“Prisons Were Made for People Like Us”: British Pakistani Muslim Experiences Upon Release From Prison

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Abstract
British Muslim young men who offend upon reentry from prison reported that “Prisons were made for people like us.” At one level, this meant that the challenges they faced were likely to be intractable and insurmountable, regrettably returning them to prison. At another, their social integration after release from prison was hampered by something more than their individual choices and agency. Cycling between neighborhood, offending, and prison, it was their characteristic social relations and the peculiar social structural constraints placed upon them as a group that best explained their experiences upon release from prison.

Keywords
Muslim prisoners, employment, resettlement, family breakdown, reoffending

Introduction: Social Integration, Muslim Ex-Prisoners, and Theory
Concern about the social integration of ex-prisoners around the world has increased as prisoner numbers have risen (Baldry et al., 2006; Melossi, 2015). This growing movement to better prepare offenders about to return to their

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communities, however, reveals that preparation alone cannot ameliorate the challenges that the ex-prisoner faces upon release from prison. Adjusting to the world outside prison can be an extremely demanding task for ex-inmates (Pager, 2003). As documented by a number of incarceree’s autobiographies, lost time cannot be recaptured (James, 2005). Nevertheless, most offenders who leave prison do so with high hopes for their future (Hartfree et al., 2008). Plans to move into employment, education or training, stay off drugs and out of prison do not always go as planned, as many find that life away from prison can be equally, if not more, challenging than the life they experienced in prison. In some cases, their plans are unrealistic; in others, the obstacles faced related to housing, employment, family support, and relationship with partners can cause the ex-inmate to struggle with life away from the prison and to start questioning whether prison life was more difficult than life away from prison (Hartfree et al., 2008).

Although plausible, these and other observations from the reentry literature seem to us under theorized. In contrast, this article argues that there continues to be something intractable about socially integrating those released from prison and insuperable about the challenges faced by those undergoing such experiences. These difficulties go beyond whether the formerly incarcerated try hard enough or are motivated enough and whether they choose and act in their own best interests. Indeed, they go beyond ex-offender personal accounts to the social structural constraints placed upon them, reflected in the well-known inadequacy of the support services offered them.

The intent of the article is, from the start, to frame our choice of theory by way of a riposte to the under theorizing of much of the reentry literature. Our theoretical choices can be characterized broadly as an approach derived from the political economy of crime and punishment. Second, linked to our stated socioeconomic structural and social relations theoretical approach, we locate empirically the position and profile of Muslim Pakistani young men in British society. Specifically, we describe and explain the peculiarities of the place that British Pakistanis occupy in the prison system and social structure, and how this may be linked to experiences of persistent and concentrated poverty. In other words, how the general social profile of the prison population is disproportionately found among young Pakistani men, without suggesting in a deterministic way that the social conditions experienced by this group makes offending and imprisonment more likely than for other groups. Of course, these conditions and their criminogenic consequences are mediated and mitigated by an array of interacting risks, exigencies, and motivations that lead to alternative experiences, identities, and pathways (Qasim, 2018). Pakistani young men, as we will show, are notably penalized in significant
ways because of their social and ethnic structural position as low skilled, unqualified, and poor.

Third, we provide a critical review of the reentry literature, noting strengths and limitations and their relevance as applied to our study of reentry.

Fourth, we note some of the economic, social, and cultural pressures bearing on the British Pakistani young men that feature in a long-term ethnographic study conducted by one of the authors showing the criminal opportunities available to them through the operation of local criminal drug markets (Qasim, 2018). We do this with reference to other similarly conducted studies of minority ethnic young men’s involvement in criminal drug markets. The focus in this article is upon their experiences leaving prison as they navigate back and forth between prison and their neighborhood. In this context, we go on to present this particular aspect of the study findings and how this led us to consider our political economy approach as the best way of understanding the experiences of these men leaving prison and reentering their neighborhood.

Moving on to the fifth and main substantive aspect of the article, we explore the experiences that a core group of nine British Muslim men had upon release from prison and the meaning of these experiences for them. This article pays close attention to some of the challenges the men faced from trying to resettle into their communities, to trying to find work and refrain from post-prison offending. The particular themes and issues that repeated themselves in the process of reentry were family relations, adapting from the prison to neighborhood environment, seeking employment having a criminal record, memories of prison, and returning to crime. Overall, the findings suggest that despite the stronger family bonds that appear to exist among Muslim families and purport to facilitate reintegration, found in desistance studies (Calverley, 2013), Muslim inmates, like most other inmates, struggle with resettlement. This includes, particularly, struggling to maintain healthy family relationships, trying to find suitable work, and refraining from further offending after release from prison.

The sixth and final part of the article assesses whether using a theoretical framework derived from political economy is justified, or supported.

**Theoretical Discussion: A Political Economy Approach to Prisoner Reentry**

Our chosen approach delineates prisoner reentry processes drawing upon work from the political economy of crime and punishment tradition, from Rusche (1933/1998) to De Giorgi (2006) and Wacquant (2009). In declaring our theoretical influences from the start, we do not override the study group’s
accounts, or fit their accounts into our preconceptions. Rather, we call witness to the eloquence, ignominy, and sanguinity of their accounts of the challenges and dilemmas they face reentering their neighborhoods from prison, because as a group ethnicity, in the place they live, there are few viable alternatives to entrepreneurial criminal activity.

Among the group of British Pakistani young men we studied, for example, we asked whether Miller’s (2014) conclusion from his ethnographic study of a United States prisoner reentry program was correct—Did social welfare and criminal justice state institutions simply collude to manage urban poverty among marginalized populations? Among our study group, there was a complete absence of any formal attempt to actually rehabilitate them as inmates. Not one of the participants throughout the 4-year study period mentioned receiving any practical interest or support from any agency that might have been tasked purportedly to support prisoner reentry.

If Melossi’s (2015) argument that migrants’ and their children’s exploitability as laborers is also strengthened through the threat and reality of captivity in prison “holds water,” then thinking about the heritage of British Mirpuri or Kashmiri Pakistani migrants and their dependents as a former peasant class, their penal disciplining could be understood in part as an attempt to forcefully transform them into an obedient working class, while they, for their part, refuse “poor work.” We jumped to this somewhat startling general assertion as a way of explaining the group’s often troubled and difficult reentry experiences according to the underlying purposes and functions of punishment from the point of view of a political economy perspective (De Giorgi, 2006; Melossi, 2015; Melossi & Pavarini, 1981; Phillips, 2012; Rusche & Kirchheimer, 1939/2003).

Because the group’s survival appeared to rely on their participation in local drug markets, release from prison and reentry to their neighborhood meant that they faced uncertain but unavoidable economic and cultural imperatives that underlay their difficulties. As such, their individual experiences of being released and returned to prison can be firmly placed within social and economic relationships found outside the prison. The group were only too aware of the disappearance of the relatively unskilled woolen textile workplaces they might normally have entered. They knew this because their fathers had told them over many years as they grew up. Although by no means straightforward, penal sanctions supplemented, and were ancillary to, these failed labor markets, and by extension to the place they resided, to their ethnicity and to poverty (Rusche, 1933/1998; Wacquant, 2009). That is, penal institutions are viewed in their interrelationship with other institutions and with nonpenal aspects of social policy, and within a wider strategy of controlling the poor (Garland, 1985/2008). The challenges, then, the men in our study faced, from
trying to resettle into their communities, to trying to find work, to refraining from postprison offending, requires this sort of contextualization.

Like marginalized young men elsewhere, those in the study faced fluctuations in the demand for (unskilled) labor. Furthermore, where criminality is a means of economic survival, policing and penal sanctions ensure that individuals are unable to sustain a living by criminal means and are deterred from tempting to try. In this view, their prison experiences are coercive ancillaries to the labor market, in which they reject its offer of poor work. Therefore, prison is meant to create conditions of life markedly more unpleasant than those experienced by those among their peers readier to accept poor work. Their pains of imprisonment, however, extend to their struggle on release from prison to maintain healthy family relationships, find suitable work, and refrain from further offending. Essentially, in this, the cycle of release and return is broken or compounded by social and economic relations beyond their control.

We have seen the prison system grow to manage economic marginalization and the withdrawal of welfare at the bottom of the class and ethnic stratification system. Harsher police and prison measures are adopted as a result of the weakening or unavailability of decent jobs, consequently managed by growing state authority. Un- and underemployment, precarious and poor work, and adverse labor market conditions, especially, weigh upon the working class—Muslim and Black younger and older uneducated, unskilled men. Ultimately—perhaps as a “last resort”—punitive welfare regulation becomes supplemented by incarceration, in the context of a general state of “social insecurity” (Wacquant, 2001b).

We were impressed by the bleakness of the study group’s position in British society and the seeming indifference toward their conditions, except to repeatedly discipline them for “refusing” poor work, which was never offered in the first place. These “dispossessed and dishonoured” young men, “entrapped” in a “deadly symbiosis” between prison and “ghetto,” neither invited nor rejected by the deregulated labor market (Wacquant, 2001a), are an important element among a growing male British Muslim population, connected to the growth of drug offenses. This penalization of the “Muslim question” in Britain is inexorably linked to the chronic economic marginalization and isolation of this young ethnic group.

**Muslim Prisoners, Employment, and Persistent Poverty**

The numbers of Muslims in British prisons have increased substantially in recent years, doubled in size over the last 10 years. In 2017, over 15% of the prison population in England and Wales is Muslim. Yet, Muslims are only 5%
of the total population. This reflects the natural growth of the Muslim population and its youth profile, that is, 59% of Muslim inmates were aged 15 to 29, compared with 47% of all those imprisoned. The more youthful profile of Muslims and their disproportionate concentration in lower socioeconomic groups explain in part the overrepresentation of Muslims in prison, as criminality is especially associated with the young and with economic deprivation (Allen & Watson, 2017; British Religion in Numbers, 2010). Because the profile of the general prison population is one of economically disadvantaged backgrounds, that Pakistanis are more economically disadvantaged than any other group in Britain is likely to be significant.

Furthermore, the British Pakistani group has the highest proportion of households living in poverty, at 45% (Barnard, 2014); they have higher unemployment rates and tend to be concentrated in the lowest paying occupations (Brynin & Longhi, 2015). Even then, although Pakistanis enter low-paying occupations relatively poorly educated and poorly skilled, they are still the most likely to be overqualified for their job, which means that education does not offer complete protection against low pay. Pakistanis are paid less because as employees they have different characteristics and work for different types of firms compared with White employees (Brynin & Longhi, 2015). This sense of occupying relatively economically marginalized and segregated enclaves apart from the mainstream labor market influenced the study group’s sense of isolation in employment views and prospects. The Pakistanis’ high levels of occupational segregation and isolation reflect barriers to entry to an occupation, due to lack of information about job options, discouragement, and discrimination. In addition, such “ethnic penalties” in the labor market are not easily explained by differences in education or other individual characteristics. Outside large cities, these obstacles force Pakistanis to enter specific “self-employed” occupations, yet possibly insecure employment, rather than as employees. Pakistanis thus are overrepresented in both low-skilled and high-skilled occupations associated with self-employment, often used as a way of escaping from unemployment or low-status manual work. In a sense, the study group’s preference—like occupations their family members legitimately occupied—was engaging in entrepreneurial criminality, as a form of illegitimate self-employment.

Because persistent poverty is more prevalent and more difficult to escape among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (Fisher & Nandi, 2015; Webster & Kingston, 2014), longer term and concentrated poverty experiences make offending more likely. Geographically concentrated unemployment has a particularly negative effect on work and poverty rates for Pakistanis. Living in such areas, racism and the fear of it restrict access to social networks and can prevent progression at work, discouraging people from leaving their own
area to look for work or access services (Catney & Sabater, 2015). Summarizing what is of most significance for the social structural position of Pakistanis (and Bangladeshis), they have a higher probability than any other ethnic groups to be paid less than the living wage in all occupational classes, being the most poorly paid and in the lowest-paying types of job. Therefore, they are most vulnerable to poverty and are substantially worse off than all other ethnic groups on all measures.

These differences are most extreme for men, and it is the exceptional social and economic conditions of our research participants that lead us to conclude that the likelihood of Pakistani young men to seek criminal solutions to resolve status frustration and impoverishment is more *likely* than other groups (Pawson, 2006; Sayer, 1993).

**Reentry: Between Prison and Neighborhood**

In large per capita prison populations such as the United Kingdom, large numbers of individuals are returned to society, largely uneducated, unskilled, often without family support, and with the stigma of a prison record, many suffering serious psychological and social problems upon release. Their extremely poor employment prospects, whether cause or effect of their offending and imprisonment, will depend on penal and social policy (Petersilia, 2003). The study group young men reported here were no exception. Regularly extracted from their neighborhood, imprisoned, and then returned a few years later, their “churning” between neighborhood and prison exacts particular sorts of costs, not only on the individuals involved but on their families and communities. This relatively recent and growing dimension to British Pakistani Muslim community life has been significant in how the community is perceived and perceives itself.

Studies of the crisis of prisoner reentry and reintegration in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere conclude that the services and personnel to facilitate these processes are ineffective, particularly in their seeming inability to adequately distinguish between those who are truly dangerous and those who are not (Burke & Collett, 2015; Graham, 2018; Petersilia, 2003).

This lack of discretion and inability to tailor the punishment to the crime is counterproductive at all the levels as discussed below in our description of the study participants’ experiences on leaving prison and, eventually, their returning. If their imprisonment temporarily stopped their offending, their return from prison brought all the negative impacts of prison. Apart from making up for lost time, the stigma and harshness with which they are treated by society, neighborhood, and family increases the likeliness of their returning...
to crime (Petersilia, 2003). Discredited ex-prisoners in ever larger numbers accrue experience, making it harder for them to ever lead law-abiding lives.

One of the key factors our study participants mentioned was the way in which successful reintegration after prison is made possible by ex-inmate family relations. Among male prisoners in England and Wales, Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017) found that prison visits and improved family relations resulted in lower rates of reoffending and a greater likelihood of finding employment and desisting from class A drug use. The role of strong family support in inmate reintegration into neighborhoods is not as well known, although Muslim family and neighborhood Biraderi (caste and clan networks) have been cited as an important source of support (Calverley, 2013).

The effects of employment on recidivism and desistance from crime after release from prison, despite employment retaining its value as a crucial aspect of social integration and wellbeing, is more limited than is generally known, especially for repetitive low-wage and low-skill manual labor among those with low education and limited employment histories. And, in any case, the devaluing of low-skill manual labor in the United Kingdom is unlikely to help (Aaltonen, 2016; Farrall et al., 2010; Maruna, 2001). Of more relevance to our study group of British Pakistani men is Maruna’s (2011) argument that ex-inmates’ reintegration requires ritual, especially after the drama and boredom of prison institutionalization, to counter the degradation of status experienced in prison. Specifically, there must be a symbolism of “moral inclusion” by which rituals of “atonement, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation” are included as “intangible processes of status elevation” Maruna (2011, p. 4). Among the participants, this could be expected to be realized through their Muslim religious identities and Mosque. Leverentz (2011), for example, studied what impact neighborhood characteristics have on attitudes toward crime and prisoner reentry, showing how different communities vary in the ways they frame “the crime problem.” More or less punitive attitudes are shaped by neighborhood characteristics such poverty, perceptions of neighborhood stability, ethnic homogeneity, and the degree to which criminals and ex-inmates are concentrated in such neighborhoods, as well as general concerns or anxiety about crime and society.

In reentering an explicitly “moral community” of Muslim religious-based rituals, we expected focused attention and emotion, the generation of solidarity and symbols of group membership, reducing anxiety and fear. We expected Muslim religious traditions would allow former inmates to repent and the community to forgive. We expected compassion and a deep concern for redemptive rites of passage making public recognition that an offender had changed and apologized for their crimes and the harm done (Ahmed et al.,
2001; Calverley, 2013; Maruna, 2011). The accounts related by our study group suggested that these facilitators were not present and that rituals of prayer, work, and marriage were absent from their lives. Rather, they had experienced “failed rituals” (Maruna, 2011).

Calverley (2013) explored whether British Bangladeshi Muslim communities have distinct and different attitudes toward rehabilitation, tolerance of returning prisoners, the role of the family, and the extent to which community members assist in ex-offender rehabilitation. While reentering young ex-inmate Bangladeshis men faced the unwelcome burden of their previous reputations and the stigma of their past, Islam presented a potential “hook for change” from which they could draw. Similar to our research participants, they began their spiritual transformation in prison, in part to cope with the monotony of prison life. Unlike these men, however, our study group men were relatively unsuccessful in reconnecting with religious and “good friends,” having lost contact with them due to their involvement in crime. Social networks of religious friends who served to recognize and legitimize their efforts to change were absent.

Calverley’s (2013) Bangladeshi research participants relied upon the social capital provided by networks of prosocial friends prior to being helped to secure employment. Families were crucial in influencing desistance, carrying a strong message of forgiveness and promise of future support. Calverley’s (2013) claim about the redemptive possibilities of Islamic religion and its forgiveness-orientated culture was illustrated in the ways Bangladeshi desisters were helped by families who counteracted shame pragmatically and rehabilitated their sons’ reputations. These men eventually took up roles and responsibilities as fathers, partners, and husbands, reconstructing a prosocial identity around the family, and the significance of religion as moral compass. In every aspect of Calverley’s findings, we, in contrast, found little evidence of any beneficial influence of Islam or a return to a Muslim community among our Pakistani study group. For us, their experiences seemed mostly dominated by the nature and opportunities of local criminal drug markets and an overwhelming commitment to entrepreneurial criminality.

Our findings, that inmate reentry was influenced by intractable economic marginalization and associated criminal opportunities, are supported by other studies of prisoner reentry outcomes among minority young men. Verbruggen (2016) found that for young men, a criminal background in itself does not necessarily damage employment prospects, when a history of unemployment has already reduced their prospects. Soyer (2014) shows that imprisonment itself restricts young men’s ability to exercise any creative energy in relation to their desired nonoffending identity. Thompson (2008) emphasized that
punitive public attitudes of inmates and ex-inmates prevented those with a criminal conviction from satisfying even basic reentry needs such as housing, health care, employment, and political participation. Fader (2013) found a complete disconnect between what young people experienced inside and institutional release that required adopting behavior that would be dangerous or demeaning in a poverty and violence-stricken urban neighborhood. Survival in a hostile environment trumped everything else.

The experiences of our study respondents contrasted the fruitless search for work with the criminal alternatives. Parenting responsibilities (most had fathered children outside marriage with White non-Muslim women between spells in prison) were covered in covert romantic relationships and the inability to form stable families. In any case, their infidelity, lack of resources, unstable employment, criminal records, and ever-present danger of return to prison made their women partners reluctant to depend on them. And yet, over time, their incarceration experiences and stories about neighborhood reentry were told through the lens of changing social conditions and economic prospects, which provide the context that shifted their accounts (Rajah et al., 2014).

**Method**

The data presented here are drawn from Qasim’s (2018) earlier ongoing study of 19 British-born Pakistani Muslim men, aged 18 to 31, living in Bradford, north England. Based on the lives of older members, this article focuses on a core group of nine individuals. Here, we draw only on the prisoner reentry aspects of the data from this core group, rather than drawing on the larger study.

This sort of immersive, close-up, participant observation study, based on informal, ad hoc interviewing and probative questioning, posed numerous ethical dilemmas and concerns. Although eventually endorsed by University Ethics Committee oversight (the research was ethically approved through Swansea University, UK), establishing informed consent to ensure that participants and the places they frequented were anonymous (by “making up” names and identifying characteristics) were only the start to guaranteeing that offender participants were not exploited, made vulnerable, or in any way exposed by the research process.

In offering context, complexity, and meaning to understanding individual and group offending, this type of qualitative study approach sought to interpret and explain the lived experiences of a group of young Pakistani Muslim men, not only in terms of openness to what they shared about their major life...
experiences, but also to access and intuit the implicit dimensions and meanings of what they said and did (Finlay, 2009).

On one hand, the usual problems of locating and accessing this hard-to-reach population were eased somewhat by the researcher’s prior knowledge of the group as a young British Pakistani Muslim living in the same neighborhood. On the other hand, proximity and religious and cultural affinity are not guarantees that a group, defined by the clandestine nature of their activity, will consent or cooperate. In this case, perhaps fortuitously, the researcher’s credentials and credibility derived from his common area schooling, age, and upbringing shared with the research participants, and to which he had returned. Furthermore, the researcher had had a troubled youth and was trusted by and known to two of the group, leading to access to the others. Openly disclosing his interest in making them the focus of research inquiry and assuring them of the strictest confidentiality, they were, in part, won over by outside interest in their lives and networks. The most important factor in accounting for the respondents’ frankness about their lives was the researcher’s wholehearted commitment, involvement, and support in the group’s natural setting over 4 years. Importantly, the researcher avoided asking participants specific questions about their personal lives or their offending behaviors. When these were volunteered in the course of conversation, participants were steered away from offering specific information, so as to gain a general but not intrusive impression.

Having previously outlined the typical social and economic conditions afforded to the ethnic group to which they belonged—notably their isolation and de facto segregation to particular residential places and parts of the labor market—we next explain the sorts of social and economic imperatives drug dealers faced in everyday life. We then report on how these pressures were felt and what they meant to the group as they navigated their post-prison reentry into their neighborhood.

**Economic and Cultural Imperatives Among Drug Dealers Released From Prison**

Upon release from prison, one of the research participants, Zahir (all names are “made up”), stated plaintively the main problem to the researcher, “There’s not a lot for me to do now that I’m out. I’m trying not to get back into hustling but it’s harder now. What else can I do to make paper [money]?” This problem reflects how mainly poorly educated and unskilled young men survive in a cash economy as recounted across many studies over many years. For Zahir and the group, release from prison meant making up for lost time,
but how? Prison had disrupted cash-flow and contacts in the local drug market. Sullivan’s (1989) Brooklyn study of youth crime in the inner city decried the emphasis in similar contemporaneous studies on the individual characteristics of young people, ignoring social and economic conditions as sources of urban minority and young, poor male criminality. While not denying the existence of individual differences, Sullivan found that ignoring group behavior and influence leads to conclusions that discount the importance of cultural, social, and economic processes, particularly as alternative sources of reward through entrepreneurial and economic crime. At the height of the U.S. crime wave, Sullivan (1989) observed how the severe economic marginalization of young people and young adults in minority neighborhoods made economic crime more attractive, and how unemployment and underemployment induced personal stress and weakened local social controls.

Although underpinned by economic marginalization, the group’s street values worked against accepting the status of the victim, seeking out instead more empowering social arenas to find status and reward. Sandberg and Pedersen (2009), in another similar study of Black cannabis dealers in Oslo, showed how in a welfarist society making money and garnering economic capital was subordinate to the possession of “street capital,” as seen in dealers’ and distributors’ technical and mythological knowledge of illegal drugs and dealing. The immense appeal of “symbolic capital,” in contradistinction to conventional forms of cultural capital, education, and status, meant that individuals in street cultures have more exciting and rewarding lives than individuals in conventional society. Similarly, Bucerius’ (2014) study of Muslim drug dealers in Germany—like those in our study area—could only hope for low-paying jobs in the formal economy or slightly better-paying jobs in the informal economy. These immigrant young men’s labor market participation limitations drive some young men to seize the many and more lucrative opportunities available in illegitimate and criminal market goods and services. The promise of fast money and local status made the drug market a tempting alternative to the formal economy, with little connection to staying in school and gaining qualifications. Again, the drug market provided them with not only financial resources, but with a way to gain self-respect and achieve leadership roles.

**Muslim Pakistani Prisoners and Their Experiences Upon Release From Prison**

One of the first areas of research focus was the challenges the young men faced in adapting to the outside world upon prison release. In particular, some
spoke of the difficulties they experienced adapting to the change in environments. This is illustrated by Salman who spoke of how on the following morning after his release he was unable to leave his bedroom until a family member came and let him out. Although this sounds comical, in reality it indicates that the group, similar to many ex-inmates, had great difficulty in adjusting to the outside world. Time spent in prison is a time of de-individuation and the institutionalization of the personality. The longer the sentence and the more frequent the imprisonments, the greater the difficulties some of the participants had in adjusting to “civilian” life. At the same time, there is tacit recognition that they all need support, ranging from money to moral support, upon reentry.

Prison also contributed to the breakdown of family relationships; many of the young men found it increasingly difficult to get along with their family members, particularly after having served a long sentence. This was certainly the case with Kamran and his relationships with his siblings after release from prison. Kamran felt that they were not showing him respect as the older brother. This was the cause of most arguments with his parents:

They [parents] always taking me younger brother’s side. I know why though, its cuz he gives them money and I don’t. He’s a fucking prick though, he thinks he’s all clever getting brave in front of them, but you should see him when he’s on his own, he don’t say two words. But then in front of them, he starts getting all funny. I told him the other day to pass me the remote, asked him about 10 times and he ignored me so I just lamped him [punched him].

Kamran later explained that his parents called the police on several occasions after he attacked his younger brother. All of these arguments meant that Kamran began spending a lot of his time away from the family home, either cruising in his car along with his friends or spending time at his girlfriend’s house. He had struggled adjusting to the outside world when previously released from prison. According to his friend Nav, Kamran was familiar with prison and he found it difficult to cope with the pressures on the outside. As Nav explained, “. . . he prefers prison. He doesn’t like it on the out, he feels lost and that out here.” Although it was clear during the time the researcher has spent with Kamran that he did not intend to return to prison, his reckless behavior at times pointed to this possibility. He had, in total, spent 7 years of his life in prison, and one could argue that his familiarity with, and conditioning by, prison life lessened any fear it had for him. It was apparent that maintaining relationships with family eluded him. Kamran struggled with the fact that while he had been to prison, his younger siblings had grown up and matured; they were no longer the children who
he could “boss around.” They wanted to be shown respect, just like Kamran had expected of them.

Salman was another of the young men who felt that his relationship with his family was no longer the same as it was before he went to prison. Salman explained how his family were unable to understand his needs; he felt they were unable to understand that he wanted to enjoy his life before settling down and getting married in an arranged marriage. While Salman felt that they cared for him, he thought that they were unsure of how to best support him upon release from prison instead of persuading him to get married.

when I came out of prison, me family all sat me down after about 3 days, they could see I was chilling and that and coming home late, they thought I’d go and do the same shit before going into prison so my parents were like it’s time for you to settle down now and get married to one of my cousins, I was like no fucking way, I ain’t ready for that shit yet, I want to enjoy myself before settling down, they didn’t like that, me family stopped talking to me for a few days but then they were alright with me after a while.

We can begin to see already, from the group’s own accounts, that while the purpose of prison is to deprive an offender of liberty as a punishment, the reality is that prison carries with it damaging, long-term hidden costs, many of which are psychological and emotional.

Another theme from the data hinged upon further challenges of finding employment. For a number of reasons, the group struggled to find work. One reason was their criminal records (discussed later). Another was there were very few employment opportunities in Bradford. It is well documented that unemployment has affected Bradford’s Pakistani population more than those from White or from other ethnicities (Alam & Husband, 2006). In the area studied, the Pakistanis have struggled with unemployment ever since the closure of the textile mills on which they were heavily dependent. The group felt frustrated that the city was failing to attract large businesses; they would frequently compare Bradford to neighboring Leeds. One afternoon, Tanny, clearly irritated with the bleak situation in Bradford, was telling the group that he was contemplating moving away:

There’s no money left here. All the big companies have left, and Bradford has just got smaller and smaller and Leeds has got bigger and bigger. Look at Westfield shopping centre [begun but abandoned at the time]—it’s been left abandoned for years; no one gives a shit. You just got people here who don’t care, but who like to make out they do.
In one sense, Tanny can be seen as a peripheral character in the group. Yet, at the same time, the sentiment he expressed was widely held. Interestingly, it was noted that people of all generations throughout the neighborhood expressed the same or similar views. It could be argued that it was perceived with more intensity by the group because they felt more constrained to remain within Bradford for family reasons, in comparison with other people of a similar age group in other communities.

Meanwhile, being uneducated and having no real qualifications was another explanation offered for the group’s struggle to finding employment. Mehmood hoped that by finding work he could provide for his children, but noted that because of his lack of qualifications, he would never secure a job: “There’s no jobs for people like me who have not even a GCSE, I’ve given up trying. Bro’ I’ve been trying to get a job for ages now but nothing out there.”

However, according to Afzal, education was not always the answer to finding a decent job; he gave the example of many people with degrees who were working in degrading jobs. Yet, realizing that they had criminal records and very few qualifications did not mean that the group sought to try and educate themselves by returning to college or any other form of education or training. Many of them could see little benefit from returning to college, particularly at their age. Their view on education was that it was something one does when younger, not in one’s mid-to-late twenties. One evening, while the researcher was hanging out with the group, some of them spoke of wanting to find work, noting they had looked everywhere and had had no luck. Hoping to help them, the researcher suggested that they try to gain some qualifications, for example, learn practical skills which could lead to an apprenticeship. However, on hearing what he had to say, Afzal replied somewhat bluntly:

It’s not our age to study now, plus all of this education don’t get you nowhere. You tell me, how’s it gonna help? Look at [naming a few people living in the neighbourhood], they got like proper education, I mean they got degrees and that, and they working in shitty job.

One particular job that several of the group appeared to like was taxi-driving. This was also a popular method of earning a livelihood for a considerable number of residents living in the neighborhood. The thought of working in a job which was flexible, picking the days and hours they worked was appealing to them. However, given that the group had criminal records, the likelihood of becoming taxi drivers was in reality very slim.
Meanwhile, even when they did eventually find jobs, it proved difficult for them to retain them. Zahir had finally found a job. The job was in a popular high street store, and Zahir was overjoyed, having searched for a job for a while. A legal job now meant that he could make money without having to look over his shoulder to see if the police were checking whether he was selling cannabis. However, the job did not go as smoothly as he had hoped. One evening after finishing work, Zahir seemed rather annoyed. He was not his usually amiable self, and when asked by some of the others what was wrong, he replied,

It’s the fucking boss he has pissed me off, he’s always trying to give me a hard time, if he tries sacking me, I’d swear I’ll fuck him up. It wasn’t the apna [Pakistani] manager, it’s the other one. He thinks he’s something special. I said to him, don’t think your something ‘cuz you ain’t, you’re only a manager in the shop. You’re not a manager out on the street. If you think you are, then come outside and speak to me like that, so he just shut up.

A few days later Zahir was fired from the job and was back to being unemployed. Given the fact that the group were mostly unemployed, there was still a need for them to raise money. This was not merely a matter of finding a source of revenue for themselves, but in some cases, also a matter of providing for their families. Some were dependent on state welfare, in particular on Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), although this was stigmatizing and damaging to street credibility, so those who depended on it were unlikely to admit it readily.

In addition to the barriers posed by the lack of formal education were their criminal records. Ahmed appeared frustrated a number of times, having searched for work but unable to secure a position. Ahmed was convinced that it was his criminal record that stood in his way; he felt that employers did not want to employ someone who had a lengthy record like his:

I can’t find work because I’ve got a record. So what am I supposed to do? I want a job, hands on, something like car mechanics, or maybe electrics, anything hands on. I’m not a book person. But there’s nothing to get. And now I am banned from driving it’s hard to go anywhere to take a course.

As documented by Bushway (2011) and others, finding employment is difficult for ex-offenders, as crime decreases the chances to find work, experience job stability, and have good earnings (Bushway, 2011; Pager, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Echoing Becker’s labeling theory (Becker, 1963), this was the case for those of the group searching for employment who found that having a criminal record was now a barrier for finding employment. One
day at the gym, Salman explained how there was one particular occasion when he was blatantly turned away from a job because of his criminal record:

In one of the interviews I thought that I might get the job until the bastards asked me about my criminal record, and I had to be open with them ‘cuz they do CRB checks on ya everywhere now. I told them that I had been to prison but that I ain’t been in trouble with the law for over two years now, but the fuckers wrote to me a few days later saying: I’m sorry you ain’t successful. I know what the bastards were thinking when I told them about my criminal record. I could see the way they were looking at me, like if I’m a proper crook or something.

For some of the group, not being able to find work was used as an excuse for continuing to pursue a career selling illegal drugs. Ahmed explained on another occasion that because he had been struggling to find work, he was finding it difficult to refrain from getting involved with drugs.

It is important to highlight here that it seemed, in the case of these men, that prison did not reduce offending. If anything, it was seen by them as a hindrance to their offending, and they would come out only to continue to do what they were doing before they went inside. Some of the group were eager to make more money on release from prison, keen to catch up on the time they had lost inside. Zahir, upon his release, returned to selling drugs:

There’s not a lot for me to do now that I’m out. I’m trying not to get back into hustling but it’s harder now. What else can I do to make paper? I have made a few good links in there [prison] and I can get my hands on bagging shit now, so I will wait and see what I do. In the meantime, I’m just gonna chill and enjoy myself.

Time spent inside did, however, make it difficult for some of the group to get back in the drugs market as other dealers were quick to take their clientele, but contacts made inside with other inmates could, in some cases, make it more profitable selling drugs upon release. Some of the group spoke of making “good links inside” and were able to buy drugs cheaper than they had previously.

Incarceration, however, often came at a considerable personal cost for some, recalling bad memories such as the loss of a family member or close friend. Research has highlighted how young people involved in offending experience parental, multiple, and traumatic deaths at a higher frequency than those in the general population (Vaswani, 2008). Nav was one who experienced bereavement while he was in prison, but, unlike the others who had lost friends and extended family members, it was Nav’s father who had
died unexpectedly. The death of his father was something that Nav found extremely upsetting, and he would occasionally talk about it to the group. One evening as the group sat in a car, Nav spoke of how he learned about his father’s death when he was in prison:

I couldn’t believe it, I was in shock, I just wanted to be there for my mum and brothers but I couldn’t. Them days were tough for me, I felt like I could kill someone that’s how angry I used to be. All I used to think about was my dad and how hard he worked to make life easy for us. I was, like, proper down for ages.

Nav was allowed to attend his father’s funeral prayer and, while he was grateful he could attend, this left him feeling embarrassed for his family, as he was accompanied into the mosque by two prison officers:

Me cousins, especially my uncles—I know they didn’t like me, they were there in the masjid, they were, like, looking at me. I knew what they were thinking, they were, like, he’s not there for his family when they need him. But then I didn’t say anything because there were loads of people in there, it was rammed. It was hard. I felt that I had stressed my dad out because of getting locked up and that.

Often, major family events would occur from which members were excluded, and no compassionate discretion was given to allow inmates to attend the funerals of close relatives without the presence of prison officers. This was especially important to members of the group when the funeral was that of a parent and was held in the mosque in view of all those present. There was also a feeling, as Nav mentions, of his having let the family down for not being there when they were going through such a difficult time. This is a particularly interesting point because, despite members not being prepared to show anyone that prison was testing at times, they would speak of prison as not allowing them to be able to support their families during tough times.

**Conclusion**

In applying a political economy perspective on empirical processes of prisoner reentry, our study reveals that Muslim community cohesion as a source of social integration among young Muslim men released from prison, no longer exists, if it ever did exist. This is due to globalization’s social and economic changes that have impacted neighborhoods. Just as being “stuck in place” is a key mechanism of concentrated disadvantage across the generations, so subsequent younger generations are forced to adapt or resolve these
downturns in fortunes, some attempting to seek redress and progression through education, others through the informal or criminal economy. This is a recipe for entrenched inequality and profound frustration among excluded young people and communities that are left behind.

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