

How can we Better Understand how Problems Link, Interact, and Reinforce, and how People Move through Different Systems as they Attempt to Resolve them?

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INTRODUCTION

The social challenges faced by individuals and communities are never isolated; instead, they often influence one another in complex ways, meaning their interplay needs to be understood to be addressed. It has long been known that poverty is associated with increased risks of poor mental or physical health (Mental Health Foundation, 2023), domestic abuse (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024), imprisonment (Crisis, 2023), and a whole range of other issues. None of these issues are truly separate, and often reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to escape. The nature of the systems that people interact with due to these problems is extremely important. While these systems can provide support, they can also unintentionally reinforce and help to create new issues if they are not well

managed. Individuals who enter the Criminal Justice System often offend due to many social challenges and are plagued with even more challenges once they hold a criminal record. Exploring the complex network of interrelated social challenges uncovers a dynamic landscape where issues such as unemployment, debt, housing, and family problems are intricately linked. This complex interconnection underscores the need for a systemic response that thoroughly addresses the intersections of these challenges. As this review navigates the details of each problem, its aim is to illuminate avenues for designing more effective solutions that acknowledge and navigate the systemic dynamics influencing individuals and communities.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment is often discussed as a primarily economic problem, but research has established that unemployment is also a public health, crime, and abuse issue. Employment and mental health have been shown to have a bi-directional relationship (Wilson & Finch, 2021), with poor mental health impacting the ability of people to find work and being out of work impacting people's ability to maintain good mental health. Furthermore, because 'unemployment lies at the core of poverty' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), those who are unemployed are much more likely to fall into poverty (Citibeats, 2022). This, in turn, can have a circular relationship with poor mental health, (Mental Health Foundation, 2023), crime (InsideTime Newspaper, 2023) and abuse (Nuffield Foundation, 2022), which consequently negates someone's efforts to escape poverty. Given that unemployment is linked to a higher likelihood of criminal activity, and criminal records to a higher chance of unemployment, prison can be a catalyst for a vicious cycle which is difficult to escape from, and can ripple out into broader society. If people are returning to crime as they are unable to find employment, this increases the number of victims, evidencing that supporting people leaving prison to find employment benefits the prison leaver as well as their surrounding community.

As previous employment experience prior to prison is a strong indicator of the likelihood of finding employment after prison, it can be much harder for

those without previous employment experience to find work. Similarly, those with lower levels of education, without vocational training, without stable accommodation, as well as older prisoners, all tend to find it harder to find work after release. Considering that these factors also influence a person's chance of finding employment prior to imprisonment, and that in turn unemployment and poverty increase a person's chances of being involved in criminal activity, it is easy to see how the vicious cycle can form between crime and unemployment. Whilst employment training does improve a prison leaver's likelihood of finding employment, it often will not by itself be enough to ensure stable, long-term employment for prison leavers if the other aforementioned factors are not addressed. Employment programmes, therefore, need to link to a range of other social programmes, most importantly targeting not only skills and education but also factors like substance abuse, lack of stable accommodation, and debt.

The intricate relationship between employment and mental health manifests bidirectionally, with poor mental health hindering employability and joblessness exacerbating mental health challenges. Unemployment's central role in poverty formation establishes a daunting cycle, making it difficult for individuals to escape its grip. The repercussions extend into crime and abuse, creating a nexus that amplifies societal challenges.

Supporting individuals transitioning from prison to the workforce not only benefits them personally but also ripples positively throughout the broader community. However, addressing the employment needs of those exiting the prison system demands careful consideration of the challenges they face. Previous employment history emerges as a crucial predictor of post-release employability, placing those without a robust work background at a disadvantage. Additional hurdles include lower educational levels, lack of vocational training, unstable accommodations, and age, all contributing to the complexities of securing employment after incarceration.

Understanding that these factors are interconnected, influencing both pre- and post-imprisonment employment prospects, underscores the intricacy of the cycle between crime and unemployment. While employment training shows promise in enhancing post-release employment prospects, it stands insufficient on its own. Comprehensive employment programs must be integrated with broader social initiatives, addressing not only skills and education but also substance abuse, housing stability, and debt, to ensure sustained employment outcomes for those re-entering society.

DEBT

Debt has long been recognised as a criminogenic influence, reducing the ability of ex-offenders to make desisting choices. Not only do debt levels amongst imprisoned people tend to be much higher than the rest of the population (Aaltonen, Oksanen, & Kivivuori, 2016), but recent research in Sweden also demonstrates a clear link between successful attempts at crime desistance and being free from certain kinds of debt (Gålnander, 2023). An important point of this research is that the problem of debt is complicated: despite the fact that Swedish households are some of the most indebted globally, those attempting to desist from crime, and trying to escape from debt as part of this, were concerned mainly not with paying any and all debt, but becoming free from the 'wrong' kinds of debt: those that were viewed as shameful or that negatively impacted their credit score (ibid).

Recognising debt as a potential criminogenic factor sheds light on its profound impact, impeding the ability of individuals with prior convictions to make positive choices or envision an escape from the cycle of crime. Recent research from Sweden underscores a tangible connection between successful attempts at crime desistance and freedom from specific types of debt. Crucially, this investigation emphasises the nuanced nature of the debt problem. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, someone aiming to clear their debts may struggle to do so through employment. This could lead to returning to crime in desperate attempts to resolve these debts. Debt thus emerges not only as a structural impediment to breaking the cycle of crime and imprisonment but also as a formidable emotional and psychological barrier.

ACCOMODATION

There is a clear connection between insecure housing situations and the possibility of re-offending for those exiting prison, with evidence indicating a 50% reduction in the chance of reoffending amongst those who have stable accommodation upon exiting prison (GOV.UK, 2023). This relationship is negatively reciprocal, in that previous offenders are more likely to become homeless and therefore more likely to re-offend, contributing to the vicious cycle of crime in which many become trapped (Crisis, 2023).

The linkage between housing instability and recidivism is connected to broader social challenges. Individuals exiting prison often find themselves navigating a labyrinth where housing, debt, unemployment, and family problems intersect. The risk of homelessness exacerbates the challenges related to debt, as individuals may struggle to secure stable housing due to financial constraints. Unemployment, as discussed above, is both a cause and

consequence of this cycle, as the difficulty in finding work amplifies the risk of housing instability. Moreover, an address is often needed to set up a bank account, and a bank account is needed to obtain employment. This demonstrates a stark link between these problems, and how much they influence one another.

Breaking free from this cycle demands a comprehensive approach that addresses the interconnected nature of these challenges. Securing stable housing not only directly reduces the risk of re-offending but also acts as a linchpin in dismantling the broader barriers associated with debt, unemployment, and family issues. Recognising and addressing the multifaceted dynamics at play is crucial for designing effective and sustainable interventions to support individuals in their journey towards rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

FAMILY LIFE AND CHALLENGES

The challenges of imprisonment are felt not only by those serving a sentence but also by their wider families. New research from the Prison Advice and Care Trust reveals that the current

record-high prison population in England & Wales is imposing significant financial, emotional, and health burdens on families of people in prison (PACT, 2023).

Further, families of prisoners also often experience social stigmatisation and community exclusion (SCCJR, 2019), as well as the significant mental health challenges associated with trying to fill the emotional, financial, and physical gap often left by a convicted family member. In fact, not only does prison tend to decrease family income, but it often increases family expenditure through phone calls and visitation, sending money to the convicted family member, or supporting to pay off debts (ibid.). The result is both that existing problems within the family may be exacerbated, whilst at the same time new problems and pressures quickly arise, which cannot be instantly fixed by the convicted person's return from prison. The risk of falling into debt or homelessness, as well as compounding possibly existing conflicts or patterns of abuse within familiar relationships, can create an extremely difficult environment for those exiting prison and may make it more likely for them to re-offend. The challenges of incarceration extend beyond those serving sentences to impact their wider families. Current research sheds light

on the substantial financial, emotional, and health strains on families of inmates due to the escalating prison population. Families of convicted individuals often confront social stigmatisation and community exclusion, alongside significant mental health challenges arising from the effort to fill the profound gaps left by an incarcerated family member. Paradoxically, rather than easing family burdens, imprisonment tends to reduce family income while increasing expenditures on communication and financial support for the incarcerated family member. This dual effect exacerbates existing family issues and gives rise to new problems and pressures, creating a complex environment not immediately resolved upon the individual's return from prison. The heightened risk of falling into debt, facing homelessness, and exacerbating pre-existing conflicts or patterns of abuse within familial relationships adds to the formidable challenges for those re-entering society, potentially increasing the likelihood of recidivism.

MOVING THROUGH SYSTEMS

So far, we have delineated many issues faced by those involved in the criminal justice system and have highlighted the great interconnectedness of these issues. We have so far seen that professionals need to understand how different

problems interact and how this may affect someone's journey to desistance. What we still need to consider is how someone moves through the systems, and how to obtain the best outcomes whilst navigating multiple services.

Interestingly, there is little research on the integrated approach of organisations. Duran et al. (2013) explored reintegrated re-entry in the context of employment and recidivism and recognised the need for improved collaboration between the different services that support a prison leaver. However, Byng et al. (2022) attempted to develop a collaborative care intervention for male prison leavers – the Engager Research Programme – in which participants were randomly divided into usual care (the control group) or usual care plus the programme. What they unfortunately found was that there were no significant effects. However, it was also noted that the main cause of the suboptimal results was lack of engagement from participants, or inconsistent intervention delivery. Despite all of this, what we can interpret from the lack of research into systems working together is that too many systems are working in silos. It is therefore important to reflect on why organisations aiming to support with recidivism may want to change this and how.

Some organisations are implementing new models to address how people move through different systems, homing in on the importance of making this as streamlined as possible. One method that appeared in several pieces of research was the idea of co-location – similar services being based in the same office or hub. Memon and Kinder (2017) conducted 28 interviews with senior staff from five different Scottish Community Health Partnerships and found that co-location was cost-saving and more efficient, but also often led to increased innovation, peer learning, and joint problem-solving. In 2022, Lalani and Marshall also explored service integration using participant observation, interviews and group

discussions. Thematic analysis showed that co-location effectively improves interactions and communications across the teams. However, a limitation identified by both papers is poor understanding of roles and responsibilities in a shared space, and a lack of shared systems. Co-location can be difficult to effectively implement if the different services are unclear on how their roles complement each other, so it is important to ensure that these are clearly identified and communicated prior to the merge of locations. Additionally, different IT systems can lead to gaps in effective information sharing and clashing opinions on prioritisation. This can also be resolved with clear decisions on information sharing being made and effectively implemented before co-locations starts.

Catch22's Youth 2 Adulthood (Y2A) hub is an example of a criminal justice service that is based within another service. Y2A supports 17–25-year-old people on probation living in the borough of Newham, and are based in Newham Probation. Y2A's senior mentor said:

“Working in a multi-disciplinary team based in the Newham probation office is an essential element of how we work in the Y2A Hub. Dependant on the needs of the young adults we are able to plan and sequence our interventions to ensure their priorities are at the centre of our delivery. Other benefits of co-location working are that planning and actions are completed in a timely manner and meetings and conversations happen impromptu, which enables us to respond effectively and provide a quality service.”

This echoes empirical findings on the “one-stop shop” being commended in support systems; co-location improves collaboration and efficiency, which overall enables a better service offer.

Another reason Y2A is excelling is due to the implementation of a “key worker” type role. The mentors in Y2A can support the young person with whatever they need – employment, educational courses, housing, and much more. Sessions can be unstructured and completed in professional and relaxed settings. For example, some sessions take place in coffee shops or consist of baking cakes or playing football. Utilising a model in which the practitioner is untethered in how they can try to support enables better trust building, rapport development, and engagement.

An enormous wealth of research digresses that a consistent professional leads to better outcomes as it promotes stronger continuity of care. Ross, Polaschek and Ward (2008) spoke with 265 justice-involved people and found meaningful reductions in mental health and criminality for those that worked with just one therapist as the time was taken to build a trusting relationship, and the professional had time to truly understand the service user. This also led to more efficient working, as information sharing was less frequent, and service users did not have to retell their story, also evidencing the impact of single points of contact on trauma-informed care. A key limitation to mention is the lack of longer-term impact tracking of “what works”. Few studies go beyond a 5-year period, meaning it is difficult to understand the most effective methods that will lead to life-long desistance from crime.

Longitudinal research with people involved in the criminal justice system is difficult. Fradley et al. (2022) explored the obstacles faced by researchers: frequent, sudden moves across estates and unstable housing post-release make it difficult to stay in touch with someone. Additionally, as previously mentioned, criminal justice systems work in silos which means data is fragmented and hard to locate. However, Fradley et al. (2022) propose methods to overcome these obstacles, such as a clear manual for conducting longitudinal research in this cohort, connections with other organisations that may be able to support with tracking, varied engagement methods, and a deep understanding of judicial processes.

Another key limitation of longitudinal research into “what works” is the varied definitions of recidivism metrics. Most services determine success as desistance. Whilst this is the main goal, there are many other metrics that should be considered when determining if someone is reforming. Bouchard & Wong (2024) compared findings of 20 meta-analyses and concluded that intervention impact can only be measured accurately if measures are disaggregated; they need to be considered separately to gather a comprehensive understanding of what is working, and what is working best. This will have profound impact on policy determination and subsequent resource allocation.

CHALLENGES OF MULTIPLE SYSTEMS

Dealing with multiple systems is possible and achievable, if the above advice is followed. Despite this, there are myriad challenges that can prevent this from happening effectively.

Poor/Complex Information Sharing

Especially in the context of criminal justice, it is important to be defensive of the service user's information. A balance is therefore crucial to ensure effective information sharing is enabled, and that the service user and the public are not negatively affected by withholding information. As has been highlighted, effective information sharing is difficult in the context of multi-agency working due to differing levels of security clearance and no unified data sharing framework, different data platforms used across the different services, and being dependent on accurate and up-to date data which can be difficult to manage when busy. Many organisations are currently utilising effective information sharing models. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) are co-located hubs based across the UK which unite police, social services, health, education, probation and charities. An ongoing study being conducted by University College London and Foundations (2024-25) is analysing MASH models across the UK and have so far identified the importance of distinct protocols and feedback loops, as well as the evident success of co-location.

Yang and Maxwell (2011) also explored information sharing across three levels: interpersonal sharing (e.g. across colleagues), Intra-organisational sharing (e.g. within the organisation) and inter-organisational (across multiple agencies). They identified the importance of trust, information retention capacity, as well as the importance of effective technology implementation and use. The three levels were interconnected in their information sharing requirements, showing that these need to apply for the individual, organisation and organisations to be content. There has been a wealth of research into the complexity of information sharing across organisations, but the research effectively illustrates that information sharing is possible and that there are tangible methods to improve inter-organisational sharing. The following themes were most present and pressing in being implemented for effective information sharing:

1. Co-location: working in the same location will make information sharing easier
2. Pre-determined protocols and procedures for information sharing: to prevent confusion and tension caused by unclear procedures, thorough protocols should be defined and implemented before the information sharing commences

3. Clearly established roles between the different agencies: A frequent issue with information sharing is unclear accountability and tension caused by not knowing each other's roles and responsibilities. These should also be clearly outlined and communicated before information sharing commences.

4. Merging of information systems: Different organisations use different systems. Therefore, agencies should try to adopt efforts such as MASH to encourage services to use the same data systems where possible, so all professionals are working from the same data, reducing the need for active sharing and further increasing efficiency.

Funding barriers

The issues with funding barriers parallel those of information sharing: sharing responsibility can be complicated, metrics across services can differ and joint working can be made more difficult by financial arrangements. First of all, most agencies have their own budget and can be reluctant to pool resources or share financial responsibility. Adams and Lincoln (2021) explored funding barriers to implementing forensic peer support (FPS) and found that a key issue in terms of sharing funding is that financial priorities differ between agencies which can make co-ordination and allocation decisions difficult. Furthermore, budget cuts can cause friction between these services when decisions are made on who will lose money. Additionally, performance metrics can differ significantly between different agencies. Narayanan and Ishfaq (2022) explored this with supply chain organisations. Despite the study being conducted in corporate environments, they still found from 556

participants that more similar performance metrics lead to reduced costs and less "back-and-forth" which enabled more efficient working and increased time to dedicate to projects as opposed to information sharing/translation. Many other organisations have found similar results: Department for Communities and Local Government (2012) found that joint working is significantly prohibited by financial arrangements, especially in children's services. Local Government Association (2024) also found that incompatible funding mechanisms are seen across the different care services, and this negatively impacts integrating the different services. We can deduce from this that resource allocation and funding barriers significantly impact the implementation of multi-agency approaches across the sector. This is exacerbated by silo working and operational differences such as prioritisation of performance metrics. Linking back to information sharing, this problem would also be resolvable through clearly defined roles and responsibilities and resource allocation being clearly stated prior to integration of services.

Eligibility Criteria

Similarly, fund sharing can be challenging when someone is not eligible for all of the services. If someone is eligible for one service but not another, the decision on how funding and resources is shared becomes complicated. This can however be planned for with adequate preparation, by deciding in advance how the funding is shared if someone is only using one of the services. This can prevent conflict and delayed decision making by having a protocol already in place.

Policy conflict

Priorities, budgets and benefits are just some examples of policy that can differ greatly between various services. Similarly to previous points, disagreements on what to prioritise as well as where to allocate resources and funding can be both common and difficult to overcome. Staff may also feel disincorporated from work if one

agency has better benefits than the other. This may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and unfairness amongst colleagues. The solution to this, similar to previously mentioned, is ensuring budget delegation is written into funding allocation from the start if the multiple system merge, so that a fair and well-considered allocation of resources is already determined.

HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE DEALING WITH MULTIPLE SYSTEMS

Simultaneously navigating multiple systems when released from prison is overwhelming, yet common. When someone is released, they often must address accommodation, finances, and employment, all whilst abiding by their probation requirements. This can lead to needing to keep track of multiple appointments with multiple professionals in many different locations, which is drastically different from their time in prison. In the current climate, prisoners are unable to organise these affairs before they are released. Additionally, probation is struggling to address this on behalf of the person on probation, with 30% more prisoners being released into

homelessness in the past year (Hunt, 2024). As mentioned before, we have seen that lack of housing in turn negatively impacts employment and finances. Therefore, when lacking these, someone is more likely to reoffend. This emphasises the need to address all three of these issues at the same time so the prison leaver is prepared to be out in the community and can focus on their rehabilitation. Despite many organisations working in silos, it is possible for organisations to learn from research's propositions and provide support that recognises and addresses the problems as they interact with one another.

Through the gate service

For a more seamless transition from prison to the community, prisoners could be provided with a practitioner who ensures that all affairs are in order before someone is released. They focus on liaising with probation and ensuring that accommodation and finances are prepared, and work with other organisations to prepare other needs such as registering with a GP or acquiring a phone and SIM card. Catch22 operates a through the gate service within their Personal Wellbeing Services, in which practitioners can conduct up to three interventions with a service user before they are released to help the prison leaver prepare.

Involvement of Social Circles

The research evaluated above evidences the importance of involving

someone's social circle in their journey to desistance. Firstly, having family and friends to support them in moving through the systems may motivate them to engage better. Secondly, the individual's journey to desistance also impacts the social circle, so recognising their struggles and their needs also feeds into providing wraparound care by supporting individuals who are also affected by someone's offending.

Wraparound Care

As we have seen repeatedly from the research above, the fewer systems the better. We should therefore focus on enabling prison leavers to work with as few people as possible to meet their needs, so they do not have to juggle several appointments, can build rapport with one person, and therefore focus more on their rehabilitation.

CATCH22'S APPROACH

Catch22 understands and values multi-faceted approaches and assertive linkage to provide more seamless care in supporting someone facing multiple challenges. Within Catch22's current offender rehabilitation model, wellbeing, finances, dependency support, accommodation, and employment are all addressed quite separately. Each "problem" highlighted here is handled by a different referral, a different professional, and maybe even a different service. A fragmented approach can be overwhelming for the service user, increasing chances of disengagement and gaps in provision. Lack of engagement can result in further criminalisation, highlighting the

profound negative impact disjointed support can have.

To address this, Catch22 welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Ministry of Justice's tender for a new Community Support for Men Service. This specifies a redesign of the current Commissioned Rehabilitative Services model to offer a multi-disciplinary approach. Catch22's interpretation of this model will comprise of a Community Link Worker that liaises between specialists to bring all services into one place, working with men at any point in their criminal justice journey, not just during probation, or close to their prison release.

They may bring in all information the service user needs, and take on the role of juggling the different services so the service user does not have to. The intention with offering support at any point in one's sentence also facilitates easier relationship maintenance, can manage debt before it escalates whilst someone is in prison, and can address external pressures such as tenancies. The Community Link Worker cannot specialise in all areas, but they can prioritise seamlessness and liaison between the service user and other services when they need to work with another professional. The model will still operate under probation provisions, but with more focus on a "one-stop shop" approach. This innovative

approach will also prioritise assertive linkage by focusing on methods to enable the service user to properly connect with their community. The Community Link Worker will focus on engaging the service user with their community through their own personal relationships, or associating passions with community need. Focusing on assertive linkage builds a wider community network for the service user and encourages them to desist from crime by being increasingly integrated and dependable by their community. Prioritising engagement with their community gives them more positive networks, more opportunities, and more reason to desist from crime.

CONCLUSION

An overwhelming amount of research corroborates that many problems interact as the cause and effect of offending and reoffending. The most striking influences are relationships, debt, housing and employment. In this review their interaction has been evaluated to discover that debt, housing and employment can all negatively impact relationships: serious debt or lack of housing and employment can lead to peers providing accommodation or financial support, but this may affect the relationship with time. Debt can be difficult to escape when unable to find employment, and employment is difficult to acquire with no fixed abode. There is unfortunately little research into an integrated approach to resolve these issues and those that attempted to integrate found negative results, but this was most likely attributable to a lack of engagement from participants.

Nonetheless, the lack of evidence into integrated organisations evidences the unnecessarily high concentration of

organisations working in silo. In terms of supporting someone to move through the systems, there are many options. Providing a through the gate service can better equip an individual to understand the purpose of their different appointments and requirements and feel less overwhelmed upon release.

Enabling an individual's social circle to be involved in their movement through systems would reduce the chance of these relationships breaking down. Finally, simply reducing the number of systems someone must be involved in would allow them to focus solely on their rehabilitation without having to worry about juggling several commitments with several professionals, which is reflected in Catch22's new model of offender rehabilitation, which prioritises multi-disciplinary approaches and assertive linkage in line with empirical evidence on how to support someone in the criminal justice system facing multiple challenges.

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The logo for Catch 22, featuring the word "catch" in a lowercase, sans-serif font above the number "22" in a larger, bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is white and set against a dark blue background.

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