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Peer-group ties and a prison sentence: a chance to enhance successful re-entry¹

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal relationships of prisoners are of key importance from the aspect of their reintegration. We focus our attention on non-kin, primarily friendship ties on a sample of young Hungarian males convicted for the first time, for a relatively short period of up to 3 years. In our longitudinal qualitative research, 80 offenders from eight penal institutions were interviewed while serving their sentence and 31 of them could also be reached 6 months after they left the prison. We analyse what significance prisoners attribute to their friendship ties, how these change during the prison sentence, which factors influence their sustainment or dissolution, weakening or strengthening.

KEYWORDS: *Friendship, peer-group ties, qualitative methods, reentry, reintegration, social support, prison*

ABSZTRAKT

A fogvatartottak személyközi kapcsolatai a reintegráció szempontjából kulcsfontosságúak. Figyelmünket elsősorban a nem rokon, elsődlegesen baráti kapcsolatokra összpontosítjuk viszonylag rövid, legfeljebb három éves időtartamra elítélt fiatal magyar férfiak mintáján. Longitudinális kvalitatív kutatásunkban nyolc büntetés-végrehajtási intézet 80 elkövetőjével készítettünk interjúkat a büntetés letöltése alatt, és közülük 31 főt hat hónappal a börtönből való távozásuk után is el tudtunk érni. Azt elemezzük, hogy a fogvatartottak milyen jelentőséget tulajdonítanak baráti kapcsolataiknak, hogyan változnak ezek a börtönbüntetés során, milyen tényezők befolyásolják fenntartásukat vagy felbomlásukat, gyengülésüket vagy erősödésüket.

KULCSSZAVAK: *barátság, kortárs csoportos kapcsolatok, kvalitatív módszerek, reintegráció, reintegráció, társadalmi támogatás, börtön*

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Introduction

The size of the prison population is significant, even growing in several countries, and so is the importance of reentry (Travis et al. 2001, Seiter – Kadela 2003, Petersilia 2003, Solomon et al. 2004, Crow 2006). As recidivism rates are high (40% in Hungary, Somogyvári et al. 2016: 11), it is of great importance to gain insights into the success factors of reintegration, and there are an increasing number of studies that analyze the experiences of prison inmates and the effects of different factors on the chances of recidivism (e.g. Nagin et al. 2009, Hochstetler et al. 2010, Cochran 2012).

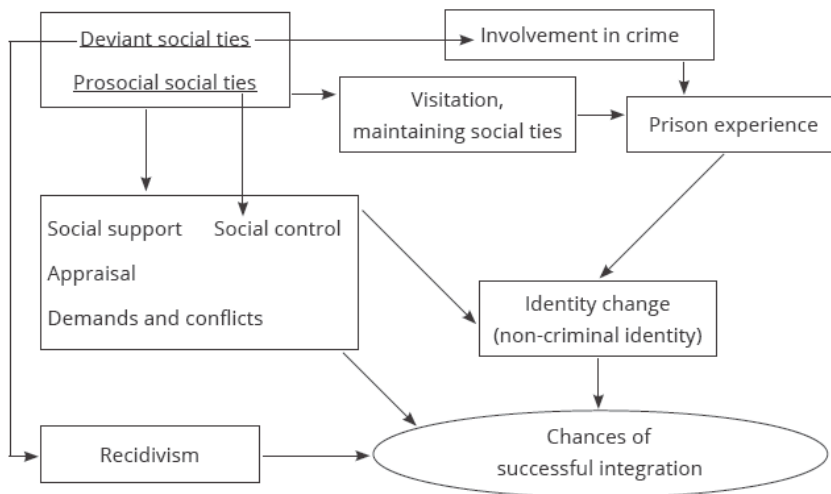
The characteristics of interpersonal networks regarding social (re)integration are of paramount importance, as the resources and support available through them have great significance after leaving a penal institution. They are significant when trying to find a place to live or employment, receiving emotional support or just spending free time, which are all factors of successful reentry or ways of avoiding recidivism (Sapouna et al. 2011). Not only the basic structure of inmate social networks should be in the focus of attention, but also how inmates' out-of-prison social ties shift and change over time. Although incarceration dramatically disrupts the capacity for interaction with one's interpersonal relationships, it does not necessarily mean the termination of such ties. In case important ties can be sustained during incarceration, as visitation literature suggests, the results are reduced prison misconduct and after release decreased recidivism together with greater chances for successful family reunification and employment (see Cochran – Mears 2013, Bui – Morasch 2010). In the present article, we only briefly mention family ties and focus primarily on peer-group relations, dominantly friendship ties.

The role of interpersonal ties in getting in and out of prison

Based on previous research, the role of interpersonal relations in the success or failure of reintegration are summarized in Figure 1. (Albert 2015: 173). Social ties with deviant individuals may easily lead to the person's involvement in acts of crime which, thus, may result in a prison sentence. Also, if such ties are sustained after release from prison, they increase the risk of recidivism for the same reason. Prosocial ties, however, are sources of support both while someone is in prison and after release, and they may contribute to successful reintegration by offering new opportunities and resources individuals need to continue with their lives. Moreover, by exerting social control, they may also contribute to an identity change, the strengthening of non-criminal identity. Of course, this change is possible for those who have deviant ties, as well.

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Figure 1. The impact of ties outside prison on successful re-entry



If prison inmates have good relations with their immediate environment, they are more likely to try to comply with their expectations and give up their criminal career. Strong non-criminal family ties enhance this by structuring everyday life and providing informal support and control. Strong emotional ties with a wider circle of people like friends can promote sensibility to take into account the feelings of others when considering committing crimes again. Other people's trust is important for the individuals and can be a strong factor in refraining from crime (Caverley – Farall 2011). New employment opportunities or free-time activities may also support a crime-free lifestyle by providing new vistas to different interpersonal circles. Welch et al. (2008) also found that social support decreases criminal activity.

However, friendship ties are not only sources of social support while in prison and after reentry, but may also be risk factors. One of the basic tenets of criminology is that the environment plays a crucial role in committing crimes, that is why the social nature of delinquent behavior has turned the attention of researchers toward social networks, most often peer relations of criminals. Friends and other peers often play a key role in one's imprisonment or criminal career: a significant proportion of the literature analyzing friendship and criminal activity focuses on this very aspect from the point of the formation of the criminal carrier (see for example Akers et al. 1979, Haynie 2002, Meldrum – Boman 2013, Pratt et al. 2010, Vásquez – Zimmermann 2014), and recidivism, going back to prison (Uggen – Kruttschnitt 1998, Giordano et al. 2003, Weaver 2013).



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The second best predictor of criminal activity following committing crimes previously is having relationship with peers who commit crimes (Agnew 1991: 148). The connection between committing crimes and the peer network is not clear. The self-selection model (e.g. Gottfredson – Hirschi 1990) claims that criminal activity precedes the selection of criminal friends, while according to the social learning theory the direction is reverse, young people commit crimes under the influence of their criminal friends. According to Sutherland (1947), someone becomes a criminal if the number of criminal relationships exceeds the number of non-criminal ties. Later, researchers found that individuals are influenced by the behavior rather than the attitudes of their friends (Jensen 1972, Matsueda – Heimer 1987, Warr – Stafford 1991, quoted by Haynie 2002), so the most important factors are the imitation and the direct reinforcement of the behavior of friends (Akers 1985).

Young people having mostly criminal friends are more likely to become criminals themselves as compared to those having few or no such friends (Haynie 2002). Socialization theories, for example differential association and social learning theories, attribute this to a peer-group effect (Akers 1998). As both criminal and non-criminal ties can be present in a young person's interpersonal network, the degree of homogeneity of the network in this respect is important: if the network is not homogeneous, so it consists of both criminal and non-criminal ties, the behavioral norms and values regarding expected behaviors are less clear.

Granovetter's theory of social embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) highlights the fact that because it is important for the members of a network to maintain their ties, thus the network can generate trust and behavioral expectations and strengthen social norms. As in young age peer relations are especially important; thus, friendship networks are very effective in influencing the behavior of their members. Coleman stresses that embeddedness is a resource that generates social capital (Coleman 1988, 1990), and in case of young people, it satisfies their needs for social acceptance and personal identity. According to the approach highlighting the importance of social networks, the ones who get involved in criminal activity are those whose friendship network facilitates and supports that. By increasing the ratio of non-delinquent friends, the social capital generated in the friendship network increasingly supports the formation of norms, expectations, and behaviors to avoid crime. That is why it is important to analyze the structure and characteristics of friendship networks (Haynie 2002).

Sampson and Laub's (1993) highly influential age-graded theory of informal social control emphasizes the importance of life transitions and attributes major significance to the strength of social bonds in various life stages. They also highlight the significance of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, where an advancement of a "new self-identity as a desister of crime", as a family man, a hard worker, a provider is possible (Sampson – Laub 2017: 176), which may be especially relevant with respect to the target group of our research.



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The impact of detention on ties

It is evident from previous research that interpersonal networks are not static (1) due to societal changes but also (2) changes over the life course, for example, when the ego enters new contexts (school, work, retirement etc.) (Small – Pamphile – McMahan 2015, Cornwell – Laumann – Schumm 2008, Mollenhorst – Völker – Flap 2014). Incarceration is definitely the most extreme shock with respect to one's interpersonal networks, disconnecting the inmates from most of their previous affiliations (Schaefer – Bouchard – Young – Kraeger 2017). Regarding the special sub-population of prisoners, although the significance of social network characteristics has been recognized, the number of studies focusing on how detention impacts the social relations of prisoners was more limited. However, a growing number of studies has appeared recently (see Kreager et al. 2016), calling attention to the use of the network analytic perspective in prison studies, and the following year even a special issue of *Social Networks* (2017 October) was devoted to the topic, entitled *Crime and Networks*.

Volker et al. (2016) divide these cross-sectional studies into four groups: (1) studies on contact with friends and family while in prison, with a special focus on the significance of visitations, (2) prisoners' ties with other inmates while incarcerated, (3) studies focusing on the impact of a prison sentence on romantic relationships of prisoners and (4) research on changes of contact frequency of prisoners with friends and family members (see Volker et al. 2016: 48).

There are only few studies that concentrate on *changes* that occur in the social networks of prisoners, especially longitudinal studies that assess network transformations after release from prison. The Returning Home Project (see LaVigne et al. 2005, Naser – LaVigne 2006), which is a large-scale panel study that contains data on inmates of the cities of Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland and Houston, interviewed inmates – similarly to our study – just before they were released from prison as well as two months and six months after their release. They were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with eleven statements about family relationship quality (see Visher et al. 2004). Results indicated no changes in family relationship quality and support in the period from before to after imprisonment. In a recent longitudinal Dutch nationwide study on the effects of imprisonment (“the Prison Project”), a representative sample of 1909 prisoners has been interviewed at the beginning of their imprisonment, as well as 6 months after their release from prison. These relationship-level data provide information about actual network members of the prisoners. Volker et al. (2016) analyzed the changes of the core discussion networks of prisoners before and after the prison sentence and found that only 40% of the pre-prison network members remained the same, and particularly friendship ties had a higher chance to deteriorate and get replaced by kin ties.



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Although a part of the extensive visitation literature examines the impact of visitation not only during imprisonment but also regarding recidivism, only a fraction of these studies involves the analysis of non-kin ties (e.g. Adams – Fischer 1976, Duwe – Clark 2011, Bales – Mears 2008), as they mainly focus on family relations (e.g. Hairston 1991, Jiang – Winfree 2016, Christian – Thomas 2006). Duwe and Johnson (2015) report that visits from community volunteers had an impact on recidivism when they examined 836 offenders released from Minnesota prisons. These visits significantly reduced all three applied measures of reoffending, and the effect grew as the proportion of these volunteer visits to all visits increased; thus, they propose the application of this finding for higher risk offenders who lack social support.

The Hungarian Penitentiary System

Hungary is a small EU member state with fewer than 10 million inhabitants in Central Eastern Europe. The ratio of prisoners exceeds the average of EU countries and has increased significantly over the past years (from 149.6 in 2007 to 185 per 100 000 persons in 2014), partly due to the fact that repressive criminal policies are increasingly dominant in the country. The majority of crimes involve theft or robbery. Imprisonment between 1-5 years is the most dominant. The 29 prisons in Hungary are run by the Hungarian Prison Service. The average prison population has been around 18 000 inmates recently; 92% of them are males. More than half of the prison population is aged between 30-49 years. The average overcrowding rate is 130% percent. There are minimum security, medium regime, and maximum regime prisons, and medium regime detention is dominant (43,7%). 50% of prisoners are first time offenders. 67% of the prisoners have primary education at most, so they are significantly less educated than the average population (Kozári – Rutkai – Sánta 2017).

One of the most pressing problems of Hungarian prisons is severe overcrowding, which persists over a long period of time and has demonstrable negative effects on the living conditions, activities and interpersonal relationships of prisoners in prison (Nagy 2015, 2016). Among the recommendations to mitigate the negative effects of overcrowding, the author also refers to the provision of family contact (Pallo 2015, cited in Nagy 2016). In parallel with the increase in prison capacity, also motivated by EU directives, the number of prisoners has also increased, reaching 18623 in 2021, a significant increase compared to previous years.⁴ In the press, one can read that prisoners are being moved from more crowded prisons to less crowded ones

⁴ https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/iga/hu/iga0007.html



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to reduce overcrowding. This can also mean that they are moved further away from their families, making it more difficult to visit them.⁵

For our topic, a very important aspect of the system is the opportunities it offers for maintaining interpersonal relationships. There are several ways for prisoners to keep contact; the exact regulations depend on the type of the penitentiary institute (jail, prison or detention center) and type of regime. For visits, prisoners may have up to four visitors at the same time, at least once a month, for sixty minutes per occasion, but for no more than ninety minutes per occasion. They can phone their contact persons, ranging from twice a week for five minutes per occasion to five times for 10 minutes, on mobile phones provided by the institution. The price per minute is very expensive which results in an affordability problem, as well. Convicts may be permitted to have a pass to meet a visitor outside the incarceration institution. In order for a relative or a friend to qualify as your „contact”, they should sign a “Contact’s declaration form”, claiming that the penitentiary institute may register their personal details. The detainees must mail these forms to their future contacts, and only if these are returned can the prisoner submit a request. In case of non-kin members, the prison officer must also approve of the request. Prisoners may also send and receive letters and packages or money orders.

Services offered after release are limited, despite the fact that as a significant proportion of prisoners are from low-status families, these would be necessary to avoid recidivism. Those without accommodation are taken care of by the system providing for homeless people, which is right now more capable of helping them survive than offering substantial help in solving their housing problems. Employment services dominantly offer jobs in the framework of the at the time of the data collection very wide scale public works project, but these jobs provide insufficient income to cover even basic housing and living expenses. Some NGOs also offer services, but these are available only for a fraction of those in need. Therefore, those without informal support are in quite a hopeless situation.

The Current Study

The basic goal of our study was to find out to what degree young males spending their first relatively short prison sentence possess chances in relation to their eventually successful reintegration into mainstream society. We focused on the perceived changes in the subjective understanding of personal relationships of our target group, particularly friendship and peer networks, as the support available through and the characteristics (or the lack) of one’s interpersonal network is a very

⁵ <https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2023/03/02/megteltek-a-bortonok-utaztatjak-a-rabokat-bedolt-a-zsufoltsag-mentesito-program/>



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important factor of successful reintegration or recidivism. We formulated the following research questions:

1. What is the meaning and significance of pre-prison friendships and peer relationships to the prisoners? How do they relate to pre-prison friends and peers? What was the role of friends in their imprisonment?
2. What changes occurred in these ties, while being in prison and after the release? How were these changes perceived and received by the prisoners/ released?
3. What factors influenced these changes? What can we say about the non-family ties that persisted over this period of incarceration? How does the prison experience affect these ties?
4. Are prison friendships possible, and what factors influence the formation of or retainment from this type of ties?
5. What happens to pre-prison and in-prison friendship ties after the release? How do these ties influence the chances of reentry and reintegration?

Method

The research project was carried out between 2012–2015. The design facilitates the comparison of the expectations of our target group in prison before the end of their sentence with their real experiences after leaving the correctional facility. The research topic was examined within the context of the existing venues for socialization – the family, social relations, labor market and the social environment. Special attention was paid to individual attitudes, motivations, and interpretations.

The method of research was qualitative data analysis. It is idiographic since we attempt to understand a wide array of personal experiences; it is inductive since we approach the general from the particular, and it is exploratory due to the relatively uncharted nature of the topic. Qualitative methodology was also chosen because we placed great emphasis on the contextualization of the problem, and as an added benefit, as with most other qualitative research projects, it enabled us to give voice to a group which otherwise is rarely audible, in this case people recently released from prison (Sofaer 1999). “Qualitative longitudinal research (following up cohorts of offenders and ex-offenders and gathering detailed evidence about the influences on their trajectories, pathways) has much to offer the medium and longer term development not just of offender management services but of criminal justice policy and practice more generally.” (McNeill – Weaver 2010: 11) Such a follow-up study provides accurate insights into the participants’ expectations and the subjective interpretation of their actual life conditions.



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Data collection

The actual research was carried out through personal interviews: two interviews were to be conducted with each participant; the first one taken in the detention facility within six months prior to the release of the inmate, the second in his residence six months after the release. Our study utilized a non-random sampling method that selected anyone who met some basic conditions described in detail in the Sample characteristics section. During the first stage, we interviewed 80 first-time offenders. For the interviews, we selected eight penal institutions in Hungary (Budapest, Tököl, Veszprém, Szombathely, Baracska, Pálhalma, Kecskemét, Szeged), each possessing special qualities, as our goal was to gain a varied sample. We were not aiming to get a representative sample of the target group, but attempted to register a multiplicity of experiences in the sample. Fieldwork took place in 2012–2013.

The participants were asked a range of open-ended questions to provide opportunity to share their personal experiences with us. During the first interview, they were asked questions about their family background and friends, their childhood, experiences with the educational system, work history, the story and circumstances of their incarceration, their experiences with prison-life, their expectations regarding the time leaving the prison. In the second round of interviews, we asked them to describe the process of readjusting to the free society after imprisonment and their experiences thereafter with family, friends, in their neighborhood, in the job-market. Our questions focused on reintegration, and unfortunately from the aspect of this present paper, no systematic network data collection was performed apart from the fact that the interview guidelines contained a number of questions about interpersonal ties.

The interviews were recorded using an audio device and then transcribed verbatim. Interviewers also took some personal notes on non-verbal aspects or other circumstances and personal impressions. The names and other personal data of the interviewees were not included in the transcriptions but were stored separately for use in finding our interviewees in the second phase of the study. The 80 interviews prepared in the first round mostly lasted between 45 minutes – 2 hours; in the follow-up phase, the 31 second round interviews we managed to prepare, although we attempted to reach all 80 respondents with various methods, lasted 30 minutes – 1 hour.

Analysis of the interview data

The voice-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, then coded and analyzed with the ATLAS.ti qualitative text analysis software (7.0.83 version). We primarily applied thematic analysis (Ritchie et al. 2014) by elaborating a thematic framework



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based on the research questions, main topics, and the questions of the two interview guides. Some of the themes (codes in ATLAS.ti) related to the friendship ties were e. g. *The description of the crime, Strengths/weaknesses in finding employment, Friends in prison, Childhood friends, True friends, Keeping contact from prison with friends and pals, Change in friendly relations, The role of friends in the crime(s) committed, Role of friends in reintegration*, etc. By systematically going through the interviews, we connected the corresponding interview fragments to these codes. We also applied open-coding, identifying various sub-themes and further themes of the specific phenomena in focus. New analytical viewpoints emerged, thus new codes and subcodes were formed as well (e.g. *The significance of work while in prison, Loneliness*), and the relevant quotations were connected to these, as well. In the primary analysis, it was possible to create various outputs based on one or more codes, that is, it was easy to obtain an overview of the various themes.

At the same time, we created a classification system of the interviews (based on the interview transcripts), which are called document groups in ATLAS.ti, which signify characteristic features of the interviewees and may be used as variables. Thus, the interviews were classified into these document groups based on the data and information gained from and analyses of the texts. This way it was possible to easily filter the coded interview quotes based on several criteria (e. g. Marital status, Educational level, Location of the penal institution) and also, by importing these variables to the Excel or SPSS programs, they provided a comprehensive and detailed picture of the main characteristics of the interviews. Excerpts of the interview responses are reported verbatim in English translation.

Sample Characteristics

The aim of our study was to detect subjective expectations of prison inmates considered as most likely to reintegrate into society after a prison sentence; thus, we targeted males younger than 35 years, spending their first, relatively short-term (maximum 3 years) prison sentence who were voluntarily willing to participate in our study. We intended to choose first-time offenders but, in fact, realized that being in prison for the first time is not at all equal to being a first-time offender (see Appendix 1).

Nearly one fifth of our 80 respondents are from the capital city of Budapest, one third lives in villages, and the rest in towns. Little more than 2/3 is maximum 26 years old. 11 respondents have not finished primary school, and almost half of them have only primary school degree. Nearly one third of them are skilled workers while only one tenth have at least a high school degree. A quarter of our respondents considered that the prison sentence has an effect on their refraining from crime in the future. Two thirds of them have friends or acquaintances and almost half



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of them have family members who have been in prison before. A quarter of them mentioned belonging to the mostly deprived ethnic minority, the Roma, during the interview,⁶ though we did not ask about ethnicity directly. In reality, two thirds of the interviewees were not first time offenders but got their first prison sentence this time. A quarter of them had never worked before going to prison. Every third of them mentioned drug or alcohol-related problems.

We must note that there may be some positive bias regarding the second wave of our interviews. If we compare some characteristic features of those who provided us with only one interview with those whom we could interview before and after release as well, we can see that this latter group in fact is in a more favorable situation (the second figure refers to the group participating only in the first interview):

People in the group with two interviews have:

- Higher educational level, for example, the proportion of those with at least vocational education: 50% versus 33%.
- More positive future outlook: 74% versus 65%.
- More friends expecting them back after release: 73% versus 53%.
- More regular contact from prison with people who are not their family members (e. g. friends, acquaintances, employer, colleagues): 63% versus 45%.
- Better employment prospects: 53% considered that he is expected back at his former workplace (legal employment or not) versus 29%.

The above data may support that we were more likely to be able to reach those for the second interview, who were in a less unfavorable situation among our original 80 respondents (see also Appendix 1).

Data Analysis and Findings

In the following sections, we present the main findings of our research with respect to the role of peer group ties in three time dimensions: before, during and after imprisonment.

⁶ Hungary is an ethnically homogeneous country with the exception of a considerable Roma population. Studies estimate the size of the Roma population to be 5-6% of the population of Hungary (Kemény et al. 2004). The majority of the Roma are affected by poverty and social exclusion.



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Relationships before getting into prison

WHO ARE FRIENDS?

Similarly to the average population (Albert – Dávid 2007), most friends of our respondents come from the school, the workplace, or especially in smaller settlements, from the neighborhood. In case of best friends, the long duration of the relationship is also a basic element, often the parents had known one another, or the friends went to school or even kindergarten together. Several interviews provide us with information on the content of friendships. In accordance with previous research (Rubin 1985, Bruckner – Knaup 1993, Fehr 1996) male friendships are mostly based on common activities, similar interests:

“If there is no work to do, we organize a grill party, go to the beach, drink and the like.” (Participant 109)

“We went to wander around, to the movies or just talked... As every company is a little different, I do something different with each.” (Participant 120)

As we received information on interpersonal relationships while our interviewees were already serving their sentence in prison, the renumeration of ties bears the influence of the prison-experience, often resulting in a significant re-evaluation of the qualities of such ties. One group of respondents had a basically positive view of their former friendship networks:

“We understood one another, everybody talked about their problems, we always went to the pub after work to drink a couple of beers, we never had a fight or were angry with one another, we could always discuss anything.” (Participant 103)

Most of our respondents claimed to have friends, but a number of them claimed to have no friends at all. This was mostly connected to the lack of trust, a disappointment, often related to the prison experience.

“I do not think there are friends. Maybe because I considered someone a friend, and then I got very disappointed.” (Participant 115)

Those lacking friends often tried to receive similar support from family ties. The majority of the interviewees reported to have contact from prison with one or more family members. In some cases, the social support given by family members made these ties even stronger and more intimate:



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*“My mom has supported me ever since I am in (prison). She asked at the beginning if I had any friends, but my friend is my mom, I tell her everything.”
(Participant 140)*

THE ROLE OF FRIENDS

Looking into the role of friends in being sentenced to prison is also part of our first research question. Studies found that in communities which are involved more in criminal activity the level of social capital is low, and that the social capital, or at least the „legal social capital” of recidivists is very scarce. The damaged nature of kinship and friendship networks of these people force them to lean on their criminal ties, which increases the risk of recidivism (Webster et al. 2006).

In line with the literature, in most of the interviews the role of friends in getting into prison was mentioned, often as the negative impact of recent friendship networks as opposed to the „good” old friends.

*“My old friends are also naughty, but not that way. With them, we went for the girls, had parties, that was all. But the recent ones had been in prison for 10 years, working was not fashionable with them. I wanted to go to prison, I am serious. So that I would be a cool guy. We always had fights, were showing off. But for whom? I do not know. We chose bad idols. That was the problem.”
(Participant 109)*

On the other hand, we also found examples that the lack of friends, the lack of real quality human relationships, communication, the lack of social control (Gottfriedson – Hirschi 1990) led to crimes. Moreover, almost half of the prisoners had one or more relatives who have previously been sentenced to prison. Some of them, especially brothers or male cousins, contributed to the crimes committed by our interviewees. In their case, the lack of social control based on family background is evident.

CHANGES IN FRIENDSHIPS – RE-EVALUATIONS

Investigating the changes that occurred in friendship ties, the number of these ties first seemed to be a relatively simple question, but proved to lead to more insightful further issues. When asking about the number of friends, most people initially replied as “many”, mentioning 5-10 or even more friends, but later on more refined distinctions were made, most often by separating true friend(s) and buddies (“*igaz barát*” vs. “*haverok*”). In determining the quality of friendship, a decisive momentum among our interviewees was going to/being in prison, which can also be considered



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as a „friendship-test”, which was used by these men to evaluate their friendship ties. To put it differently, they compared the cultural friendship-scheme to their actual experiences with their friends, and this comparison often resulted in a negative conclusion. Some realized they have never had real friends, as they did not receive the support and care which they had expected in such a crisis situation, so retrospectively they re-evaluated these relationships. Often the symmetric, giving-and-receiving aspect of friendship expectations failed both in relation to themselves being in prison and also supporting their loved ones „outside”:

“I have friends, but I lost interest in them. I do not have friends any more. They do not write to ask if I am dead or alive. While outside, they hanged out with me all the time as I bought them alcohol...I write them but they do not answer. This is not friendship. I was good only until I had money. But I have no money now.” (Participant 116)

Some expected in advance that they were going to have fewer friends after they go to prison; they considered it as a natural phenomenon:

“I used to have many friends but as I got in (to prison), some disappeared, but I expected it. Those who I was in daily contact with, but they do not even write a letter... I do not have any contacts with 80% of my former friends. I used to have about 20 closer friends, 3-4 remained. But one could expect that.” (Participant 105)

These quotations indicate that many friends failed this „test”; however, although less frequently, the opposite also happens: certain relationships turn out to have those characteristics which prove to be essential through the prison experience, and the interviewees were not aware of them.

“You realize in prison who is a friend. My best friend for ten years is not my friend any more...because of my girlfriend. But there is one guy, older than I am, we had not met for a long time, but he learnt that I was in prison...and he wrote me a letter asking what I needed. He was the only one...” (Participant 113)

“...my friendship with my best friend grew stronger. He did not only say he would help, but he did help.” (Participant 130)

Interestingly, new friendship ties were in several cases not completely new ties but people the prisoners had known in the past. However, the quality of their



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relationship changed, as these people – often surprising the inmate – proved to be supportive during the prison sentence.

The factors that influence the changes in ties from outside the prison (pre-prison relationships) are described in more detail later in this study. As it can be seen from the quotations above, it is of primary importance in several cases whether a friend will be registered as a contact officially or not.

The time spent apart from friends erodes even those friendship ties that seem to be stable at the beginning of the prison sentence:

“Now that I am in prison, at first regular contact was kept, letters, phone calls, but as years go by, we do not send messages to each other, I am not interested in them any more. At the beginning if I could, I called a couple of close acquaintances, they went to see my parents, sent in parcels, but then it all stopped completely.” (Participant 123)

It is very important to highlight that inmates, while in prison, counted on the friends who have passed the „prison test” after they leave prison, and we can check how much these expectations were fulfilled due to the longitudinal nature of the study.

The meaning of friendship ties to our prisoners and the changes that occurred in these relationships thus proved to be strongly related to their prison experience. Prison experiences made expectations toward a true friend very clear: a friend is someone you can always count on, friendship is a symmetric, mutually supportive intimate relationship. The blurring of the line between friends and family is indicated by the fact that in some interviews it was mentioned that someone is such a very good friend that can be viewed as a sibling, or even more/better than that, or a certain sibling has also a place among friends, and acts not only as a brother but also as a true friend in the egocentric network.

DIFFICULTIES OF KEEPING CONTACT WITH FRIENDS OUTSIDE THE PRISON

The difficulties, limitations and high price of maintaining outside contacts were often mentioned by our respondents. A quarter of our sample are socially excluded, their families live in dire circumstances. Social inequalities are reflected in the possibilities of maintaining contacts. Prisoners in better financial situation could contact their ties more frequently, while others scarcely had a chance to meet their family members in person, as they did not have the money for a visit:



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“Phoning is rather expensive. Writing letter also. Everybody is struggling to receive a bonus-talk. I could only get one visit for the month, there is fight over it.” (Participant 102)

Due to the aforementioned reasons, some prisoners consciously select and concentrate their resources on keeping contact with family members:

“I agreed with my friends that after release I am going to hang out with them a lot, but the few opportunities I have here, I will use for my family.” (Participant 103)

Based on the literature, the chances of reintegration are decreased by this otherwise rational strategy that prisoners, due to practical reasons, choose to maintain their strongest, family ties at the expense of their weaker ties (Granovetter 1973), which may provide them with more diverse resources.

Some do not even try to keep contact with friends so as not to put them in an embarrassing situation. Yet it may also be that they only defend themselves with this strategy from disillusionment and refusal.

“I did not send my friends a contact request. I did not want to make them feel uncomfortable that I send it so as to ask anything.” (Participant 108)

Some others just do not want their friends to see them in prison; they feel ashamed.

“Honestly, my friends would keep contact, but I only want the family, I feel ashamed even in front of them.” (Participant 142)

Interpersonal ties in prison

Inmates may have interpersonal relationships with people “outside” and those inside the prison, with other inmates, or the prison staff. Clemmer’s often cited prisonisation theory claims that in case the outside relationships of inmates are good, it protects them from overtaking the value system of criminals (Clemmer 1940, cited by Papp 2012). Papp (2012: 22) however points out that a number of researchers consider outside relationships by definition positive and non-criminogen, which may not be the case, as often family and friendships ties play a central role in a criminal carrier, and maintaining further contact with these may reinforce the acceptance of the norms of the prison society.



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It is difficult for prisoners to satisfy their interpersonal needs in prison (Cooke et al. 1990). Stress levels are very high in such total institutions as prisons, which means that supportive relationships are very much needed, although some studies indicate different patterns of psychic stress and supportive networks in prisons than in civil life (Lindquist 2000). Our fourth research question was about the possibility of prison friendships and the factors that influence the formation of these. According to Corley (2001), men make friends in prison for two main reasons: protection or comfort. The quality of friendships in the prison is influenced on the one hand by the *masculinity code*: be masculine, tough, do not show weakness, do not let others know about your problems, your personal details, do not be caring, and also the *prison code*, that is, mind your own business, protect yourself and those who hang out with you, and keep your mouth shut. Neither of these expected behavioral norms favors the formation of long-term real friendships. Despite this, friendships are formed in prisons as well, for being close together for a long time provides plenty of opportunities to form and deepen new relationships.

On the other hand, in case such ties are formed (especially among those serving long sentences), it can even attract people back to prison, as they miss their prison relationships after release. Friends from prison can also provide support for each other while in prison and after release, and especially as after long years spent in prison interpersonal networks existing prior the prison sentence can get seriously damaged or even cease to exist, former prisoners may get support in finding housing or employment with the help of their former inmate friends. However, prison norms (Mind your own business! Be masculine!) and the negative environment where paranoia is adaptive and trust levels are low, hinder the formation of quality ties.

Interviewees with limited family support are more inclined to form new ties in prison. Several people mention that the real quality of ties formed in prison will be tested after release from the penal institution. While in prison, most people plan not to get involved again with those who played a role in their getting into prison, or with those who turned to be “false” friends, not providing support while in prison. Some people intentionally plan to form new friendship networks, which better suit their new (non-criminal) ego. This latter strategy is very important in forming a new, non-criminal identity and enhancing desistance from crime.

The prison code does not permit making friends with the prison staff, as it may indicate that the prisoner is an informer. That is why prisoners try to talk the least possible to guards in front of others. To get new friends from the outside world is also difficult, but not impossible.

As indicated earlier, prisons are not the ideal locations for friendships and several of our interviewees shared this view. They identified a number of reasons for that, including the lack of trust, the lack of free-time programs organized from one’s own free will, the general atmosphere, the lack of (intimate) conversations.



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“As we are in prison, you cannot let anyone be close. Usually friendships here are fake. In case there is friendship, they will commit crimes again together after release.” (Participant 140)

“I have learnt a lot in prison including that there is no such a thing as a friend. Even if we eat from each other’s mouth, you can never know the real intentions. Maybe your best friend betrays you.” (Participant 202)

The intention to create possibly good, unproblematic ties with fellow prisoners and the staff, to provide support for one another appeared in the majority of the interviews; however, they are afraid of making deep, intimate bonds.

“Everyone inside takes up a style, a role, but you show your real face only after release. Inside you only get a tiny little part from a person.” (Participant 120)

Some phrased that it is not even worth investing into a relationship too much, as one will be released earlier than the other, and the chance of sustaining the tie after release is minimal, due to, among others, the distance of the places of living. Despite the fact that most prisoners have a negative attitude towards making friends while in prison as no one can be trusted, yet 36 prisoners out of 80 claimed to have one or a few friends in the prison. It is understandable from the aspect that being locked up together for a longer period offers numerous opportunities for deepening a relationship or making new friendship ties, in line with the meeting opportunity argument of Feld (1982). Sharing available resources and leaning on each other also deepens certain relations.

In these prison friendships the generally observable principle of homophily is also at play, prisoners seek “similar” others (who are from the same neighborhood, who also work while in prison or maybe even work together, who also have a family or married, who will be released at the same time etc.) An often mentioned aspect was that the friend is also a “first-time offender, does not belong here”, and among the relationship expectations, mutuality and prospective support after release were also considered to be important. This aspiration may enhance successful reentry.

The durability of the prison friendship can only be tested after release, several prisoners mentioned that it will only turn out in the long run after release how functional the prison friendship really is.

“There is one guy in the same shoes as I am, but I may not call him a friend. Real friends always support you in good or bad, I think you cannot judge it while in prison.” (Participant 119)

Some reject the mere possibility of making a prison friend for fear of recidivism.



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*“I would like to avoid the possibility that I may do something because of them or under their influence. None of them are in prison for the first time.”
(Participant 115)*

The next quote phrases explicitly the idea of better relationship alternatives and also the fear of the negative impacts of possible criminal ties for the future:

“I have enough friends outside. Even if they are first-time offenders as I am, they will come back here.” (124)

On the basis of the interviews conducted, it seems that those having no friends outside the prison or have been disillusioned with them are more likely to try to build relationships they can lean on later on, after release.

*“I do not have friends outside any more. There is one inside here. We plan to help each other, I will come and pick him up as I will be released first.”
(Participant 116)*

To sum up the answers to our research question if prison friendships are possible and what factors influence the formation of or retainment from these type of ties, we came to the conclusion that imprisonment has negative impact on the former interpersonal network, especially friendship ties, but offers only limited new opportunities to replace the lost ties with durable new ones from the prison. Especially prisoners whose former networks seems to have consisted of lower quality relationships are open to making new friends in prison.

After release from prison

While in prison, expectations in relation to friends concerning re-enty were also influenced by the changes in pre-prison ties. In the first interview, we asked about expectations after release. Some had extremely positive expectations: their friends would help them find a job; they are going to welcome them. Others were also hopeful in this regard but also had some doubts concerning how much they can lean on such support. Those prisoners, whose friends failed the “prison friendship test”, were rejective: if friends were not there for them in trouble, they will not need them after release either. This view is often linked to the fact that friends played a part in their incarceration, so in case they do not want to go back to prison, they must refrain from being friends with them. This disillusionment with such friends may trigger a process of identity change in these prisoners, help them reevaluate their past, their



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lives, and change their individual preferences, which – among other factors – is an important factor in successful desistance from crime.

Some people in prison planned to form new friendships if released, which may better suit their altered ego. This also indicated a wish, hope, and intention to change and commit themselves to a different, crime-free future. This positive attitude, a faith in a different life also contributes to desistance. Burnett and Maruna (2004), in a ten-year long follow-up study found that 40% of those with positive faith in the future while 70% of sceptics became recidivists, and former prisoners desisting crime were especially optimistic about their control of their future (Maruna 2001).

In line with their plans formed in prison, most of our 31 ex-prisoner interviewees whom we could reach for a second interview after release, did try to refrain from their more problematic friends so as not to get back to prison. These were mostly the friendships that failed the “prison test” anyway. As our second interviews were prepared relatively soon (3-6 months) after release, we do not know how these intentions prove to be persistent. We could also observe a turn toward family members instead of friends.

“I swore that apart from my siblings and children I need no friends. They cause all the problems, they led me to prison.” (Participant 110)

Some people tried to make up for lost relationships with new ones:

“I selected a lot. Or should I go back to those silly things again? I dropped out many, but there are new acquaintances, new faces, maybe not so cool as we were, but they do no bad things.” (Participant 144)

As to how much relationships formed in prison last, there were some examples for both lost and stronger ties, but in a number of cases prison friends already got back to prison.

We could rarely observe the phenomenon the literature describes that people are longing for their prison life to a certain extent (Fleisher 1989). In our study, it was mostly in relation to ties formed in prison:

“I miss them, it would be a lie to tell I do not, as there are certainly moments when I do miss them, I spent two years with those people. It started to become almost like family, as you can count on them.” (Participant 111)

Although the research participants considered the role of their families (family of origin and/or family of procreation) as a factor in their successful reintegration of paramount importance, some evidence exists in the interviews that friendship ties also contributed to the reentry process. Family members provided the most detailed



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information on various aspects of instrumental support received (in housing, finding a job, material support). Emotional support was mentioned in general terms or considered as self-evident. Informational support and appraisal seems to have lower significance. Negative aspects only emerged in few interviews. Social control exercised by family ties is prevalent indirectly, respondents mentioned self-control which is enhanced in an optimal situation by social ties. Not only social support received, but also the intention to return it appeared, especially in cases where released prisoners work in order to contribute to living expenses; thus, they have less motivation and time to spend time with “bad” friends.

Most respondents emphasized the increased importance they attribute to their families, and they claim trying to avoid situations which risk being together with them. This of course characterizes those with supportive family backgrounds. Those whose partnership relations which broke up while in prison or right after release and could not yet find a new partner are more at risk due to loneliness or boredom, which may easily lead to risk-taking or recidivism. Thus, in their case the support of friends and their family of origin would be even more important. A turn toward family relations as opposed to friends seems to be a general trend. The friends who managed to pass the former “prison test” proved to be an additional source of support in reentry and reintegration, especially finding employment.

Discussion

When analyzing the impact of the prison sentence on the non-kin segment of interpersonal networks, a striking feature is that our data actually reflect dynamic re-definition of friendship over time (a part of which we termed the “prison-test”). The prison sentence seems to drastically limit the circle of friends even in case of such a relatively short incarceration episode, and mutuality, symmetry, trust, and support appear as strict criteria of friendship; moreover, a significant part of the previous friendship networks fails to meet them. In extreme cases, prisoners realize they do not have any friends at all, which is a major trauma, but it also indicates an important lack of resources regarding successful reentry. Some manage to form new peer relationships either in the prison or others reclassify some of their former ties as friends. The first recent complete network study of prison inmates in a unit of a medium security men’s prison in Pennsylvania found that 98% of the inmates get along with at least one other inmate, but on average with 3.8, and that the inmate network resembles friendship networks in other settings (Schaefer et al. 2017). The authors concluded that the self-organizing inmate society can foster social integration similarly to other settings. In our study, friendships formed in prison seemed especially important for those who lacked such ties in other settings.

Regarding the factors that influenced the changes in pre-prison interpersonal relationships: maintaining ties with friends and family requires opportunities for



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contact, interaction, and the lack of it weakens relationships, especially as time goes by. A number of people are imprisoned further away from their homes and keeping contact (e.g. phone calls) is costly and is also restricted to a circle of individuals formally accepted as “contacts”. Some prisoners cannot write properly or do not consider writing to be a suitable means of communication, so letters may not work.

The positive effect of visits on decreasing behavioral problems in prison and recidivism has been indicated by a number of studies (Lembo 1969, Jiang – Winfree 2006, Lahm 2008). Visitation research results found that the recidivism rate of prisoners whom no one visited while in prison was three times higher than the rate of those who were visited at least three times (Holt – Miller 1972, quoted by Wright – Wright 1992: 5). A possible mechanism behind this may be that visits help prisoners maintain their social relations and increase their social capital, which on the other hand helps them not to identify with the deviant criminal subculture (Cochran 2012). This aspect may be of paramount importance in case of first-time offenders. Unfortunately, despite the fact that supportive interpersonal ties are key elements of successful reentry after release, it can be stated that – at least at the time of our research – the penal system does little to help sustain existing interpersonal ties, let alone help build new ones, although the necessary infrastructure is in place, and the increased frequency and support of visits could be accomplished with very moderate costs as compared to other interventions. In Hungary a major obstacle in the way of increasing the number of visits is the very low number of supervisors and reintegration officers in penal institutions. In case of those who end up having no such informal support available for them, interventions should help the formation of a supportive, non-criminal interpersonal network.

In Hungary, new law-enforcement regulations came into effect in 2015, placing more emphasis on various fields of reintegration than the previous regulation, and providing more institutional support for them (e.g. regarding employment, housing after release) (Felkai 2013: 5). The new regulations, in theory, offer more opportunities for communication with new forms: e-mail, video-phone and specially constructed mobile phones. Previously only landline phones could be used for a limited period of time, in the presence of the prison staff (Schmehl 2013: 20). At the time of our data collection the previous law (1995. /CVII.) was in effect, which also included that so as to enhance the chances of reintegration, maintaining contact with former relations, primarily family members, should be supported, stating that creating and maintaining stable and durable family relations fail in the case of a significant proportion of prisoners (Hatvani 2006: 52). Despite the fact that the emphasis was on maintaining or settling family ties as a task of the penitentiary system, it should have also supported any interpersonal relationships with the potential to enhance successful future reentry (Hatvani 2006). Another means of keeping contact with the outside world was working at an outside workplace, or short leaves from the institute (Vókó 2014). This latter option was scarcely



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mentioned by our interviewees. There has not been a publicly available scientific evaluation so far on the impact of the recent changes on keeping contact; however, news pieces from the media unfortunately indicate no significant improvements in this dimension so far.

Our qualitative research has come to some similar conclusions as the quantitative analysis on the changes of core discussion networks of prisoners in the Netherlands (Volker et al. 2016) especially regarding two aspects: the prison sentence changes interpersonal relationships in a significant way, but less so, if the prisoner had good quality ties before imprisonment. Especially friendship ties dissolve, while a strong orientation toward kin relations can be observed. In our case a possible explanation could also be that at this stage of young men's lives peer relationships are losing their importance.

After release, the intentions to refrain from "bad" friends and turn toward the family are often explicitly connected to prevent recidivism, and the formation of a new, non-criminal network can be observed. The time-frame of the study does not permit judgement of how persistent such plans are. Our findings, which suggest that most of the released prisoners really tried to avoid former problematic friends may also have to do with the unintended selection bias: as mentioned before, we suspect to have found the better-situated part of our former prisoners after release, those who had a place to return to, who provided us with valid contacts where they could be found, and who were willing to talk to us for the second time. This may be linked to the fact that in their cases the difference between their expectations in prison versus the realities they experienced after release are not so different. Maybe several of our first round interviewees did not want the second interview because that would have forced them to face the discrepancy between their original expectations and future plans and the more negative realities after their release, or they did not want us to see their new situation which may have been worse than what they had described or expected.

As maintaining "outside" relationships while in prison is significantly limited, it often leads to the weakening of even good quality friendship ties, as most people understandably focus on their closest family members: partners, children, parents. This weakens wider networks that could provide links to more diverse resources, which are of key importance after release, for example, when trying to find employment. This is a very practical aspect why the focus of non-kin relations of prisoners' networks is important. By all means, it seems important to promote the maintenance and strengthening of supportive interpersonal ties, including both kin and non-kin ties during the prison sentence (Sapouna et al. 2011) and after release to help former prisoners break away from their criminal networks, in order to decrease their chances for recidivism. On the other hand, it is extremely hard to terminate negative relationships, especially in case the prisoner is not welcome by a well-functioning family or non-criminal friends. It is difficult and time-consuming



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to build new relationships, and the feelings of loneliness and exclusion chase several people back to their former deviant, or prison friends. Thus, social isolation is a risk factor of recidivism, as well.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

Although our fieldwork took place a decade ago, in 2012–2013, unfortunately, despite the changes of legal regulations aiming, among others, to promote the maintenance of ties, the actual practice has not changed substantially, so both the empirical reality and the policy aspects we tackle are still quite current. The prison experience itself seems to act as a very serious test of former ties: the resulting re-evaluation of one's former relationships as weighted by the support they provide in times of trouble leaves a lot of prisoners with the feeling of loss and loneliness, and it is a cause of their increased orientation toward their families. In the definition of friendship, reciprocity, support in times of trouble, and trust become key elements at the expense of having a good time together.

Based on our results some policy suggestions can be framed:

(Re)integration of prisoners into society is an important goal, and the practices of the institutional system should reflect this.

It can be considered tragic that the overwhelming majority of released prisoners cannot rely on any kind of substantial institutional support in helping to solve their housing and finding employment, despite the fact that it is the best interest of society. Not providing any individualized formal support in securing housing and employment, the two most basic elements to sustain living and to avoid recidivism means that chances for a further crime-free life are minimal for these people, unless their informal social networks have resources to support them. This is highly unlikely in a significant proportion of the cases, as offenders have higher probability to be affected by poverty and social exclusion, housing poverty, low educational level etc. The fact that the majority of former prisoners do not receive any institutional support or follow-up after release is a very negative phenomenon not only from the aspect of avoiding repeat offences, but also the system does not even have a minimal amount of information on these people either.

The results of our research also call attention to the dangers of imprisonment with respect to socializing people into a criminal career; thus, a prison sentence should be avoided in all possible cases, especially in connection with petty crimes. While analyzing the interviews, resources available through one's interpersonal ties appear to be a crucial dimension not only regarding social support, that is, emotional, financial help, providing the most basic preconditions after release by securing housing and helping to find employment, but also from the aspect of sustaining/strengthening, or, less often, forming a non-criminal identity. Thus, the penitentiary



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system should strive for trying to support the maintenance of interpersonal ties of prisoners during the often long years of their sentences, so as to secure the satisfaction of their most basic needs after release, as at present, due to the very limited capacity of the institutional system, released prisoners return to a vacuum.

It would be worth mapping the network resources (social capital) of prisoners systematically and individually from the aspect of supporting their reintegration after release but also even during imprisonment. It is an important task to help and ease the maintenance of existing interpersonal ties, but it would also be useful to provide support for prisoners in settling their family conflicts, for example, with the help of social workers. Moreover, it would be useful to promote the formation of new ties, including friendships with people not involved in criminal activities, which may later provide emotional support as well as help in finding a job and housing, but also could play a major role in preserving or forming a non-criminal identity. Such programs and interventions could be realized with high efficiency at relatively low cost and would take significant burdens off the otherwise not too efficient employment centers or homeless services while successfully preventing recidivism.

Although there is only a smaller overlap between first-time offenders and those spending their first prison sentence, still in this latter group the proportion of those who are not yet characterized by a stable criminal identity and who seem quite determined not to continue a criminal career after release is quite high. For this reason, it seems to be an efficient intervention to provide help in supporting this intention and their pro-social identity. It would be important to separate real first-time offenders from other prisoners in the penitentiary institutions, as relationships formed in prison maybe crucial after release from the aspect of repeat offences, as well. On the other hand, our research indicated that there are significant differences even in the group of those serving their first prison sentence, so it is worth further differentiating even this group. In the long run, it would be good to differentiate prisoners in the various regimes not only regarding their opportunities in prison but also spatially. Thus, those with a (more) pro-social identity could be separated from those with a criminal identity, who break the rules in the penitentiary institutes, too.

We would like to emphasize that as our analysis focuses on a special subgroup of the prison population (young males serving their first prison sentence of maximum 3 years), it may well happen that the impact of the prison sentence on interpersonal networks might be significantly different from our observations in other subgroups. Although our article focuses on interpersonal ties, no systematic network data collection was performed in the framework of the study, so we could only rely on the narratives and evaluations of our interviewees on this topic.



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