as "faith-based," per the policy of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.[3] The question arises: is it faith services, faith organizations, or a reliance on secular "best practices" that is the cause of any identified program-level effectiveness?

In the first scenario, it is possible to imagine a faith-based program that emphasizes specific faith-related activities (e.g., self-help classes aimed at increasing an individual's religiosity or spirituality), and that these in turn generate improved outcomes. Here, as with the two other scenarios below, the improvement might occur in comparison with any of the three groups previously identified (i.e., released prisoners who received no services, those who received "business as usual" services, or those who participated in some type of secular program known to be effective in its own right). In short, the faith aspect produces improved outcomes.

A second scenario is that faith-based programs provide no specific faith services but typically are administratively better, or more efficiently run, than "business as usual"

efforts or other prisoner reentry programs. Any difference in outcomes thus might arise purely because of organizational efficiencies or characteristics, such as the extent of coupling with other service providers (Smith & Sosin, 2001). A related possibility is simply that faith-based organizations, because of their mission orientation and community connections, can provide many more services than others (Blank & Davie, 2004). Thus, their effectiveness arises from the fact that few or no services would otherwise be available to released prisoners (Branch, 2002, p. 1; McGarrell et al., 1999, p. 7; Roman et al., 2004, p. 20). Here, it is not faith, but organizational efficiency in the provision of "business as usual" services, that produces improved outcomes.

A third scenario is that faith-based programs provide no specific "faith" programming, but rather are more likely than "business as usual" services or other reentry programs to emphasize principles of effective intervention (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000), such as a targeting of criminogenic needs (e.g., substance abuse, employment, anger) or the use of "best practices" (Sherman et al., 1997). In this case, any identified effectiveness would likely be due to the secular, best practices content of the programming, not faith per se.

Of course, it is possible that all three general factors—faith, organizational efficiency, and best practices—might come into play in creating improved reentry outcomes among individuals exposed to faith-based programs (see Sundt et al., 2002, p. 74). From an evaluation research perspective, they all therefore would be important both for creating appropriate comparisons and for developing appropriate measures of program impact. Put differently, failure to take all of them into account means that inappropriate comparison groups might be used. For example, researchers may miss the fact that a faith-based program provides best practice services in addition to faith-related services. In turn, they likely would proceed to use secular, non-best practice programs as a comparison rather than other best practice programs and services. Then they may fail to identify or may exaggerate the true effects of the program, and they may also fail to measure the specific factors that create any observed effects. For example, they may neglect to measure organizational characteristics of one or more faith-based programs or to collect data on their use of best practices.

Types of faith-related causal effects and mechanisms through which the effects arise

With these observations made, assume that by a "faith-based" program is meant one that emphasizes either entirely or to a substantial degree services that involve faith-related content (e.g., an emphasis on developing religious or spiritual centeredness). Two questions arise: *first, what exactly is the type of causal effect between faith and crime, and, second, what explains why the effect arises?*

It is important to recognize that the broader literature on religion and delinquency and crime provided relatively little guidance about these questions (Baier & Wright, 2001; Benda & Corwyn, 1997; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Evans, Cullen, Burton, Dunaway, & Benson, 1997; Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, & Burton, 1995; Johnson, Li, Larson, & McCullough, 2000; O'Connor, 2004, 2005). On the one hand, relatively little of this literature examined "faith" as a more general and encompassing concept than "religion" or "religiosity," and the bulk of the research used rudimentary measures, such as the frequency of church attendance, of these latter concepts. On the other hand, it provided few explanations about why a link between faith and crime might exist. Rather, it simply established that a modest inverse relationship could be found between measures of religion (e.g., frequency of church attendance, level of community-level religiosity) and crime, and that this relationship might vary depending on the type of offense (Clear & Sumter, 2002, pp. 130–131; O'Connor, 2005, p. 20; Roman et al., 2004, pp. 4–6).[4] The literature rarely examined the effect of *changes* in religiosity on offending (Johnson, Larson, Li, & Jang, 2000; Regnerus, 2003a). In addition, few studies examined potential faith-crime links as they might exist among populations of released prisoners.[5] Instead, the bulk of research in this area focused on general population samples, and so its generalizability to released prisoners, who comprise a small and unique subset of both the general population and criminals, was questionable (O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002).

With these caveats made, the focus of the article now turns to eight common types of causal effects that can characterize the faith-crime relationship, including direct, indirect, interactional, conditional, threshold, symmetric, nonlinear, and negative effects. For each, there is a range of specific mechanisms that may give rise to the effect. Here, these different types of effects, along with some of the mechanisms that may account for them, are discussed to illustrate their importance to evaluating faith-based programs and developing and testing theories about how such programs, and faith in general, may contribute to improved outcomes for released prisoners. The focus will be on "faith" as a general category that encompasses religion, religiosity, and spirituality,[6] and on individual-level types of effects

(i.e., effects as they occur among individuals, as opposed to, say, relationships between rates of faith-oriented activities and rates of crime among cities).[7]

First, faith may have a *direct* causal effect, contributing directly to improved outcomes among released prisoners. Participation in faith-oriented classes may, for example, result in reduced offending. In this situation, there may be no obvious or testable explanation about the causal relationship; it simply, and perhaps inexplicably, exists. Typically, however, researchers expect that there may be some explanation. For example, it may be that participation in a faith-oriented class leads individuals to believe that certain behaviors are morally wrong,[8] and this belief in turn may reduce the chances that the individuals engage in criminal behavior. Observe, however, that simply because a factor, such as faith, may achieve its effect indirectly through another factor, the influence is no less causal. Rather, it simply is more temporally distal in its causation (Mears & Stafford, 2002).

Second, as the example above suggests, the effect of faith may operate *indirectly* (i.e., through some other intervening or mediating mechanism) (Benda & Corwyn, 2001). Faith programming may increase participants' religiosity, which in turn may affect known criminogenic factors, such as drug use, or increase participants' willingness to access services that target similar factors. Changes in these criminogenic factors may ultimately improve recidivism and behavioral outcomes among participants. When thinking about unpacking the "black box" of any relationship (Rossi et al., 2003), such as a faith-crime link, indirect effects generally are the most common type of mechanism envisioned. For example, Smith (2003) recently argued that no fewer than nine indirect pathways between religion and delinquency could be hypothesized. Specifically, he identified three dimensions that included three factors each: (1) moral order (moral directives, spiritual experiences, and role models); (2) learned competencies (community and leadership skills, coping skills, and cultural capital); and (3) social and organizational ties (social capital, network closure, and extra-community skills). In each instance, the suggested logic is that religion—and presumably faith and other dimensions of religiosity, such as the salience of faith in one's life (Davidson & Knudsen, 1977)—changes each of these dimensions and that these changes in turn lead to improved outcomes, such as reduced offending.[9] Other researchers have identified additional indirect mechanisms that might exist, such as changes in an individual's social bond, moral values and commitments, association with conventional versus delinquent peers, and self-concept (Dammer, 2002; Hirschi & Stark, 1969;

Jensen & Gibbons, 2002; Johnson, Li et al., 2000; McGarrell et al., 1999; O'Connor, 2004, 2005; Regnerus, 2003a; Roman et al., 2004; Simons, Simons, & Conger, 2004).[10]

Third, the causal effect may be *interactive* (or moderating) such that the influence of faith programming varies depending on the presence or level of some other factor (Benda & Corwyn, 2001). For example, participation in faith-oriented services may create more pronounced effects for individuals who are involved in other services, such as employment referrals and skills training. It may be that participants who have jobs have more opportunities to put lessons learned from their faith-instruction into effect, thus reinforcing and strengthening the faith lessons. Given an interactive causal effect, researchers still are confronted with the challenge of explaining why the effect exists. Perhaps participation in faith-oriented programming increases an individual's commitment to a set of particular moral beliefs. These in turn may inhibit offending, but much more so when the beliefs are supported by the ability to put them into action in, say, a work environment.

Fourth, there may be a *conditional* faith effect, that is, a causal effect that is contingent on the presence of other factors. For example, an effect of attending faith-oriented classes may be contingent on participants also taking part in employment and mental health counseling, such that failure to participate in the latter services results in no effect of the faith classes. Assessing the relative contribution of faith to a given outcome can be difficult in these cases. Consider, for example, that to start a fire, oxygen, fuel, and a spark are all needed, and no one of these factors is obviously more important to the endeavor. The amount of one of these factors, such as fuel, may, however, tell one something about the *size* of the resulting fire. By extension, the intensity of faith programming may bear on the magnitude of an outcome, even when the outcome cannot occur without the presence of other factors. Here, again, identifying causal explanations—not only why the effect of faith is contingent on, say, employment and mental health counseling, but how the contingent relationship ultimately leads to improved behavioral outcomes—is a critical undertaking.

Fifth, an effect of faith may arise only after a *threshold* has been crossed—that is, when a sufficient "dose" of faith has been achieved. Such effects may be especially relevant in discussing faith-based programs. For example, there are many accounts of individuals in the criminal justice system, as well as outside of it, who experience epiphanies, moments in which they come to view faith or the presence of a higher power as critical to

their lives, or in which they arrive at an existential shift in perspective that leads them to view the world and their role in it differently (Clear, Hardyman, Stout, Lucken, & Dammer, 2000; Dix-Richardson & Close, 2002; Jensen & Gibbons, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Miller & C'de Baca, 2001; O'Connor, 2005).[11] Some faith-based programs may be structured to promote such moments in the belief that any lasting effect can only be realized through profound inner change. Whether the belief is true, the logic implies that it is insufficient simply to be exposed to faith programming. Rather, a requisite level or amount of such programming must occur before inner change occurs that can, in turn, produce improved outcomes. Here, again, explanations would be needed to explain how or why the identified causal effect improves crime outcomes (e.g., perhaps inner change affects an individual's motivation to commit crime).

Sixth, it also is possible that the effects of faith on reducing recidivism may be *nonlinear*. For example, reductions in criminal behavior may be greater as people move from being nonreligious to somewhat religious, and less as people move from being somewhat religious to very religious. Reiterating the above comments, explanations about why the causal effect is nonlinear and how exactly it arises (e.g., through what indirect or intervening mechanisms) may be diverse, yet are important to identify. Perhaps initial, marginal changes in faith have the equivalent effect of pushing a barge that is stuck off a riverbank—the change frees the barge to move down river, but any additional push has a much-diminished effect. Similarly, the effect of faith may be such that any initial change is more likely than subsequent changes to affect someone's behavior. Armed with this knowledge, however, researchers still would want to examine *why* this relationship exists. What, for example, is the mechanism that explains why any change in faith, whether initial or subsequent, leads to improved behavioral outcomes?

Seventh, it is possible that all of the above-identified effects are *symmetric or asymmetric*. If a causal relationship is symmetric, then increases in the causal variable lead to a particular effect, and decreases in it lead to the reverse effect (Lieberson, 1985). If the relationship is asymmetric, then the effect only occurs in one direction and is irreversible (e.g., an increase in faith may decrease criminal behavior, but a decrease in faith may not increase such behavior). Consider a simple example: adding water to a basement results in flooding and damage to carpeting, but removing the water does not then fix the damaged carpet. Similarly, perhaps the failure early in life to develop one's faith contributes to criminal behavior, but that does not necessarily mean

that developing one's faith later in life reduces offending. That issue aside, researchers still face the task of explaining *why* an identified symmetric or asymmetric relationship exists. To illustrate, a failure to participate in faith-oriented activities early in life may lead to a diminished sense of self-esteem, and in turn, to an increased propensity to commit crime. By contrast, participation in faith-related activities later in life may be incapable of undoing, say, a long-standing sense of low self-esteem.

Finally, there are potential *negative effects* of faith that have yet to be closely examined or even conceptualized (Regnerus, 2003a; Smith, 2003).[12] Changes in one's religious beliefs may lead to higher recidivism rates than would otherwise occur. Consider that some faith-based programs ask people to openly acknowledge both their crimes and their powerlessness relative to some higher force. Acknowledgement of one's past may well be difficult for some people to accept, especially if they feel relatively ill equipped to compensate for or overcome that past. Out of frustration, they may revert to their previous behaviors, including offending, at even higher levels. In addition, accepting that a higher power has ultimate control in one's life could lead to a belief that one is not actually responsible for specific behaviors, including crime. Not least, embracing a particular religion that in turn disappoints in some way (e.g., if an adherent comes to believe there is a significant disjuncture between a particular religion's teachings and practices) may arguably contribute to a disavowal of any faith, and in turn, a greater propensity to commit crime. Such possibilities appear plausible, yet have not been subject to rigorous basic or applied research.

It should be emphasized that other types of causal relationships, such as contextual and reciprocal causation (Benda & Corwyn, 2001),[13] may exist, and for each a range of competing causal explanations may also exist. Moreover, it is possible that two or more types of causal effects may co-occur. For example, the effects of faith-oriented services may be direct, indirect, interactive, and conditional, or perhaps both interactive and threshold-specific.[14]

Although an ideal of science is parsimony—the simplest theory is, all else equal, the best—in reality, much of social behavior is not simple (Lieberson, 1985; Marini & Singer, 1988; Mears & Stafford, 2002; Steel, 2004). In the case of crime and the effects of faith-based programming, social behavior may, for example, proceed along the directions sketched here. Indeed, Agnew (2005) recently had argued that crime theories and research increasingly pointed to a diversity of causal effects that contribute to crime. To the extent that this assessment is

correct, existing research on the faith-crime relationship falls far short of providing empirical documentation of these different causal effects or theoretical insight into the mechanisms that gives rise to them (see, however, Benda & Corwyn, 2001; O'Connor, 2005; Smith, 2003), whether for general populations, the criminal population, or for the subpopulation of criminals who were incarcerated and subsequently released.

Identifying and explaining causal effects is important for developing theories and contributing to social science, but it also is important for program and policy development and evaluation of faith-based programs and policies. For example, if it is known that a faith effect arises only when faith services are present at a sufficient level or "dosage" (see O'Connor & Perrey-clear, 2002, p. 17), then practitioners know to develop a program that aims to achieve such a level. Similarly, if it is known that a faith effect occurs through an intervening mechanism, such as increased access to a network of prosocial peers, practitioners might create a program that provides additional services (e.g., training in effective communication) to help ensure that contact with this network is sustained over time. Not least, identifying and explaining causal effects is important because it provides guidance in knowing how to appropriately evaluate faith-based programs. If researchers know to look for a specific threshold effect, for example, it will be easier to find the effect and in turn to demonstrate that a program was effective. Without such knowledge, the risk arises of overlooking the effect and concluding that a program is ineffective.

What is the evidence concerning the impacts of faith-based reentry programs?

The discussion to this point has emphasized in varying ways the limitations of research to date bearing on measuring the effectiveness of faith-based prisoner reentry programs. These points are elaborated below through reference to extant evaluations, with particular attention given to the critical problems that remain to be addressed.

First, as has been emphasized, research on the effectiveness of faith-based reentry programs is scarce (Clear & Sumter, 2002; Farabee, 2005; Johnson et al., 1997; Johnson, Li et al., 2000; O'Connor, 2005; Roman et al., 2004). Indeed, despite the growth in research on prisoner reentry (Petersilia, 2003), few accounts have examined faith, and those that have failed to find faith programs to be effective in improving reentry. For example, Johnson et al.'s (1997) study found no differences in recidivism rates between prisoners who

participated in Prison Fellowship-sponsored programming and a matched group of prisoners who did not. Some studies have found positive outcomes (O'Connor, 2005, pp. 21–22), but these and other such studies invariably have suffered from considerable methodological problems, including a lack of random assignment, no use of controls or comparison groups, self-selection biases, and limited measures of impact (pp. 23–24).

The neglect by researchers of the faith-reentry nexus might reflect a potential bias (Johnson et al., 1997). Whether true or not, the inattention is striking. Maruna's (2001) otherwise excellent account of the "reformation" process during reentry is illustrative. Despite an extensive focus on how, as his book's subtitle states, "ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives," the text makes little to no mention of the potential role of faith in the reentry process, even though reformation of self is a concept central to many faiths and certainly to faith-based programs (see, generally, O'Connor & Pallone, 2002).

Research on faith-based delinquency and crime *prevention* programs is, by contrast, more common. The relevance of this research to prisoner reentry programs is, however, not clear. For example, many delinquency and crime programs focus on individuals during their crime-prone years, not the young adult or older years in which desistance may be a naturally occurring process and in which unique challenges, such as finding a job despite having a felony record, may be faced. Extant research also provides little guidance about the content of adult reentry programs (Roman et al., 2004, pp. 16–19). Furthermore, in most instances, research on faith-based crime prevention programs has not employed appropriate comparison groups or address the causal issues discussed above.

Second, despite a large body of research on religion as a correlate of crime (Baier & Wright, 2001; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Evans, Cullen, Burton et al., 1997; Evans, Cullen, Dunaway et al., 1995; Johnson, Li et al., 2000), the relevance of this work to ascertaining whether faith-based reentry programs are or can be effective remains questionable. For example, most studies to date have focused on the relationship between religion and delinquency, as opposed to the relationship between faith and adult offending and desisting processes, especially among the unique subset of offenders who entered and eventually were released from prison (Maruna & Immarigeon, 2004).

In addition, this research has rarely relied on anything other than single measures of religiosity (e.g., frequency of church attendance). Thus, it does not adequately reflect the full range and dimensions of faith (see Benda & Corwyn, 2001; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Idler et al.,

2003). It does not, for example, typically conceptualize or measure faith as a broader, more general construct that encompasses religious salience, affiliation, practice, or spirituality, or in turn link these diverse dimensions to different types of offenses (Fernander, Wilson, Staton, & Leukefeld, 2004, 2005; Roman et al., 2004).[15] In addition, this research has provided few investigations of the types of causal effects between faith and crime, especially desistance, that might be operative. Thus, while the body of scholarly work to date is instructive, its relevance to evaluations of the likely or actual success of prisoner reentry programs is subject to debate.[16]

Third, although the few studies of faith-based prisoner reentry programs to date constitute important first steps (Clear & Sumter, 2002; Johnson & Larson, 2003; Johnson, Larson et al., 1997; Johnson, Li et al., 2000), they typically suffer from the problems described above. For example, how exactly the programs were "faith-based" was not always clear, and to the extent that they were, they might not be representative of other programs characterized as faith-based.

Furthermore, the comparison groups created for these studies typically suffered from selection bias issues. Specifically, the study designs generally precluded the ability to sufficiently address concerns that the individuals who in general would have had better outcomes self-selected into treatment while those who in general would have had worse outcomes self-selected into comparison groups (O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). In theory, selection effects are not a problem if researchers adequately control for differences between treatment and comparison groups. The problem, however, is that almost invariably studies of faith-based programs do not employ adequate controls. For example, instead of controlling for, say, motivation or faith inclinations, they control for age, sex, race, or prior history of offending, none of which necessarily (or at face value) are appropriate for addressing selection effects. This problem is especially relevant for faith-based programs because by their very nature, they appear to be more likely to attract individuals with different levels of motivation (Schneider, 2001, p. 192).

In short, it simply is too early to say whether faith-based prisoner reentry programs are more effective than "no programming," "business as usual" strategies for assisting released prisoners, or as effective or more effective than secular, "best practice" reentry initiatives (O'Connor, 2005, p. 24). By extension, it is too early to know if any putative effects of such programs are attributable to faith-related elements of such programs, organizational operations, or reliance on best practices. It also is too early to know, among those programs that explicitly emphasize faith-related services, what kinds of causal effects are present and how and why they arise.

The dearth of research may be due to many factors, including the difficulty of developing a typology of faith-based programming that garners general agreement among researchers, practitioners, and government agencies (Smith & Sosin, 2001). Another factor may be that many faith-based programs focus on providing services to address the short-term needs of individuals rather than on addressing longer-term needs, such as intensive substance abuse prevention (Chaves, 1999). Still another may be the relatively small sample sizes and limited administrative or other data associated with these programs (Roman et al., 2004). Regardless, the lack of a solid body of research on faith-based reentry programs will likely continue so long as the definition of "faith-based" remains inconsistent across studies and until more methodologically rigorous research is conducted. In addition, progress will likely be hampered until basic research can provide a compelling and systematic theoretical foundation for explicating how faith and offending are causally (if at all) related. Such research will need to be linked in turn to efforts to develop specific programs and policies that take account of community- and individual-level factors that may affect their implementation and ultimately their effectiveness (see Roman et al., 2004).[17]

What are critical implementation issues that may affect the operations and impacts of faith-based reentry programs?

Even the most effective programs will fail if they are not implemented as designed (Rossi et al., 2003). Although implementation issues affect virtually all social programs, they may be especially problematic for faith-based reentry programs. Such issues in turn reduce the chances that evaluations will identify significant impacts, such as improved behavioral outcomes. No list of implementation issues can be complete, but identified here are several of the more prominent ones that may impede the effectiveness of faith-based reentry programs.

Unclear goals and uncertainty about how specific activities contribute to goals

Perhaps the most critical implementation issue lies with failing to articulate a clear statement of program goals and how exactly specific activities will contribute to these goals. Without such statements, it is impossible to evaluate a program's activities or outcomes, and the

chances increase that important activities will be inconsistently implemented.

The range of possible goals is extensive, including not only reduced recidivism but also such other goals as reducing drug abuse or addiction, obtaining housing, reuniting with family, acquiring the skills needed for a particular vocation, and developing basic life skills (e.g., how to obtain and balance a checking account, grocery shop, interview for jobs, recreate in a pro-social manner). Some faith-based programs, such as the Ridge House program in Reno, Nevada (Drinan, 2004), attempt to achieve all of these goals.

With such a diversity of possible goals, the likelihood increases that faith-based programs will fail to fully articulate how each goal is to be achieved. As a result, the programs may not incorporate certain activities that could be critical to achieving particular goals. To illustrate, consider a faith-based program that seeks to reduce recidivism and to increase access to housing among released inmates. The program may adopt a range of strategies without fully examining whether the strategies are the best ones for achieving these goals. Indeed, the question in each instance is whether specific strategies are likely to result in progress toward the goals and whether all staff consistently use or promote the strategies. For example, does the faith component of the program consist solely of Bible studies? Or does it include other activities, such as staff role-modeling of specific faith-related behaviors (e.g., prayer)? Are such activities really the most effective way to increase or enhance "faith"? More generally, are they relevant to increasing access to housing? In the latter instance, it may be that those inmates who develop a strong faith orientation become more confident and thus better able to seek housing. It also may be the case that other activities, such as referrals to housing assistance agencies, can be more helpful, especially if provided in conjunction with faith-related services.

The number of permutations is considerable, especially when programs, such as many faith-based initiatives, offer a range of services (any one of which may require clear protocols to ensure consistent implementation) and indicate that they want generally to improve the lives of released prisoners (which can include physical and mental health, educational and employment outcomes, reduced offending and drug use, to name but a few). The more services and activities that are offered, the more chances arise for certain goals to be overlooked or for staff to emphasize some goals or activities and not others. The result can be marked inconsistency in program services and activities, and in turn, a diminished likelihood that the program can substantially achieve any of its goals.

These issues are compounded by the inherent difficulty of articulating fully and precisely the "faith" dimension of even the most "faith-saturated" programs (Johnson & Larson, 2003). Even if there were no such challenge, faith-based programs may purposely be vague in their explicit goals and how these are to be achieved. The fear is that any overtly articulated faith, spiritual, or religious services or activities may prevent or cause the loss of government funding.

Inconsistent implementation

Even when a program has clear goals and an articulated logic model for the specific activities that will be undertaken to achieve the goals, obtaining consistent implementation of these activities can be difficult. This issue may be especially critical for faith-based programs. Referring to the example above, if a critical element of a faith-based program involves role modeling of faith-related behaviors, the risk arises that different staff will model such behaviors differently. Indeed, for many individuals, faith may be something that they express in their own unique way. For program participants, however, the diversity of ways in which faith is role-modeled may be confusing or differentially reinforced by different staff, thus inhibiting their ability to learn what is expected or how to behave.

In addition, some faith-based programs premise their effectiveness in part on the ability of staff-client relationships to help motivate clients to change. Thus, if, as one might expect, some staff develop less close relationships with clients than do other staff, the chances that they will motivate the clients to change is correspondingly diminished. In turn, the clients may be less likely to be exposed to the very experiences that the program emphasizes to achieve its goals.

The challenge of coordinating diverse organizations and agencies

Faith-based programs frequently are described as community-based efforts entailing the coordination of diverse services through many different organizations and agencies (Blank & Davie, 2004; Branch, 2002). Such efforts are challenging as a general matter (Harris et al., 2005; McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001). To be effective, they must match clients with appropriate services, and they must then work closely with other entities who provide the services. To do so successfully requires effective leadership and considerable effort and planning, as well as sufficient funding and staffing.

Virtually any organization may experience difficulties in addressing each of these dimensions. Faith-based organizations face, however, the additional challenge that other community organizations may strongly resist or oppose their efforts, reflected in no small part by the partisan and divisive nature of the issue nationally (Hercik et al., 2005; Jablecki, 2005; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2005).

In addition, some may be better situated that others to obtain the support and assistance of important local organizations. For example, Leventhal and Mears (2002) studied Catholic churches in a large urban city in Texas and found that some were better able to forge ties with the local Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which in turn enabled them to gain access to specific social services for their clients. Given that faith-based programs serving released inmates typically operate with limited funds (discussed below), the traditional challenges confronting community-based organizations assume greater prominence. Effective leadership becomes more important, for example, as a basis for leveraging services from other organizations and agencies.

Insufficient or inconsistent funding

Finally, sufficient and consistent, sustained funding can be another critical challenge. Nationally, financial support for faith-based reentry programs appears to be greater than in previous decades, yet such support cannot be taken for granted (Burke et al., 2004). Frequently, it is a relatively trivial percent of the funding programs need to exist (Smith & Sosin, 2001). In such cases, faith-based programs must rely on the support of volunteers, churches, community associations, county and state agencies, and other diverse organizations, contributing to program instability. Many smaller faith-based programs may simply lack the administrative infrastructure and experience to apply for funding, thus placing program operations at risk. In addition, sustained funding for program operations may be threatened by neighborhood opposition to efforts involving released prisoners (Tucker, 2003). Against this backdrop, faith-based reentry programs face the daunting challenge of maintaining the integrity of their efforts and sustaining them over time.

Conclusion

Prisoner reentry stands as one of the central social problems confronting the United States today, and faith-based programs increasingly are being promoted as an effective strategy for managing this problem. Such programs hold much promise. Critical conceptual and measurement issues must be addressed, however, before that promise can be supported empirically. Research to date simply provides too little a foundation for clearly identifying when programs are "faith-based" or for stating that such programs effectively improve recidivism and other behavioral outcomes, and existing faith-based reentry programs generally have not been subject to rigorous theoretical or empirical analysis (Farabee, 2005).

To improve research and practice, the first priority should be to develop a foundation, such as the one suggested by Smith and Sosin (2001), to classify faith-based programs, identifying distinguishing characteristics of "faith" and "faith-related programming." As discussed above, Smith and Sosin (2001) had argued that using "faith-related" terminology provided greater flexibility, ensuring that programs that were not associated with a particular denomination or church nonetheless were classified as involving a faith dimension. At the same time, clear distinctions should be made between organizations with formal ties to particular denominations and those with no such ties but that express a specific religious or theological orientation. When denominations or faith organizations are involved, it is important to ascertain whether a faith-based program reflects the denomination's or organization's ethos or takes an approach that is unique or substantially different.

Regardless of organizational affiliation, a further distinction is critical—namely, does the content of the program center primarily around some element of religion or faith (e.g., prayer) or is it primarily secular in orientation? More generally, what is the intensity of the faith component? For example, does the program rely solely on a single type of faith-related programming (e.g., Bible studies) or many types, or does it provide a milieu or "faith-saturated" environment (Johnson & Larson, 2003, p. 8)?

Extending Smith and Sosin's (2001) framework in this way provides considerable flexibility for creating meaningful classifications of faith-based programs for bases of comparison. Implicit in the approach is the recognition that not all faith-based programs are the same, and that evaluations should account for the precise organizational and faith components of these programs. Perhaps an evaluation may find that largely secular programs that include Bible studies are consistently no more effective than those that exclude such studies. That, however, would not justify saying that all faith-based programs, such as those that attempt to create a "faith-saturated" environment, are ineffective.

Once the precise faith aspect of a program has been identified, the critical next step is to identify appropriate comparison groups to assess the program's effectiveness in reducing recidivism and improving other outcomes. Here, many possibilities present themselves and depend entirely on the type of faith-based program of interest. In the ideal instance, however, a pool of eligible candidates is randomly assigned to the program and to some "business as usual" option. In such cases, even if the latter includes a range of services, an evaluation can determine whether the faith-based program exceeds the benefits associated with such services. For example, Operation Starting Line (OSL), an evangelical prison ministry program, conducts one-day events, held in prison facilities, where "program organizers, staff, and volunteers [have a chance] to interact with inmates and to share a message of faith and hope" (Kerley et al., 2005, p. 415). These events occur nationally, providing many opportunities to create comparison groups. To illustrate, even if participation in such events is voluntary, researchers could identify similar inmates in similar facilities where the event is not offered, and compare in-prison and post-prison outcomes. This type of design is important because an individual's faith may be a motivator for program entry, and the design ensures that the comparison group is made up of individuals who have similar motivations or characteristics. A related type of quasi-experimental design would involve using a waiting list of individuals for the program under study; individuals from the list likely would have similar motivations and characteristics.

Researchers then must determine whether any identified effect (e.g., reduced recidivism), if such exists, is attributable to some faith aspect of a given program, its organizational operations, or its reliance on secular services that would be considered best practices. Here, again, an experimental or quasi-experimental design affords the greatest leverage for disentangling these possibilities. For example, some faith-based programs, such as the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (Johnson & Larson, 2003), operate a largely similar program in multiple prisons. Were particular aspects of each prison program to be systematically modified and monitored, researchers would be better positioned to evaluate whether the program was more effective when it emphasized certain activities (e.g., mentoring) over others (e.g., biblical studies) or when the faith activities were similar but the leadership, staffing, or other organizational features varied.

Finally, in those situations where the effect is held to result from some faith-related activity, researchers need to identify the specific type of causal effect that exists (e.g., direct, indirect, interactional, conditional) and then explain *why* it exists. For example, does acceptance of a higher power lead to greater motivation to participate in other types of treatment, to greater self-control, or to some other change that in turn reduces the likelihood of crime or an improvement in some other behavioral outcome?

Scholarly research can be especially useful in this last regard by exploring how faith and desistance from crime may be related. Some research (e.g., Clear et al., 2000) suggests that prisoners who "find religion" or renew their spirituality while in prison or in a rehabilitation program may be less likely to reoffend. Researchers should seek to understand the factors that shape released prisoners' decision to desist from crime. In addition, studies of the faith-crime nexus should employ a much wider array of measures of faith, with causal linkages examined that take account of the diverse ways in which diverse dimensions of faith (e.g., involvement in specific faith-related activities versus adherence to specific religious beliefs) may influence social behavior. They also should distinguish between spirituality and religiosity, denominational affiliations, and the salience of these dimensions to individuals. Research along these lines will be important for improving theoretical understanding of how faith, crime, and recidivism may be related and for synthesizing a diverse range of studies.

Not least, increased research is clearly needed on the range of prisoner reentry outcomes relevant for assessing effectiveness. As O'Connor (2005, p. 24) recently emphasized, even if faith-based programs do not reduce recidivism, they may achieve other outcomes, such as humanizing the correctional system experience or improving employment and housing conditions. Improvements along these dimensions conceivably can improve recidivism. Even if they do not, however, they constitute a substantial benefit to these individuals, the communities to which they return, and society.

Research on faith-based programs, guided by the above considerations, will also be important for program and policy formation. It can, for example, be used to guide the logic, structure, and activities of specific reentry programs and policies. Too often, programs are developed without clearly articulating goals and how exactly specific activities will contribute to these goals. The result can be inconsistent implementation and reliance on assumed causal relationships that may be suspect. This situation can and should be avoided for two reasons. First, a body of research on faith and crime exists that can inform the development of a theory-based program with clear goals. Second, programs and evaluations guided by a sound theoretical foundation are likely to produce better, and

more likely to be measured, outcomes (Chen, 1990; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998).

In addition, policymakers and practitioners can use such research to defend, where appropriate, support for faith-based reentry programs. Although these programs clearly hold promise, the absence to date of empirical evidence creates the risk of a backlash. Crime policies historically have tended to follow specific trends (e.g., rehabilitation versus "get tough" approaches). So, the problem is that faith-based programs will come to be seen as ineffective and dismissed as a passing fad even though they may be effective. Increased and better research may well diminish the chances of that happening, especially in an era that stresses accountability and evidence-based practices.

Given the ongoing emphasis on faith-based programs (Meckler, 2005), a unique opportunity exists for policymakers to promote such research. For example, they can require that federally funded faith-based programs must develop clear logic models and at the same time can support evaluation efforts of these programs. Anything less than this type of systematic approach is likely to leave current debates about faith-based programs at a standstill, with proponents accepting "on faith" that faith-based programs are effective and opponents rejecting, on similar grounds, that assessment. Of course for some critics, effectiveness is irrelevant—in their view there is a constitutional requirement that church and state be separated, especially where taxpayer dollars are concerned (McDaniel et al., 2005). As with many policy debates involving constitutional or philosophical differences of opinion, research cannot be the ultimate arbiter, but it can help place such debates on a firmer foundation.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Staff at the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (personal communication, October 6, 2004 via www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci) confirmed with the lead author that the Office uses no legal or other definition of a "faith-based" program.

2. Heckman and Smith (1995) discussed the logic of evaluation designs involving social experiments. They emphasized, among other things, that comparisons involving "treatment" and "no treatment" frequently entail an inappropriate counterfactual logic. It likely is the case, for example, that some type of services are available to the general population of individuals sampled for the treatment group. In creating a comparison group, however, researchers may well select individuals who receive no treatment (or assign them to the group that is to receive no services). An evaluation thus might show that treatment "worked," meaning that treatment was more effective than receiving no services. Use of such a comparison group, however, might be inappropriate if in fact most individuals receive some services. Indeed, if compared with individuals who received "business as usual," which might well include services of some kind, there might be a less pronounced "treatment" effect, or perhaps no effect at all.

3. See note 1.

4. Although the evidence for an inverse relationship between measures of faith and criminal behavior is consistent, evidence supporting the idea that this relationship varies depending on the type of offense (e.g., crimes, such as drug use, strongly prohibited by particular religions) is limited (Evans, Cullen, Dunaway et al., 1995). Denominations do not appear to differ appreciably in their rates of individual-level offending (Ellis, 2002).

5. Additional limitations exist as well. For example, it can be argued that any link between religion and crime is spurious. The "true" underlying relationship may be that some individuals differ with respect to certain neurological characteristics that make them more prone to embrace or avoid religion (Cochran, Wood, & Arneklev, 1994).

6. Faith, religion, religiosity, and spirituality need not be the same and, in fact, are conceptualized in different ways in the literature (Fernander et al., 2004, 2005). In reality, then, the issues discussed here are more complicated.

7. Some work examined ecological-level relationships (O'Connor, 2004, p. 17). For example, Stark, Doyle, and Kent (1980) found that metropolitan areas with higher rates of church membership experienced lower crime rates. These and related studies are not discussed here because faith-based programs typically focus on individuals (O'Connor, 2005, pp. 19–20).

8. Many studies have suggested that, as a general matter, religiosity is positively associated with moral prohibitions against crime (Kerley et al., 2005; Stylianou, 2004).

9. Smith's (2003) argument rested on the assumption that there indeed is something causal about the role of religion: "[There is] something particularly *religious* in religion…that…can exert 'causal' influence in forming cultural practices and motivating action" (pp. 19–20, emphasis in original).

10. Hirschi and Stark's (1969) study of the relationship between religion and delinquency, and their positing of the "hell fire" thesis (namely, that religious individuals are more likely to refrain from criminal behavior out of fear of punishment in the afterlife), was the forerunner of much research today on this topic, and directly contributed to the application of social bond and social control theories as frameworks for explaining any link between these two phenomena.

11. The director of one faith-based prisoner reentry program, the Ridge House residential program, has made just such an argument (Drinan, 2004). The program reportedly disavows the term "faith-based," but does include a strong emphasis on encouraging spiritual exploration.

12. Regnerus' (2003a) study suggested that in certain contexts parental religiosity might contribute to increased delinquency. Smith (2003) suggested that religious involvement might, for a variety of reasons, have no effect or result in a negative effect. He also emphasized that research outside of criminology suggests some negative effects of religious involvement, including the potential for it to inhibit educational attainment (see Darnell & Sherkat, 1997).

13. Contextual relationships may occur when, for example, ecological-level conditions affect individual-level outcomes. Some research points to the possibility of an interaction effect between ecological conditions and the effects of measures of individual-level religiosity. For example, Stark and Bainbridge's (1997) study indicated that religion inhibits individual-level offending more strongly in rural southern communities as compared with individuals in large East Coast cities (see, however, Benda & Corwyn, 2001). Reciprocal relationships arise when two factors affect one another.

14. An evaluation of the Ridge House residential program in Reno, Nevada, suggested that all four possibilities might in fact be operative in the program (Drinan, 2004). Smith's (2003) analysis, among others (e.g., Benda & Corwyn, 2001), suggested similar complexities in the way in which faith might contribute to reduced offending.

15. Fernander et al. (2005) emphasized that relatively little attention had been given to measures of spirituality and criminality (p. 682). They noted: "isolating the links between spirituality and criminality and religiosity and criminality may be informative as individuals who identify themselves as spiritual do not necessarily involve themselves in religious organizations or activities, or vice versa" (p. 683). Further, according to Roman et al. (2004), the vast majority of studies on the relationship between religion and crime "had used only one item to measure religion" (p. 13). The range of measures used varies dramatically, and can include such dimensions as church attendance and membership, religious salience or attachment, belief that certain actions are a sin and/or will result in supernatural sanctions, spirituality, and involvement in religious or spiritual activities.

16. Interestingly, one of the stronger supports for the logic of some faith-based programs comes from studies that show the role of ecological-level conditions in reducing individual-level offending. Studies of the "moral communities" hypothesis, for example, suggest that in communities that are more religious (as measured in various ways), the propensity of individuals to commit crime is lower (Bainbridge, 1989; Regnerus, 2003b; Stark, Kent, & Doyle, 1982). A review of the literature, however, turned up few examples of faith-based correctional or reentry programs that drew on this line of reasoning. The causal logic is nonetheless compelling in some respects. For example, to the extent that particular programs recreate the context of a larger "moral community," they may well help inhibit criminal behavior and promote prosocial behaviors. The question arises, then, as to whether this effect is sustained once an individual leaves the program. Researchers simply do not know the answer, and have not yet examined whether ecological effects of "moral communities" continue to exert influence on individuals who leave these communities.

17. Roman et al. (2004, pp. 27–31) suggested a conceptual framework that attempts this task by sketching ways in which different theoretical perspectives and empirical research might be linked in general ways to specific program activities and sets of short- and long-term outcomes.

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