



Article

Prison and Love: The Role of Affection and Rehabilitative Actions in Reducing Recidivism and Beyond

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Abstract: This study investigates the protective role of emotional relationships and rehabilitative actions in reducing recidivism within the prison context. Data were collected from three Italian prisons as part of the European project “Calypsos”. This study examines the role of love across its various expressions and components in the social reintegration of inmates, exploring how family ties, educational programs, and employment opportunities contribute to their well-being and socio-affective regeneration. Descriptive analyses and multiple linear regression were used to assess the impact of these factors on recidivism. The results indicate that stable family relationships, positive interactions with teachers, and meaningful work experiences significantly reduce the likelihood of reoffending. The findings highlight the necessity of policies supporting the maintenance of emotional bonds and the provision of educational and vocational training within prisons. This study concludes that integrating these elements into rehabilitation strategies can improve inmate outcomes, reduce recidivism, and enhance social cohesion. Finally, the article identifies love as a performative right as a future research direction.

Keywords: prison; recidivism; affection; meaningful relationship; employment; education; social love; performative right



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1. Introduction

This work stems from integrating research and intervention experiences in the prison context with studying the social dimension of love. Although the association between prison and love may not be immediately apparent, this work will demonstrate how love plays a central role even in this context.

This study explores the role of love not only as a promoter of inmates' well-being but also as a protective factor against recidivism. Love is a multidimensional phenomenon and concept inherent to living. Its presence, absence, and specific manifestations, both acted and experienced, significantly contribute to giving meaning, significance, and interpretation to existence as it unfolds. For example, love manifests as eros (romantic love) and philia (friendship) and includes agape (selfless love) and storge (familial love), among others. Thus, love manifests, even in its absence, in all areas of life: in the most private and intimate sphere as well as in the public and institutional domains.

Indeed, love can be understood through two dimensions: a relational dimension, which concerns affections and relationships with significant individuals, and a conative dimension, which pertains to social actions. This work will explore both dimensions.

On the one hand, social, friendly, intimate, and familial bonds will be analyzed. Specifically, in relation to traditional expressions and components of love (Enright et al. 2022), this study will explore the role of desire, attraction, and physical intimacy in erotic love considering within partner relationships. However, nurturing this form of love in a prison environment is highly complex, particularly in Italy—where this study has been conducted—since physical

intimacy is prohibited for practical and legal reasons. Regarding familial bonds, this study will examine family affection, traditionally represented by *storge*. Developing such bonds in prisons poses challenges due to logistical constraints on family visits and the emotional strain of incarceration. Additionally, friendships and peer relationships, traditionally associated with *philia*, will be analyzed. This includes examining their role both within and outside prison walls and exploring the supportive relationships among inmates.

On the one hand, social, friendly, intimate, and family bonds will be analyzed. On the other hand, love as an institutional social action within the context of education and work will be explored. Although these two elements are not traditionally associated with love, according to some theories they can be included in a specific interpretation of love that enhances its socio-political dimension rather than focusing on intimate, familial, or friendly relationships. Indeed, education and work are (or can effectively be) domains of the expression and manifestation of the public “side” of love, that of sociality enacted outside of the closest familial and intimate relationships. The term “side” is not accidental: in line with feminist tradition, the public and private are spheres or domains of action and inquiry, only theoretically and socially constructed as distinct and distinguishable sides of the same coin. Love as a crucial dimension of existence, that is, of life enacted and lived. Specifically, education and work are pillars of the institutional sphere. In fact, they are sub-systems of society that regulate human conduct (Berger 1963, p. 87), as well as structures that contribute to society’s (re)production. Love, as a phenomenon inherent to living, also manifests within these sub-systems and societal structures, though always in different ways depending on its varying contexts. This interpretation, supported by many scholars (e.g., Boltanski 1990; Hooks 2000; Iorio 2015; Hardt and Negri 2000), demonstrates that love, overcoming utilitarianism and individualism, inherently possesses traits of social transformation, community reconstruction, and reconciliation in the face of injustice. Within this framework, two elements will be considered. The first concerns these environments’ capacity to regenerate the social bonds in secondary relationships, among peers, and within hierarchical roles. Secondly, the *agape* expression of love (Enright et al. 2022; Iorio 2015) will be analyzed, which is particularly relevant in rehabilitation institutions where kindness, empathy, and forgiveness are promoted. These elements are essential for the rehabilitation process and for preventing recidivism.

To support these reflections, the results of a research project will be discussed, which involved administering a questionnaire to a sample of inmates from various Italian and international prison contexts. The research questions focused on the inmates’ biographies, examining multiple perspectives—educational, relational, affective, and occupational—and the impact of these dimensions on the respondents’ recidivism. Based on results obtained through descriptive and multivariate statistical analysis techniques, specific educational intervention activities were subsequently implemented to support the reintegration of inmates into society at the end of their sentences.

With respect to the aspects described above, this article is organized as follows. The next section addresses the topic of recidivism and the rehabilitative function of prison, thoroughly examining the dynamics that contribute to reoffending and the importance of rehabilitation programs in the penitentiary context. This is followed by two subsections that analyze the protective role of affection and positive interpersonal relationships, highlighting how social support and emotional connections can positively influence the reintegration of inmates into society. Additionally, the crucial role of education and work in mitigating recidivism is examined, emphasizing how access to such opportunities can reduce the risk of people returning to the penitentiary system. The Materials and Methods Section provides a detailed description of the research methodology, including data collection, the questionnaire administered, and the statistical analysis techniques employed. The Results Section presents and interprets the main findings of the study, followed by a discussion that analyzes the implications of these findings, with a particular focus on the importance of emotional support and educational opportunities for the social reintegration of prisoners. Finally, the article provides a summary of its key points and recommen-

dations for policy and practice, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach that includes emotional relationships and institutional opportunities as essential components of rehabilitation strategies.

In conclusion, this investigation provides valuable insights into the critical role of emotional connections and educational and employment opportunities within correctional facilities. It highlights the urgent need for policies and interventions aimed at improving social cohesion and the well-being of inmates to effectively address the issue of recidivism. The article ends with an invitation to explore the idea of love as a right, specifically as a performative right, to deepen our understanding its social dimensions even beyond the correctional environment.

2. Recidivism and Rehabilitative Function

Criminal recidivism is a crucial indicator for evaluating the effectiveness of criminal justice systems in rehabilitating individuals and combating the perpetuation of crime. Additionally, its relevance extends to guiding decisions on inmate management strategies, suggesting which programs should be implemented on a large scale (Teasdale et al. 2023). A high recidivism rate is commonly interpreted as an unequivocal signal of a judicial system that does not provide adequate rehabilitation programs.

The calculation of recidivism is primarily based on the two-year reconviction rate of individuals released from prisons (Yukhnenko et al. 2020). However, international comparisons are complicated by variations in recording practices and differing socio-economic and criminological contexts (Browne 2020). These differences can affect recidivism statistics, making comparisons reflect variations in recording practices rather than significant differences in the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. Additionally, other factors must be considered, such as the proportion of individuals with different baseline offenses among those released and macroeconomic and criminological factors (Anser et al. 2020; Gruszczyńska and Gruszczyński 2023; Wolf et al. 2014). Significant variations between and within countries can also influence the direct effects of the criminal justice system on recidivism.

However, a recent systematic review (Yukhnenko et al. 2023) shows that recidivism rates are generally high in most countries, with at least one in five individuals reoffending within two years and rates exceeding 40% in some countries after one year. In Italy, the problem of recidivism is particularly acute, highlighting the structural deficiencies in the prison system. According to the latest statistics released by the National Council for Economy and Labor (CNEL 2024), Italy records a concerning criminal recidivism rate, with 68.7% of former inmates reoffending. These data highlight the global extent of the recidivism phenomenon and the need for effective strategies to address it, which must be based on a detailed examination of the factors involved.

The reason it is essential to study the protective and risk factors of recidivism is that they have a significant impact on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs and crime prevention. Research has shown that the severity of the initial offense does not necessarily predict the risk of recidivism. Additionally, it is important to consider the differences in the types of crimes committed. For example, inmates convicted of murder have been found to be less likely to reoffend compared to those convicted of property crimes. These findings highlight the complexity of the factors that influence the recurrence of criminal behavior and underscore the need for an accurate assessment to develop effective interventions. Although it is a complex issue, recidivism can indeed be addressed. Examples such as Norway demonstrate that an effective reform of the judicial system can lead to significant reductions in recidivism rates (Kirwin 2022).

The explanatory factors of recidivism are a complex interplay of socio-psychological, economic, and structural factors that influence the behavior of individuals once they are released from the prison system.

Social isolation emerges as one of the main challenges faced by former inmates. Incarceration can disrupt emotional and friendly relationships, leaving individuals without a support network upon release.

Furthermore, former inmates often find themselves in disadvantaged social environments characterized by poverty and a lack of resources, which do not favor rehabilitation and may even expose them to new criminal opportunities.

The lack of access to rehabilitation within correctional institutions is another significant factor in recidivism. Rehabilitation programs may be insufficient or poorly structured, failing to provide individuals with the skills and resources necessary to reintegrate positively into society. Additionally, the lack of ongoing support once released can make it difficult for former inmates to maintain the progress made during their incarceration.

Social discrimination against former inmates represents another obstacle to their reintegration. Social stigma can ostracize individuals, making it difficult for them to find employment, housing, and social support. This cycle of discrimination can lead former inmates to feel marginalized and alienated, increasing their risk of involvement in criminal activities as a means of survival.

In addition to socio-psychological factors, the excessive emphasis on punishment over rehabilitation within the prison system can exacerbate the problem of recidivism. When individuals are treated exclusively as criminals rather than persons with the potential for change, they are less likely to find motivation and support to adopt positive behaviors once released.

Conversely, a more rehabilitation-oriented and humanizing approach to prison treatment can help reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Specifically, programs aimed at developing practical skills, supporting personal development, and offering educational and employment opportunities can provide former inmates with the resources they need to build a stable life outside the prison system. In this context, love, with its diverse components and expressions, can play a crucial protective role. This is particularly relevant with respect to mental health care and social support, which can assist individuals in navigating the challenges of life after incarceration and preventing recurrent criminal behavior.

2.1. The Role of Affection and Meaningful Relationships

Historically, love has consistently been recognized as having a fundamental role in social bonds. It is a factor of cohesion and thus protective against disintegration and deviance. Specifically, in its interpersonal dimension, love has an emotional component, understood as affection, and a relational dimension, understood as positive interpersonal relationships, particularly in intimate and friendly relationships.

This is evident in classical philosophy, as demonstrated by the reflections of Empedocles, Plato (1925), and Aristotle (2012). Empedocles (2018) considers love (philotes) a cosmic force that unites and binds in both intimate and civil relationships, giving it a plurality of meanings that include sensual love, friendly love, and benevolence. In *The Republic*, Plato (2004) also discusses philia as a fundamental principle of justice and social cohesion within his ideal vision of a city-state. This idea is further developed by Aristotle (2002) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he expands the concept of philia to include various types of friendship based on intrinsic motivations and reciprocity, which play a fundamental role in social and political life. With the advent of Christianity, another dimension of love, agape, emerged, emphasizing unconditional love and compassion. Meanwhile, storge, the affectionate bond typically found within families, is prominently discussed by philosophers such as Aristotle, who considers it one of the natural forms of love essential for the well-being of the family and society. These philosophical perspectives highlight how love, both emotionally and relationally, is essential for social cohesion and stability.

Classical sociologists also converge on this position. In his essay "Fragment on Love", Simmel (1921) sees love as a specific form of social life. For Simmel, love is essential for establishing social relationships, merging two distinct individuals without eliminating their

individuality and overcoming polarizations such as egoism and altruism. Additionally, love has a transformative capacity, improving both the lover and the beloved.

It is certainly impossible not to mention Durkheim, who argues that love, as a form of social bond, significantly contributes to social integration and is fundamental in preventing anomie and suicide (Durkheim 1987). In his view, close affective relationships, such as those within the family, provide emotional support and a sense of belonging—elements that are undoubtedly crucial for social cohesion. Durkheim pays particular attention to the role of family and marriage. He argues that married people tend to have lower suicide rates compared to single people, attributing this phenomenon to the emotional support and stability that familial and marital relationships offer. Similarly, Parsons (1951) believes that social relationships play a role in maintaining social integration.

After the fathers of functionalism, social network theorists also emphasized the role of friendships in social cohesion. For example, Blau's (1964) studies highlighted the relevance of interpersonal relationships, including friendships, in this context. While Blau explored how friendship networks can positively influence psychological well-being and social stability, Granovetter (1973) showed how social connections, even less intense ones, are crucial for social cohesion. The "weak ties" in social networks, such as acquaintances and superficial friendships, can significantly impact social cohesion and individual opportunities. Lastly, Wellman (1999) emphasized the importance of personal relationships and social networks in providing emotional and social support. He demonstrated how relationships within communities and social networks are fundamental for psychological well-being and social cohesion.

What has been said about the relevance of social bonds also applies to prison. Interpersonal relationships can influence well-being and behavior within the prison environment. As Hairston (1991) notes, maintaining quality family relationships can improve inmates' emotional and psychological well-being during their incarceration. Furthermore, social support and family ties can positively influence inmate behavior in prison, providing them with a network of emotional and practical support (Jiang and Winfree 2006).

The literature highlights that strong interpersonal relationships play a significant role not only in promoting the well-being of prisoners during detention but also in reducing the likelihood of criminal recidivism (May et al. 2008). In particular, family relationships seem to play a crucial role in the process of reintegration into the community after detention (Ditchfield 1994). Some studies have also shown that periods of family leave from prison are correlated with lower recidivism, suggesting that support and connection with family can have a positive impact on inmates' behavior (Baumer et al. 2009).

Among all intimate relationships, parent/child relationships and those with partners emerge as particularly significant. Studies have shown that positive relationships of this type reduce the likelihood of recidivism, especially among adolescents (Ryan and Yang 2005). Additionally, marriage has been associated with a reduction in criminal involvement, suggesting that the support and stability provided by a marital relationship can positively influence criminal behavior (Sampson et al. 2006; Cunha et al. 2023).

However, not all relational dynamics have a positive effect on recidivism. For example, conflict in relationships has been identified as a key factor contributing to criminal recidivism (Zamble and Quinsey 1997). Therefore, it is essential to consider not only the presence of relationships but also the nature of their interactions and their quality.

Ultimately, maintaining quality relationships proves to be a fundamental factor for the success of inmate rehabilitation. However, it is important to consider that institutional barriers and physical separation can hinder the building and maintenance of positive relationships, increasing the risk of recidivism (De Claire et al. 2020; NIJ 2023).

This is even more true in Italy, where the law regulating the penitentiary system (Law no. 354/1975 amended in 2018) establishes that prisoners have the right to maintain affectionate relationships through correspondence, telephone calls, a preference for detention near their residence, visits, and permits. However, sexuality, despite being an expression of affection, is not addressed by the law. Visits are the primary means of main-

taining warm in-person relationships; however, they are limited to short periods, usually an hour, and often occur in crowded and noisy environments where privacy is not guaranteed and affectionate gestures are prohibited. Although the 2018 reform aims to promote a more private context for visits, mandatory visual supervision by prison officers remains a security requirement, and many facilities are inadequate in this regard. As for eros, in Italy, prisoners are not allowed to have consensual intimate encounters with their chosen partners. Numerous attempts have been made to change this situation, with the latest in 2020. However, to date, eros remains completely excluded from the Italian penitentiary system. In addition to relationships with a partner, relationships with family members and especially with children are also very difficult in Italy. Often, the organization of the interviews does not allow children to participate, as they go to school in the morning, and their classrooms are often not adequate and lack privacy, making them unwelcoming for the children. This aspect is also particularly controversial.

2.2. The Role of Institutional Action

In the sociological field, various approaches consider love not only as a personal feeling but also as a social force capable of influencing institutional dynamics. This perspective underscores the importance of love in shaping the structures of society and contributing to the construction of a more equitable and supportive community.

Sorokin (1954) introduces the concept of “altruistic love”, highlighting how this form of love can be reflected in institutions themselves, suggesting that institutions based on the principles of altruism and solidarity can play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and reducing disparities. Furthermore, the analysis conducted by members of the Frankfurt School, such as Honneth (1992), delves into the connection between love and solidarity. Honneth argues that the experience of being loved is an essential prerequisite for active participation in public life and the promotion of individual and collective autonomy. According to Honneth, love represents the first stage of the theory of recognition, as it fosters the formation of relationships based on trust and reciprocity, thereby supporting the construction of a more inclusive society that respects differences.

The concept of social love (Iorio 2015; Cataldi and Iorio 2023) reflects this approach, suggesting that love is not only an emotion or affection but that it also has a practical dimension. The starting point is action: through it, love can transform into interaction and relationship, eventually becoming institutional action.

Which institutions play a key role in protecting individuals and promoting social integration? Education and work have particularly significant cohesive and protective dimensions for individuals. Durkheim (1893) recognizes how these institutions, typical of organic solidarity, allow for close interconnection among their members, giving meaning to individual life through education, memory, and an interdependent division of labor.

However, there are two authors in particular who address the dimension of love within these institutions. In the education field, Paulo Freire, in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), promotes an educational approach based on love. He argues that the act of educating should be permeated by a relationship of love and mutual respect between teachers and students, which is fundamental for creating an educational environment where individuals can develop a critical awareness of their conditions and actively participate in the transformation of society. In the workplace context, Hooks (2000), in her work *All About Love: New Visions*, offers various perspectives on love and its relationship with work. hooks argues that love in the workplace involves an active commitment to the well-being of others and the creation of relationships based on trust, respect, and solidarity. She considers work not only as an economic issue but also as an opportunity to cultivate meaningful bonds, support colleagues, and promote social justice.

As we have seen, some of the literature emphasizes that education and work are not only tools for education or sources of income but also that they can act as generators of love. What mechanisms, therefore, intervene within educational and working institutions to promote this process? The literature identifies two main mechanisms.

First, these institutions can act as generators of love to the extent that they help mend the social relationships that individuals have outside of their primary circle of family and friends. Building bonds between peers emerges as a crucial aspect of education and work. Through communities of practice, shared interactions foster the development of mutual creative bonds, which are essential to an experiential and collaborative education in the framework of an affective epistemology (e.g., Dewey 1938; Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Lave and Wenger 1991). In the prison setting, this takes on even greater importance, as inmates' pre-existing relationships can often be dysfunctional, making the establishment of new bonds between peers vital. In this context, rehabilitation institutions can be crucial in fostering the *philia* relationship within a broader political perspective, as envisioned by the ancient Greek philosophers. Another significant aspect within this function of mending social relationships with individuals outside of the primary circle is the regeneration of ties to authority. In prison contexts, the relationship with authority often represents a critical point for rehabilitation. For the prisoner, any hierarchical role is, in fact, representative of the State, with which the relationship of trust has been broken and needs to be rebuilt. Relationships with teachers and employers can help rebuild the mutual trust between hierarchically different roles through open dialogue and shared leadership. Promoting collaborative and inclusive dialogues and environments in both organizational and educational (e.g., Freire 1970; Senge 1990; Semetsky 2014) contexts is crucial for social reintegration and rehabilitation.

The second fundamental function of these institutions in relation to love is the construction of the 'common' and the social, which is essential for cultivating a renewed sense of community and shaping a new societal framework. School and work not only facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also provide fertile ground for social interaction and collaboration, which are crucial for community life. In this sense, rehabilitative institutions, especially educational ones, can promote active participation in society and contribute to the formation of a new sense of "we", inclusive social networks (e.g., Illich 1971; Hardt and Negri 2000). This is particularly crucial in the prison environment, where social interaction can play a fundamental role in reintegration, as it embodies the *agapic* component of love. This dimension is especially relevant in rehabilitation institutions that emphasize kindness, empathy, and forgiveness. This is linked to the ability of education and work to facilitate individual and collective development. Not only does social interaction support the cognitive and personal growth of individuals, but there is also a liberating and creative potential in education and work that promotes deeper and more conscious individual and collective growth, contributing to individuals taking care of themselves and their future (e.g., Marcuse 1964; Sen 1985; Sennett 1998). They are, therefore, institutions of love to the extent that they address the challenges of sustainability and responsibility towards the future.

Despite the importance of these aspects, studies on education and work in prison contexts often focus mainly on their preventive value with respect to recidivism, neglecting the opportunity to fully explore the transformative and regenerative potential typical of the socio-political dimension of love. Research demonstrates that participation in educational and work programs is pivotal for both the well-being of inmates and the prevention of recidivism. There exists a robust correlation indicating that engaging in these programs significantly reduces the likelihood of reoffending (CNEL 2024). Conversely, the absence of employment opportunities stands out as a primary risk factor contributing to criminal behavior and recidivism following incarceration.

Educational and work activities are connected to a reduction in recidivism in two ways: indirectly, by signaling the inmate's positive interest in social reintegration, and directly, by improving their prospects outside of prison through enhanced skills and, in the immediate term, better relationships within the prison.

The crucial importance of education and work in the prison context is widely recognized both globally and in regulatory frameworks. Educational and work activities in prison align with the sustainable development goals of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda,

and they are an important component of the strategy aimed at reducing poverty, promoting quality education, and encouraging decent work and economic growth. In Italy, Law No. 354 of 26 July 1975 regulates education and work in prison as part of inmates' rehabilitative treatment (Law No. 354/1975).

However, inmate participation in such programs remains limited: only about 34% of inmates participate in educational courses, and 6% receive vocational training (referring to the 2022/2023 school year). Additionally, the percentage of inmates who work is low, at approximately one-third (CNEL 2024).

These data are concerning, considering that research shows the significant impact of education and work on reducing recidivism. While the recidivism rate for non-working inmates is around 70%, it drops drastically to 2% for those who work in prison (CNEL 2024).

In conclusion, providing more work and training opportunities for inmates appears to be a crucial measure for improving their employment prospects after their release and reducing their risk of reoffending, in stark contradiction to the real data reported above. The mechanisms through which work and education are crucial as preventive factors are, in our view, closely connected to love. The following research will attempt to support this idea with evidence.

3. Materials and Methods

For this study, data were collected from three Italian prisons as part of the European project "Calypsos—Support for Social Inclusion, Specific Needs for Educational Support and Improvement of Basic Competences for Prisoners Europe" (2016-1-ES01-KA204-025656). This project involves four European universities, two NGOs, the management of two penitentiary institutions, and the Institute of the Innocents and is coordinated by the Center for Adult Education of Santa Cruz in Tenerife. The objective of the project was to focus on prison education for adults as a tool for inclusion and the valorization of diversity, identifying the special educational needs of prisoners in Spain, Portugal, and Italy.

In the current phase of the study, the focus is on analyzing recidivism and its relationship with protective factors, using the responses of Italian prisoners to the ILA-Employability questionnaire (Catone and Diana 2017). The research was conducted in three prison institutions in Lazio: the Rebibbia and the Rebibbia Femminile (i.e., for women) prisons in Rome and the Velletri prison. The Italian sample included 60 participants, of whom 51 were men and 9 were women, with an average age of 40.52 years, ranging from a minimum of 22 to a maximum of 69 years.

The questionnaire was administered face-to-face and investigated a series of dimensions related to:

- Socio-demographic information such as gender, age, educational qualifications, and parents' level of education;
- Criminal history: the illicit acts committed by prisoners, the type and number of crimes committed, and the length of the sentence;
- The family environment: a description and evaluation of the home and neighborhood of the young prisoner and the people with whom they lived;
- The school context: the prisoner's participation in school life and their behavior in class;
- The working sphere: any experiences;
- The peer group: the friendly and romantic relationships established before entering prison;
- Social relationships: the types of relationships that prisoners have established with their main socialization agencies such as their family, peers, and teachers;
- The time spent in the detention center: an assessment of the prisoner's experience in prison.

Previous publications have focused on the analysis of criminogenic risk factors (Cataldi et al. 2020). This paper focuses on the role of emotional and family relationships and institutional reintegration actions as protective factors. For the analysis, descriptive

analyses were initially conducted to profile the inmates in relation to their relationship factors. Subsequently, a multiple linear regression was performed, with the absence or presence of previous detentions as the dependent variable. The independent variables included school attendance, the importance attributed to friendships and work, and the presence of emotional family ties.

4. Results

In this research, recidivism was operationalized using the number of incarcerations as a proxy. From the questionnaire responses (Table 1), it appears that a significant portion of the prisoners interviewed have previously experienced detention. Some inmates have been incarcerated up to 25 times. It is interesting to note that some inmates in Velletri prison were facing their first prison experience, while in the women's prison there was a high rate of recidivism among female prisoners. Regarding their number of incarcerations, 28.3% of prisoners had been imprisoned only once, 40% had been incarcerated two to four times, and 31.7% had experienced five or more incarcerations. Furthermore, the number of crimes committed appears to be high: in the sample interviewed, only 46.7% of those interviewed committed a single crime, while the majority committed between 2 and 40 crimes. These data highlight the complexity of the situation and the recurrence of illegal behavior within the sample.

Table 1. Summary of descriptive analysis (absolute values).

Age	Mean: 40.2	Min: 22	Max: 69
Sex	Men: 51	Women: 9	Tot. 60
Education Level	Up to primary school: 5	Middle school: 35	Secondary school: 20
Living with family before	Yes: 26	No: 34	
School attendance before	Yes completed: 35	Yes interrupted: 22	No: 3
Crimes N.	1 crime: 28	2-4 crimes: 19	5 or more crimes: 13
Incarceration N.	1 incarc.: 17	2-4 incarc.: 24	5 or more incarc.: 19
Satisfaction with siblings	Unsatish.: 17	Satish.: 20	Very satish.: 23
Satisfaction with family	Unsatish.: 17	Satish.: 26	Very satish.: 17
Satisfaction with friends	Unsatish.: 19	Satish.: 28	Very satish.: 13
Satisfaction with partner	Unsatish.: 8	Satish.: 18	Very satish.: 32
Satisfaction with teachers	Unsatish.: 6	Satish.: 30	Very satish.: 22
I know who to share my problems with	Disagree: 26	Agree: 16	Totally agree: 17
N. of real friends	No friend: 17	1-3 friends: 33	Up to 4 friends: 10
Stable partner/family	No: 41	Yes: 19	
School/training attendance	No: 36	Yes: 24	
Job importance	Not important: 7	Important: 53	
Importance of friends	Not important: 13	Important: 47	

Regarding the protective factors considered in the research, the importance of family ties was first examined. Before entering prison, 43.3% of participants lived with family, while 56.7% did not have this support. With regard to their emotional relationships after incarceration, only 31.7% of those interviewed had a stable relationship, while the majority, 68.3%, did not have a stable partner or family.

Regarding meaningful relationships, approximately 28.3% of prisoners reported having no one to share their problems with, while almost one-fifth were dissatisfied with their relationships with siblings, friends, and family. Only half of the interviewees expressed satisfaction with their relationship with their partner. These data highlight the fragility of family and romantic relationships, which are put to the test by a risky lifestyle and the experience of detention itself (Ferrario and Galliena 2012).

Concerning work, direct access to the number of prisoners employed in work activities was not available due to bureaucratic and administrative difficulties. Therefore, the variable “importance of work” was considered. Based on the analysis, it emerged that work is considered the third most important value, after family and health. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that only 11.7% of prisoners did not consider work important, while the remaining 88.3% emphasized its importance.

Finally, to investigate whether and which relationship and institutional factors have an influence on recidivism, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The model took into account the following dichotomized variables:

- Recidivism (dependent variable): the prisoner has/has no other prior detentions;
- School attendance (independent variable): the prisoner follows/does not follow school or professional training courses;
- Job importance (independent variable): the prisoner does not consider/considers work important or very important in life;
- Friend importance (independent variable): the prisoner does not consider/considers friendships important or very important in life;
- Stable partner/family (independent variable): the prisoner does not have/has a stable partner or family.

The model explains 56% of the observed variability (R 0.747; R^2 0.558) and presents an acceptable fit and robustness, considering the limited number of interviews conducted (Table 2).

Table 2. Model summary.

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.747a	0.558	0.526	0.42313

Dependent variable: recidivism.

As shown in Table 3, the importance of a stable partner or family is strongly associated with the dependent variable, with a high level of significance ($p < 0.05$), emerging as the most influential predictor among those examined (standardized Beta 0.387). School attendance has a positive and significant relationship ($p < 0.05$), although with a moderate impact on the dependent variable (standardized Beta 0.271). The importance of work also has a positive and significant relationship with the dependent variable ($p < 0.05$), with a significant but smaller impact compared to other variables (standardized Beta 0.198). In contrast, the importance of friends is not significantly correlated with the dependent variable ($p > 0.05$) and does not significantly affect the dependent variable in the context of this model.

Table 3. Coefficients of the multiple linear regression model (recidivism as the independent variable).

	B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.029	0.144		0.203	0.840
School attendance	0.268	0.118	0.271	20.261	0.028
Job importance	0.319	0.191	0.198	10.674	0.010
Friend importance	0.072	0.116	0.074	0.621	0.537
Stable partner/family	0.485	0.145	0.387	30.350	0.001

5. Discussion

These findings highlight the importance of emotional support and educational opportunities for the social reintegration of prisoners, suggesting that targeted interventions in these areas could be particularly effective in preventing future recidivism. In line with the previously illustrated literature, the research results highlight how love, in both its affective and institutional dimensions, plays a crucial role in protecting prisoners, increasing their well-being, and preventing reincarceration.

In particular, the affective dimension of love, traditionally conceived as *storge* (Enright et al. 2022), manifests itself mainly through the significant relationships that prisoners maintain outside of prison. Family relationships represent an important source of emotional and social support. Data show that female prisoners with stable family ties tend to commit fewer crimes, suggesting that the emotional support and sense of belonging resulting from these relationships can act as a barrier against criminal behavior. This highlights the importance of cultivating and maintaining family ties even during detention. However, given the focus of this research on Italy, we have specifically emphasized affection as the pertinent form of love in our study, omitting *eros* due to legal and practical constraints within the Italian prison system.

Regarding the *philia* dimension of love, no significant relationships were explicitly found regarding friends. The survey instrument is probably not adequate at capturing this dimension, as it is unable to distinguish between friendships prior to prison and those developed inside, nor between friendships linked to a criminogenic environment and those that could act as a protective factor.

However, it emerged that around a fifth of prisoners said they had no one to share their problems with, while another fifth expressed dissatisfaction with their social and family relationships. This finding highlights how critical emotional relationships are in providing a support system that can mitigate the stress and isolation often associated with prison life.

The institutional dimension of love manifests itself through education and work, key elements in the rehabilitation of prisoners. School attendance emerges as a significant protective factor, with prisoners who possess a higher level of education showing a lower propensity to reoffend. Furthermore, many inmates reported positive relationships with teachers, suggesting that an educational environment in prison can provide not only knowledge but also important emotional support. This can be interpreted as a sign of the school's ability to act as an agent of love and of the regeneration of relationships with authority. Furthermore, school can be seen as a place where the *agapic* expression of love (Enright et al. 2022), understood as the possibility of forgiveness and a new future, is manifested through teachers' daily interaction with incarcerated students.

Employment is perceived as having significant value. Involvement in work activities allows prisoners to develop valuable skills for their reintegration into society while providing a sense of personal fulfillment and dignity. The impact of work goes beyond the economic aspect, profoundly influencing the emotional and social spheres of prisoners and helping to reduce the risk of recidivism. Unfortunately, it is necessary to underline that, currently, too few prisoners work in Italy. Even in this research, it was not possible to include data relating to the actual employment of prisoners as an independent variable as the number of workers was insufficient. For this reason, the variable relating to the importance of work (understood as its value) was included and considered a proxy for work as a protective factor against recidivism. It is clear that employment itself makes a difference, not only to the well-being of prisoners during detention but also, above all, to their social reintegration after their release.

Another obvious limitation of the research is the small sample size, especially for women. This does not allow for in-depth analysis and limits reflections on gender differences, which are certainly relevant in this area.

6. Conclusions

This work integrates research and intervention experiences in the prison context with the study of the social dimension of love. As shown, prison is a peculiar context for social relations, where love plays a significant role. In particular, this study explored the role of love as a promoter of prisoners' well-being and a protective factor against recidivism, considering both its relational and institutional dimensions.

Emotional and family relationships offer essential emotional support, reducing stress and isolation. Inmates with stable family ties show a tendency to commit fewer crimes,

while, regarding friendships, it was not possible to support our formulated hypotheses. Education and work, as expressions of institutional love, are powerful tools of rehabilitation. School attendance and positive relationships with teachers are significant protective factors, while work provides prisoners with useful skills for reintegration, increasing their dignity and personal fulfillment.

These findings illustrate that love, specifically understood as *storge*, plays a crucial role in nurturing and giving purpose to inmates' current circumstances and future prospects within the prison environment. *Eros*, however, faces significant restrictions in Italy; however, recognizing its potential for rehabilitation remains crucial. While the explicit protective roles of friendships were not evident, rehabilitation institutions emphasize their fundamental role in fostering relational dimensions. These institutions are instrumental in cultivating *philia* relationships within a broader political context, echoing the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers. Furthermore, they facilitate the restoration of social bonds beyond immediate circles, including hierarchical relationships such as those with teachers. Lastly, within prisons, social interactions embody the *agapic* expression of love, promoting reintegration through acts of kindness, empathy, and forgiveness. This dimension is particularly emphasized in rehabilitation programs aimed at comprehensive prisoner rehabilitation. Thus, more generally, this research contributes to highlighting the relevance of the public and institutional "side" of love. For example, in school, love manifests not only as support and positive relationships with teachers, an aspect empirically observed in research, but is also itself an object and "matter" of socialization and "education". The same applies to work, where love is not only present (or absent) as an element capable of providing a sense of personal fulfillment and dignity, which are factors connected to a sense of self-worth and vocation and are expressions (not without risks for the individual, such as exploitation—see [Koltonski 2018](#)) of self-love, but can also manifest as care for and commitment to society as a whole, characterized by an excess beyond the expressive needs and sense of self-worth of the acting individual.

This study opens up various intervention perspectives. Penal institutions should implement policies and programs that promote emotional relationships and institutional opportunities as tools for rehabilitation. Facilitating family maintenance, ensuring adequate time and space to cultivate relationships with partners and family members, and offering opportunities for interactions with external peers and friends are essential. This crucial emotional support helps reduce prisoners' isolation and psychological distress.

Educational programs must be strengthened, ensuring access to basic education and advanced courses or vocational training. Positive relationships with teachers and a stimulating educational environment prove to be important protective factors. Job opportunities within the prison environment are another key strategy. Work provides useful skills and increases prisoners' dignity and personal fulfillment, significantly contributing to reducing recidivism.

Educational and professional support are, therefore, key elements to rehabilitation. Prison institutions must consider these dimensions of love as integral parts of their social reintegration strategies, investing in programs that promote both emotional relationships and educational and work opportunities. This integrated approach can lead to positive outcomes for prisoners and society, reducing recidivism and improving our overall well-being.

Ultimately, love emerges as an essential component even in the peculiar social context of prison. Reducing recidivism and, therefore, improving the overall well-being of society is not the only, nor the most important, reason to invest in programs that promote nurturing relationships and educational and employment opportunities. Above all, this is a way to realize, in practice, the right to love that prisoners, like every human being, have. Thus, considering such a specific context as that of prison allows us to illuminate an essential dimension of social love itself, that of representing (and doing) a "right". Love as a right, and even more as a "performative right", realized through situated action and potentially having a disruptive political value ([Hoover 2019](#); [Zivi 2008](#)), clearly transcends utilitarian

logic, including the goal of preventing recidivism. It is a dimension able to profoundly enrich our understanding of the social, yet it remains largely unexplored.

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