

ARTICLE

# Structural discrimination and social stigma among individuals incarcerated for sexual offenses: Reentry across the rural–urban continuum\*

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## Abstract

The stigma associated with a felony conviction can impede the reentry process, and emerging research findings indicate that one's community can amplify or temper the mark of a criminal record. Researchers examining criminal stigma have focused on individuals living in urban areas, overlooking the experiences of persons outside these communities. Using qualitative data collected from a sample of men and women paroled for sexual offenses in Missouri, we contrast how social and structural stigma alter the reentry experiences for participants living in communities along the rural and urban continuum. The results show that the stigma of a sex offense conviction was a near-universal experience and residence restrictions stymied efforts to find housing. Residents of urban areas and some large cities felt that the community offered relative anonymity from stigma but the stress of their status being discovered was omnipresent. Participants in rural areas and small cities had less social privacy and reported being shunned in the community, although strong social ties did mitigate some of the consequences of stigma. The results highlight the importance of considering place when studying reentry and have implications for designing correctional policies to address the needs of residents returning to non-metropolitan locations.

## KEYWORDS

community, qualitative research, rural, sex offenses, stigma

The results of a large body of research highlight the effect of community context on crime, criminality, and criminal justice organizations. Scholars have extended this work to describe the implications of community and social structure for persons returning from prison (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Mears, Wang, Hay, & Bales, 2008). Despite the breadth of scholarship on crime and place, extant work has been focused on individuals returning from prison to urban communities, limiting the understanding of whether similar processes occur in other places, such as rural contexts. Criminologists have begun to address the urban–rural gap (Eason, Zucker, & Wildeman, 2017; Miller, 2014; Ojha, Pape, & Burek, 2018), but the call for more research on the “urban–rural dimension” made by Osgood and Chambers (2000, p. 82) two decades ago remains unanswered.

In this study, we extend the findings from prior research in several ways. First, using qualitative data from a sample of men and women paroled to varied communities across the urban–rural landscape, we consider how individuals experience stigma and how the features of place condition this lived experience. We adopt a broader measure of community instead of the rural and urban dichotomy common in work of this type. Understanding place as a continuum is particularly important given the growing overlap and flow of population and labor between urban and rural communities. The United States is more spatially integrated than ever before, and traditional geographic divides have blurred (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017).

Second, we focus on a unique justice-involved population—individuals convicted of a sexual offense. Recent punitive policy mandates, like residence and registry restrictions, have primarily resulted in separating individuals convicted of a sexual offense from every other conviction type, making the experience of stigma more pronounced and prolonged for this population (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Soothill, 2010). Structural restrictions end up stigmatizing individuals by limiting where they can live and work; thus, place is inherently linked with the stigma of a sexual offense conviction (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Socia, 2011). We draw on data from in-depth interviews with a sample of 62 men and women released on parole for a sex offense conviction in Missouri to derive a deeper understanding of how the social stigma of the “sex offender” and “felon” labels, and the structural stigma accompanying residence restrictions, influences the reentry experience for individuals returning to communities across the urban–rural spectrum.

## 1 | STIGMA OF A SEXUAL OFFENSE CONVICTION

Individuals convicted of crimes are stigmatized, or marked, in ways that inhibit them from fully reintegrating into society (Jones et al., 1984; Pager, 2003). Persons with a criminal conviction face stigma when seeking housing, employment, and social services, as well as by members of the community as the “felon” label becomes their master status (Becker, 1963). Goffman (1963, p. 3) argued that social stigma results when an individual is discredited “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.” Individuals, therefore, are stigmatized when “they are labeled, set apart and linked to undesirable characteristics” that leads to status loss and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 369).

Social stigma results from interpersonal interactions and experiences, and it originates in the social context and is reinforced through social exclusion by others (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Once an individual acquires the stigmatized status, he or she may be shamed, shunned, or banished from social engagement (Spencer, 2009). The stigmatized also experience “stigma consciousness” in which they recognize the devaluation of the attributes they possess, and this is linked with a host of psychological consequences, such as reduced self-worth, avoidance, and shame (Herek, 2009; Pinel, 1999). Labels can result in diminished social opportunities and, ultimately, in a changed identity (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

In contrast to social stigma, structural stigma is entirely dependent on the discrimination advanced by institutions, such as the criminal justice system, which exert power over individuals (Link & Phelan, 2001). Structural stigma perpetuates and worsens a stigmatized status because of social institutions that enforce and reinforce the differentiation and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001; Pryor & Reeder, 2011). When institutions implement policies to target or limit the opportunities of a group, they are potentially introducing new or amplifying social stigma (Corrigan, Markowitz, & Watson, 2004).

Individuals convicted of sexual offenses experience social and structural stigma in ways that differ from other offense classifications. This group endures a social stigma fueled by citizen perceptions of the perceived dangerousness and norm-violating characteristics of sexual behavior (Pryor & Reeder, 2011). The devalued attribute of being labeled a “sex offender” is shaped by several stereotypes including the homogeneity of offending, unresponsiveness to treatment, and high rates of reoffending (Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008; Sample & Bray, 2003). Society applies a “moral-deviate script” to individuals convicted of sexual offenses (Jones et al., 1984, p. 190), which describes the perceived immorality underlying their behavior and serving as a label that cannot be shed. The “sex offender” status is seen as a feature within the person rather than as a label affixed to him or her or as a characteristic (Harris, 2017; Link & Phelan, 2001).

The stigma of being labeled a sex offender is simultaneously constructed and fueled by the adoption of numerous legislative acts to curb offending, such as residence restrictions, registration requirements, GPS monitoring, and mandated treatment (see Mancini, Barnes, & Mears, 2013, for a review). This modern-day banishment leaves individuals convicted of sex crimes devalued and discriminated against by the community (Link & Phelan, 2001; Simon, 1998; Spencer, 2009).<sup>1</sup> In fact, what once was considered an invisible stigma for individuals convicted of felonies generally (Travis, 2005) has become a visible, structurally induced, and permanent mark with the presence of their names on public registries (Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

Ultimately, the status loss experienced by individuals convicted of sexual offenses is linked closely with discrimination in a variety of spaces, socially through interpersonal relationships, and structurally via barriers to housing and employment, and continues long after the punishment has been served. The culmination of this experience, according to Link and Phelan (2001, p. 373), is that the structure has been altered such that the individual’s life chances are diminished, having “a cascade of negative effects on all manner of opportunities.” Thus, institutions bear great power generating and perpetuating stigma. The influences of stigma on reintegration present a paradox of sorts that has yet to be reconciled. In essence, these concepts are in opposition, in which reintegration from prison is a welcoming transition that allows for the individual to construct a new nonoffending identity (Maruna, 2001), but it is juxtaposed by the social and structural stigmas that interact and symbolically reproduce the very prison from which one is released.<sup>2</sup> What remains less clear is how the experience of stigmatization manifests by physical location, as well as how place may serve to alter the symbolic and physical prison for individuals convicted of sexual offenses.

## 2 | REENTRY AND PLACE

Despite the theoretical importance of community context on criminality, the characteristics and structural and social dimensions across types of places remains underdeveloped. Researchers have

<sup>1</sup>The “us” versus “them” distinction is reinforced by the labels attached to stigmatized individuals such that an individual is a sex offender rather than being someone who is convicted of a sex offense (Link & Phelan, 2001). As such, we take the position of describing the stigmatized attribute rather than the label.

<sup>2</sup>Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

traditionally demarcated place by population size and density dividing communities into urban and rural groups (Berg & Lauritsen, 2016; Lichter & Brown, 2011; Osgood & Chambers, 2000). Typically, “urban” refers to city centers with dense core populations, whereas “nonurban” includes the remainder of community types in which people can reside: small city, village, suburb, micropolitan, and rural (Logan, Stevenson, Evans, & Leukefeld, 2004).

The study of nonurban spaces has been focused primarily on the conceptualization of rural settings, and scholars have denoted several factors that make rural areas structurally and culturally distinct. First, rural residents characterize familial relationships as more close-knit, who provide more monetary support, and are less likely to allow “outsiders” in as compared with individuals who live in metropolitan communities (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000). The interdependent nature of kin and friend relationships can lead to a lack of privacy in some rural communities where residents know one another over long periods, perhaps generations, and have intimate knowledge of their lives (Weisheit & Wells, 1996). Scholars have coined the term “acquaintanceship density,” in which rural residents have “substantially more physical privacy, but substantially less social privacy” (Weisheit & Wells, 1996, p. 384). In contrast, urban dwellers experience the inverse where they are in close proximity to other residents but have greater anonymity. Urbanites report more friendship ties and obtain fewer resources from relatives compared with their rural counterparts (Amato, 1993), and in a rich body of work, scholars have suggested individuals living in impoverished neighborhoods rely heavily on “fictive kin” or nonrelatives that together form a web of disposable ties on which to draw (Desmond, 2012; Stack, 1974).

Second, the rules and norms of a rural locale are more homogenous, tightly guarded, and conservative than in urban communities (Gimpel & Karnes, 2006; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). Researchers have suggested that individuals with a criminal record face more stigma in rural communities than in metropolitan regions (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), which may be amplified for individuals convicted of sex offenses. For example, Anderson, Sample, and Cain (2015) polled Nebraska residents about appropriate distances for individuals convicted of sexual offenses to reside, and rural residents were significantly more likely than urban residents to feel that “500 feet is not enough.” There is also evidence that rural residents rely more heavily on informal social control in response to individuals convicted of sexual offenses, such as gossip mills and interpersonal shaming, to send a message that they are being watched, rather than relying on formal criminal justice control (Leverentz & Williams, 2017).

Third, rural and urban residents have differential access to social services and housing stock, both key structural components of reintegration. Rural communities are topographically different from urban communities, marked by a greater distance between homes or centers of town making transportation a critical need (Wodahl, 2006). Rural communities have fewer amenities and services including access to treatment programs, subsidized housing, and food support when compared with urban communities (Logan et al., 2004; Wodahl, 2006). Justice systems in rural locales rely on a smaller tax base, and community supervision officers have fewer and more distant resources for clients (Applegate & Sitren, 2008; Weisheit & Wells, 1996; Zajac, Hutchison, & Meyer, 2014), which is compounded by high employee turnover and fewer qualified staff (Edmond, Aletraris, & Roman, 2015; Hipp, Janetta, Shah, & Turner, 2009; Logan et al., 2004). Stable, affordable housing is also less prevalent in rural areas (Wodahl, 2006), and residents rarely have access to halfway houses, homeless shelters, and other types of transitional facilities that are more common in urban communities (Jackson & Shannon, 2014).

In addition, residence restrictions have further exacerbated place-based stigmatization experienced by urban residents convicted of sexual offenses. Researchers have suggested these restrictions have “relegated” individuals returning to urban areas to “neighborhoods of last resort,” which are marked by higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, increased poverty, and fewer treatment and

social service resources (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008, 2014, p. 111; Hipp, Turner, & Janetta, 2010; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2008; Socia, 2011). Evidence also shows that residence restrictions push individuals out of cities and into rural communities (Levenson & Hern, 2007; Socia, 2013; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006). It remains unclear if, and how, these laws influence residents who transition outside of metropolitan areas.

Scholars have recently attempted to expand place duality into a continuum, revealing that urban-rural spaces are more than just opposites (Eason et al., 2017; Schaeffer, Loveridge, & Weiler, 2014). Although there has been a scant amount of research conducted on the role of stigma among individuals paroled outside of metropolitan areas, the findings of some theoretical and empirical work indicate potential variation in stigmatization across communities. In a large body of demographic work, for instance, the results highlight that the traditional, dichotomous conceptualizations of community have changed given the “increasing back and forth flows of capital, labor, population, information and ideas, and material goods between rural and urban America” (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017, p. 8). As boundaries have diminished with urbanization, the social characteristics and sense of place linked with these structurally defined locations have also shifted. The string of large and small cities linking the traditional demarcation between urban and rural locales reflects the blurring of norms and values that now govern its space. In this way, the U.S. landscape is more integrated than ever before (Irwin, Isserman, Kilkenny, & Partridge, 2010; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). Diversification of industry and greater transport of people and resources across place boundaries have led to a muddying of those features typically associated with prior definitions of place.

Understanding stigma from a strictly urban experience likely masks importance nuance. For the current research, the place continuum is important in two ways. First, varied social, institutional, and cultural structures of communities along a continuum could reveal the inequalities and unequal treatment of citizens with stigmatized statuses. Wacquant (2007) theorized that territorial stigmatization exacerbates inequalities based on place, focusing especially on the urban ghetto, and Eason (2012) identified similar processes in the rural south. As the economic structure of many communities changes, place-based stigmatization can shift as well. These changes may be particularly prominent with the amenity-led growth occurring in some small cities, particularly those with close proximity to an urban area, and some urban cores, where individuals are drawn to restaurants and cultural activities or luxury recreational opportunities that may dislocate existing residents (Irwin et al., 2010) and change the nature of the community structure (Ulrich-Schad, 2018). The shifting nature of the economy to a service-based structure, and resulting changes in land use and home values, may “other” individuals from communities, where previous stigma was not as prevalent.

Second, spatial stigma can act in structural and socially stigmatizing ways to influence access to resources, economic opportunities, and daily activities, as well as to influence one’s sense of self and relationships with others in his or her and other communities (Graham et al., 2016). For example, the increasing suburban sprawl and switch to service-focused industries has decentralized job opportunities as many companies have relocated outside of the urban core. This change in the economic and geographic structure has made the job search more difficult for many, particularly for individuals with little access to transportation (Raphael & Stoll, 2010), and the implications for returning citizens remains unknown. A clear parallel is also seen in the research on HIV-related stigma. In a study of HIV-infected men and women in metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas, Gonzalez and colleagues (2009) found suburban men feared disclosure of their status compared with men in urban or rural areas. Although the underlying mechanisms remain unknown, the suburban community has some of the topographical distance of rural spaces while imposing social distance more consistent with urban experiences. It is this complicated middle where communities collide that could inform new dimensions of social and structural stigma.

We document the reentry process of men and women incarcerated for sexual offenses who are returning to an array of communities. We build on traditional notions of place to examine the ways in which the features of communities influence the experience and responses to structural and social stigma. Through this analysis of individual narrative, in conjunction with participant perceptions and knowledge of their residential locale, we provide insight into how individuals experience and navigate reentry to communities and contexts that may impede or influence success. In addition, comparing individual perceptions of and experiences with social and structural stigma allows us to broaden our theoretical and practical understanding of the mark of a criminal record.

### 3 | METHOD

#### 3.1 | Study site

The research for this study was conducted in Missouri. The state has a large correctional population with 32,461 individuals in prison and 13,460 on parole, of which approximately 15 percent were convicted of a sexual offense (Missouri Department of Corrections, 2016). Nearly half (47 percent) of individuals on parole in Missouri were convicted in an urban county, 11 percent in a rural county, and the remaining individuals were sentenced in a county characterized predominantly by small towns and large cities (Missouri Department of Corrections, 2016). Individuals convicted of sexual offenses in Missouri are subject to numerous legal restrictions and requirements. Missouri is 1 of 21 residency states (Mancini et al., 2013), where individuals cannot reside or loiter within 1,000 feet of a school, park, or daycare. In addition, at the time of the study, individuals convicted of sex offenses must register every 90 days with the Missouri State Highway Patrol, are not allowed to work or live with minor children, must submit to polygraph testing, and are subject to GPS monitoring, mandated treatment, and other conditions.

#### 3.2 | Data and sample

Data for this study come from a larger mixed-methods project on residence restrictions in Missouri (Huebner et al., 2014). The authors recruited and interviewed all participants in 2010. The focus of this work is 62 semistructured interviews with men and women convicted of a sexual offense. Participants were recruited from six interview locations, including five parole offices ( $n = 43$ ) and one prison ( $n = 19$ ). We strategically selected parole offices to represent diverse regional locations in the state, and the selected prison is the primary institution housing persons convicted of a sex offense (Creswell, 2007).

Participants were selected using a nonprobability quota sampling procedure to capture an equal number of respondents from each site (Bachman & Schutt, 2007). Although purposive sampling strategies are limited in their generalizability to populations outside the scope of our study, the goal of the research is to document the lived experiences of individuals returning from prison to an array of communities across one state.<sup>3</sup> Using this sampling approach ensures our participants represent a range of reentry experiences. Participants interviewed in the community were under correctional supervision and subject to registration and residence restrictions. The prison sample included individuals who had served

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<sup>3</sup>Selection bias could be a potential threat to validity. We did not collect systematic information on individuals who were eligible for the study but chose not to participate. We compared the study sample with the population of individuals on parole for a sex offense in Missouri and found no significant differences.

a period of incarceration, were released to parole supervision, and were returned to prison for a new crime or technical violation within 3 months prior to the interview.

We worked with parole officers and prison staff to help identify and recruit eligible persons. The community sample was recruited from the population of individuals designated to report on the day of our visits. The correctional sample was identified and recruited by correctional staff prior to the visits. During recruitment, corrections personnel were instructed to use an approved noncoercive script and researchers reminded prospective interviewees that participation was voluntary. Researchers explained the study to participants and obtained written informed consent, and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The study authors conducted all interviews in private offices. On average, interviews lasted 1 hour. Participants interviewed in the community were paid a \$20 incentive upon completion of their interview; incentives were not permitted in prison. We assigned pseudonyms to participant's names, places, and other identifying information to preserve confidentiality.

We followed a semistructured interview protocol modeled after prior research of this type (Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). We advised participants that the study was broad in nature and designed to gain more information on the nature of reentry in Missouri. The interview protocol included questions related to prison life and reentry, housing, employment, substance abuse, and social support. Participants interviewed in prison were prompted to reflect on their experiences during their most recent release into the community. We also asked participants about the effect of residence and registration laws on reentry. We took great care to focus the interview on the person rather than on the offense for which he or she was convicted as not to center the entire interview on the sex offense itself (Waldram, 2010). We did not ask participants to describe the nature of their crime; however, if they presented information, we would ask appropriate follow-up questions. The interview guide also did not query participants directly about stigma; rather, we inquired about experiences with housing and employment discrimination and asked questions like, "*Are your neighbors or community aware of the nature of your offense?*" We also posed a series of questions on residence and other restrictions, including, "*How have these laws affected your day to day life?*" We then probed participants to learn more about the experiences they described. The semistructured nature of the interview process allowed for participants to expand freely on areas important to them and allowed for us to ask probing questions when appropriate.

### 3.3 | Defining place

Scholars have documented the challenges in classifying urban and rural spaces as broad measures fail to capture its heterogeneity (Ellsworth & Weisheit, 1997; Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Wodahl, 2006). We developed a four-category measure based on the Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes (RUCA) to categorize participants (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). Unlike traditional dichotomous measures, these codes are used to separate communities by population size and to consider commuting flow and adjacency to urban centers and other urbanized areas within counties. Participants were classified based on their home address at the time of the interview, and incarcerated persons were identified using their residence immediately prior to incarceration.<sup>4</sup> Address data were geocoded using ArcGIS to the census tract. We coded individuals as living in *Urban* ( $n = 21$ ) areas if the community was characterized by a dense population of more than 250,000 and part of a metropolitan core area (codes 1 and 2).

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<sup>4</sup>We also asked a series of questions about the participant's place of residence, including "Do you consider yourself to be living in an urban or rural context? Do you feel safe at home?" These queries were designed to understand where the participant lived. Introducing the discussion of place in the interview as a dichotomy potentially limits responses, and future research should be aimed at continuing to identify new ways to frame discussions of place.

**TABLE 1** Participant demographic statistics ( $N = 62$ )

Demographic/Background	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Age (years)	38.4	(11.9)	20–70
Race (White)	76.7%		
High school diploma/GED	72.3%		
Social Background			
Intimate partner relationship	74.2%		
Minor children	74.2%		
Employed at interview	76.4%		
Number of residential moves	1.2	(1.6)	0–4
Criminal History			
Offense against a minor	60.0%		
Length of incarceration (months)	60.8	(64.0)	4–288
Multiple prior incarcerations	52.7%		

*Large City* ( $n = 16$ ) is also classified as metropolitan but has fewer than 250,000 residents and is not adjacent to the two largest metropolitan communities in the state (code 3). For nonmetropolitan counties, we considered population size, adjacency, and commuting population in place designation. *Small City* ( $n = 13$ ) is classified as nonmetro, also termed “micropolitan” or “small town,” with approximate populations between 10,000 and 50,000. These communities vary in proximity to metro spaces and have a moderate flow of commuters to large and small urban clusters (codes 4–9). The last categorization, *rural town* ( $n = 12$ ), has a population of slightly less than 2,500 residents, is not adjacent to urban centers, and has low commuting flow (code 10).

A description of the study sample is presented in table 1. Participants were primarily male and White and ranged in age from 20 to 70 years at the time of interview. Three quarters of the sample reported being in a current intimate partner relationship, and 75 percent had minor children. In addition, 75 percent of the sample reported being employed at the time of interview. Participants averaged one move postrelease, and the number of moves ranged from zero to four. The sample served, on average, 5 years in prison before being paroled, but incarceration lengths ranged from 4 to 288 months. In total, 53 percent of the sample had served only one term in prison, whereas the remainder had been incarcerated on multiple occasions.

### 3.4 | Analytic strategy

The focus for this study is on participant’s experiences with social and structural stigma, and these sensitizing concepts, as defined by Goffman (1963) and Link and Phelan (2001), guided our analysis. During data collection and initial inductive coding of the data set, we discovered the prominent role that stigmatizing experiences played in the participant’s narratives. We took an iterative coding approach to using both deductive and inductive techniques. Our initial deductive approach was aimed at identifying elements of the narrative describing instances of discrimination or mistreatment with people (social) or institutions (structural).

Social stigma was identified when participants’ narratives reflected being excluded in relationships or experiencing shaming or shunning by others (Goffman, 1963). Structural stigma was coded when participants denoted being denied access to resources or when they underwent discriminatory treatment by institutional actors (Link & Phelan, 2001). After the initial coding, we relied on inductive techniques to capture more nuanced themes related to participants’ social and structural stigma



experiences, further deepening our analysis. All three authors coded the interviews independently and then compared primary and secondary codes for consensus (Miller, 2014).

We then conducted comparative analyses of social and structural stigma experiences and other key themes across the urban–rural continuum. Our third iteration of coding produced more refined patterns by accounting for the elements of locale and the participant’s sense of place (Agnew, 1987).<sup>5</sup> This procedure aligns with the constant comparative method in which researchers compare themes within and across the data to establish patterns and locate continuities and discontinuities (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We rely on these discontinuities across our comparisons to strengthen the prevailing themes while offering insight into the realities of participants’ lives (Miles & Huberman, 1993).

The accounts presented in the following section reflect the most representative evidence of the prevailing themes within the data. The researchers’ positionality as White, middle-class women might shape the responses provided by the predominantly male sample, or the setting of the interviews, particularly in prison, could shape the interviews; however, we believe the rapport built by researchers and our *in situ* research setting present a reliable narrative. Instead of seeking generalizability, we emphasize the validity and trustworthiness of our findings such that they may be transferable to other settings where the elements of the lived experiences we uncovered can be considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We present information on the participant’s home community, providing additional context on the nature of the locale and give the reader the sense of place and support for our analysis.

## 4 | RESULTS

The pervasiveness and durability of the “sex offender” label is a near-universal theme in previous research (Levenson & Hern, 2007; Tewksbury, 2005) and was echoed by participants. The stigma associated with a sex offense conviction carried a heavy weight that permeated all aspects of participant’s lives. Participants believed the label to be a unidimensional part of their identity and perceived that they were “othered” by society and had lost status as a whole person (Goffman, 1963; Harris, 2017). For example, Bobby, who returned to a small neighborhood on the outskirts of a large city, argued the following:

*I think they should not put everybody in one category that paints us all as sick people. And I think it should be on an individual basis; the categories and groups that you get put in, because it definitely lowers your self-esteem.*

Furthermore, sex crimes encompass a wide net of behaviors, but most participants felt these distinctions went unrecognized by the public. Martin, who lived in a large city in the southwestern part of the state, remarked, “They overgeneralize, and if one sex offender does something bad, that’s all you hear on the news so therefore, it gives every single one of us a bad name.” The stigma of a sexual offense conviction went beyond the tacit acknowledgment of a label and acted as a universal sorting mechanism for participants, further blocking opportunities to integrate into society (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

Across communities, participants reported myriad experiences with structural and social stigma. The ways in which individuals experienced and managed stigma was related, in part, to their community of

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<sup>5</sup>We acknowledge that differences may exist between those under community supervision and those in prison. We performed a constant comparative method of analysis to examine differences in structural and social stigma experiences. No notable differences emerged.

residence. Participants residing in urban communities and large towns reported similar experiences as did residents of small cities and rural places, and the data are organized as such. The most salient evidence is presented as follows, and variations within and between community groups are distinguished when appropriate. It is important to note that the themes reported here are general patterns and that there was overlap across communities and among types of stigma. It is also difficult to disentangle structural and social stigma as many socially stigmatizing experiences emerge as a result of the structural stigma enforced and reinforced.

## 5 | STRUCTURAL STIGMA

Structural stigma reflects how institutions reinforce discrimination of individuals based on a negatively perceived attribute (Link & Phelan, 2001). Individuals convicted of sexual offenses face more legal restrictions than do those with any other crime classification, fortifying the negative label attached to this group (Soothill, 2010). Legal restrictions banish living near schools and daycares, bar employment opportunities, and restrict movement, whereas procedural controls, most often associated with conditions of correctional supervision, bar living with or in close proximity of minor children and like persons. The proliferation of these restrictions has given license to many landlords and rental companies to develop policies barring persons with sex offense convictions from their properties. The result of this reality was an iterative housing search process in which individuals had to find a house that was outside of the restricted area, then work to identify friendly property owners and safe housing, and finally ensure that individuals with similar offense records or minor children did not already live there. At any point, an individual could be rejected. This theme persisted across locales. Participants who reported minimal trouble finding housing were most likely to have strong social ties and fortunate or “lucky” circumstances.

### 5.1 | Residence restrictions and displacement

Residence restrictions were the most cited legal control, and the double stigma of “felon” and “sex offender” governed the space in which participants could exist, essentially banishing them from many communities (Kras, McGuirk, Pleggenkuhle, & Huebner, 2018). Many participants reported being displaced from their home communities. Residence restriction laws augmented participants’ stigma consciousness, and they were the first consideration when searching out a home plan. Legal limitations complicated every aspect of the housing search as a result of the multitude and overlapping nature of restricted areas and a dearth of affordable housing in nonrestricted areas (Socia, 2011). Many participants, like Arthur, denoted, “[I]t’s hard to find a place that’s not a thousand foot of something that you can’t be around.” Participants described the ubiquitous presence of daycares, schools, and parks in their neighborhoods and felt the pervasiveness of restricted zones induced a coercive mobility that involved moving further away from town and city centers, typically where few other services were provided (Chamberlain & Wallace, 2016).

### 5.2 | Banished within the community

Individuals returning to urban communities and large cities reported that residence restrictions severely restricted housing choices and felt that legal restrictions pushed them into neighborhoods of “last resort” (Burchfield & Mingus, 2014). Consistent with Hughes and Burchfield (2008), respondents living in urban communities reported that residence restrictions forced them to live in locales marked

by higher crime and poverty rates, limited access to services, and less maintained housing stock. For example, Jason, an electrician, returned to an urban residence in a municipality with approximately 70,000 residents. The community has one of the highest crime rates in the state and rates of poverty above the state average. He previously lived with his wife in a home they owned in a middle-class neighborhood but now struggled to find housing. Jason said, "Searching for an apartment was very, very tough on both of us. Cause, not that we didn't have the money, but because of my record." He described one incident:

*[The landlord] wouldn't talk about it. They just said that the background check showed that there was things in it that was basically undesirable. And by my wife living with me, there was no difference. Even some of the sleaziest places, if you want to use the term, turned us down. I went to [my PO] and I asked her for acceptable places. For people like me. We found one place, it was a sleazy place, with the roaches and everything.*

Many respondents felt that they were trapped in substandard housing because so few places were available to rent and perceived they were often at the mercy of the landlord. Nathan, who moved to three different residences, eventually settled in the core of one of Missouri's most urban areas with levels of poverty and crime more than two times the state average. Nathan described his current residence: "It's not like a five-star. . . . two-star," noting that his current apartment was less than ideal and "wasn't really that nice."

Residence restrictions also limited housing options in large cities but in a slightly different way than in metropolitan centers. The sprawl that is characteristic of large cities meant that it was easier to escape the labyrinth of restrictions and residents were able to find housing within the community; however, spatial distance came with a cost. Individuals felt that available housing was often far away from commercial districts where jobs were more plentiful. The challenge of finding work was complicated for many as there was less proximate access to public transportation in these communities (Bohmer & DeMaris, 2018). Benjamin returned to live with his mother in a multifamily home in a neighborhood of a large city with a major university. He wanted to relocate to the retail center of the community where he could find and walk to work, but he felt that it would be difficult to find a home in those neighborhoods because of the restrictions. Benjamin stated, "It's kinda hard 'cause in [this city] there are so many schools, so many daycares . . . so many churches with playgrounds, and it's just, it's unbelievable. I mean you can't hardly turn a corner without something there." Benjamin was not able to align residence availability with job opportunities, which he felt forced him to take a lower wage job that was closer to his home, despite being qualified for a higher paying position.

Concomitant to the barriers of residence restrictions, the tight rental market in urban areas and large cities afforded landlords more discretionary power in screening rental applications, further reinforcing structural stigma. Large corporations often manage rental housing in these communities, and many had blanket policies against renting to individuals convicted of sex offenses, ignoring individual offense or circumstance. In one example, Phillip, who initially secured a home plan with his girlfriend in her urban apartment, stated, "I wasn't able to move with her. We were all set up to move with the parole officer, but he wanted some notification from the landlord. That's what ruined it." The policy in place was not a legal restriction, rather one imposed by the landlord of the apartment complex. Phillip explained, "I wouldn't get in trouble with the law, but the landlord, he still doesn't want me living there, because it shows up on the computer he's got a creep living in his house. Said it's bad for business." In these cases, the interplay between structural and social stigma is evident, moving beyond individuals or corporate rental policies barring persons with a sex offense to those social service agencies typically tasked with helping returning individuals. For instance, Jeffrey returned home to an urban area with few social

supports or housing options. Prior to his release, he reached out to local social services agencies but found few who would accept him because of his conviction. Jeffrey stated, “They would not touch me. No halfway house, none of the places would let you in.” Jeffrey moved two times, ultimately residing with his parents.

Conditions of supervision further limit the pool of available housing in urban communities and large cities. Individuals on correctional supervision are barred from living in close proximity to others with similar conviction records, further narrowing the rental market. One effect of residence restrictions in more densely populated communities was the clustering of individuals with sexual offense convictions (Socia, 2011). Thus, housing options in legally approved locations with accommodating landlords were in high demand. Nathan highlights the multitude of challenges in locating a place in the city:

*It was very challenging finding a place to stay. You know that’s not near a daycare or a school or park. It squeezes you like, in a certain area then. Some of the places where I was going to apply for residence, uh, if there’s X number of offenders there, you were not allowed. You know you can’t stay.*

He eventually found housing in an apartment with his aunt in a large city just south of a major metropolitan area. The squeezing of individuals into certain areas of cities reinforced the structural discrimination related to the sex offender label but also the inequalities plaguing the urban ghetto (Waquant, 2007), resulting in a reintegration process that diminishes opportunities for success (Link & Phelan, 2001).

### 5.3 | Banished outside the community

Residence restrictions also displaced some rural and small city participants, although in a different manner and to a lesser degree than their urban and large city counterparts. Despite the typical broader topography, the small footprint of a rural locale can complicate the housing search if multiple parks, schools, and daycare centers block much of the community and relegate individuals to residences further out of the town center or community completely. Many small city and rural residents echoed Brian’s sentiment that “to live in town, it’s next to impossible.” Similarly, Jennifer returned to her rural hometown of 150 people, but the presence of childcare facilities in the center of town precluded most housing options. She noted, “I went everywhere in town and there was nowhere [to live]. I found people that would rent to me no problem. But it was too close to a daycare and it’s a little bitty town.” Jennifer eventually found a home with her sister outside of town. Like Jennifer’s case, individuals returning to small cities and rural communities were more likely to rely on family for housing as these locales were characterized by fewer rental opportunities and many housing leases were informally bartered rather than established via corporate contracts.

Individuals convicted of a sex offense in the study state are restricted from residing with minor children. Participants returning to rural areas and small cities were more likely to report this condition of supervision as a substantial barrier to finding a home plan because of the heavy reliance on family for housing. For example, Howard, released from prison after a 4-year sentence, returned to a rural community of 985 residents and an active cattle ranching industry where he was able to secure employment. He was not allowed to live with his mother, who was his primary source of support, “because all my other home plans had minors at them.” Instead, Howard rented a mobile home from a family friend in a trailer park several miles outside of the town center. Howard liked living on his own but stated, “The landlord there and me don’t see eye to eye.” Howard elaborated that his family friend never told the proprietor of the trailer park about his criminal past, so Howard kept to himself most of the time to avoid confrontation.

Rural and small city participants were more likely to report that the enforcement of residency laws was arbitrary and in part a result of the informal nature of community networks and varied institutional operations. For example, no central list or document of restricted areas was available to residents, and participants felt that the burden was on the homeowner to prove that the home plan was compliant with legal restrictions. Carl described his recent experience trying to purchase a house in a small farming town of 12,000 people north of the Missouri River:

*We were actually in the process of signing papers and closing on the home, and what the PO (parole officer) said was we were clear on it, and then right before we finalized it all, we found out from Sheriff's Department that it was 538 feet to a daycare.*

Carl was frustrated by the discrepancy in measurement between agencies and felt that there was no way to appeal. Instead of looking for a house in the same community, he “made it a point to find something out of town,” deliberately choosing to relocate to a residence that would not be near a restricted zone, further circumventing the structural stigma of his conviction.

The measurement process was often complicated because of the unregulated emergence of daycares, which was oft noted by residents of rural areas and small cities compared with other locales. Community residents could abruptly qualify their property as a daycare and, thus, create a new zone that was off limits to individuals on the registry. Ronald, who returned to a riverside small city, described his challenges:

*You have to tell your landlord and everyone in the world that “hey I’m a sex offender,” and so a lot of people won’t rent to ya, just flat won’t rent to ya. Then when you do finally find a place – and then the next thing you know, some lady at the end of the corner decides she wants to start babysitting kids, she goes in and signs a piece of paper, “well I’m a child care provider,” now he’s gotta move!*

Ronald was eventually able to secure a spot in a faith-based sober living house, but he was frustrated having to alter housing plans as a result of the happenstance opening of a daycare. The combination of residence restrictions and the ever-present and changing regulations made obtaining a home difficult.

The informal nature of enforcement was primarily constrained to the rural and small city experience, whereas participants living in urban areas reported that agencies had established systems of enforcement. Although the broader physical landscapes of rural areas and small cities offered more opportunities for housing outside of the circle of residence restrictions, the unpredictable and sometimes ad hoc nature of code enforcement highlights the overlap between social and structural stigma in this space.

## 6 | SOCIAL STIGMA

Structural stigma was often accompanied by, or at the behest of, social stigma, and nearly all participants described negative interactions with others as a result of their diminished status (Goffman, 1963). Social stigma emerges as a function of interpersonal interactions and is accompanied by a host of negative consequences. Participants felt that stigma restricted their opportunities for positive social interactions, blocking the achievement of normative roles (Goffman, 1963). In the case of social stigma, the sense of place (Agnew, 1987) emerged as a central feature of the locations where participants lived, guiding the nature of relationships, the strength of social networks, and experiences

in public spaces. In response, participants coped with stigma and managed the effects of their label in ways that were differentiated by the broader community characteristics and the specific spaces leftover that they could occupy.

## 6.1 | Hiding in plain sight

Urban and large city participants described similar experiences with social stigma. Residents communicated an underlying fear about the inevitability that others would learn about their conviction through the public registry. Many urban and large city participants avoided social interactions whenever possible to reduce the likelihood of being discovered, leading many to feel like they were hiding in plain sight. For example, after a short stay at a transitional facility, Willie returned home to live with his parents in a large city, where he worked as a cook in a local steakhouse. Despite being a large city, the community is tight-knit as it is surrounded by small cities and farms. Willie expressed anxiety that his conviction would be discovered, and he felt that the public registry put him in potential danger of harassment and vigilantism. He described the following:

*I mean I worry about it a lot, I worry about the fact that you know, OK, what if someone finds out about it and they got a thing about you know, uh, sex offenders, you know? It's put my parents in danger because of where I'm staying at.*

Willie felt isolated as a result of his fear of being found out. He noted there was no way to feel normal in the community and he will always be the “other.” As such, he did not share anything about his life with co-workers at the restaurant and spent little time interacting with community members.

Residents of urban communities and large cities indicated that the social and physical geography allowed for anonymity. Being nameless and faceless in urban locales meant the likelihood of confronting stigma was diminished. The geographical diversity of urban areas and large cities, including dense city blocks, major highways, alleys, and busy common thoroughfares, allowed for individuals to face or avoid stigma. Participants could physically and symbolically retreat *within* the community instead of *outside* of it. For example, Paul resided in a high-density apartment complex in an urban area and indicated the size of the city was a major factor in his housing choice. Paul stated, “I’m in the city ‘cause normally the neighbors don’t know who you are and don’t pay attention to who you are.” Paul said that he liked to “stay under the radar” in the city because he is “just going to try to live as best I can.”

Participants in large cities and urban areas, however, were not immune to the everyday stigma from neighbors and remarked that local residents were likely to engage law enforcement when they became suspicious. For example, Michael, 34, lived in a single-family home with his wife in an urban community of 70,000 residents. He noted that the news of his conviction traveled fast through the neighborhood and stated that his neighbors “won’t make eye contact.” Michael’s neighbor was vigilant about noting his whereabouts, and when Michael went to his church, which also operated a private school, he was reported to his parole officer. He explained, “My one neighbor across the street reported that I parked by the school for 15 minutes. That’s why I went back in [prison] for 60 days.” Even though Michael’s neighbors knew him before he went to prison, his conviction for child molestation created a new label that superseded any previous relationship and contributed to ongoing tension in the community.

Overall, participants in urban and large city settings were more likely to report abstract but pervasive experiences with social stigma. Participants perceived an omnipresent threat of being discovered but felt that the anonymity of the city allowed them to avoid stigma in many social situations. Yet, many participants reported fear of law enforcement. Large city residents presented a variation on this theme of

anonymity as these communities were marked, for some, by greater social ties that presented a mixed experience of being scrutinized in some circles and welcomed in others. Participants felt that their reputations in the community and presence on the registry increased the potential for social stigma, but the cultural norms of the large city begin to traverse the anonymity provided by urban density and the acquaintanceship density in distant locales.

## 6.2 | Nowhere to hide

The short social distance and strong acquaintanceship density characteristic of small cities and rural towns meant that it was difficult to escape the label, particularly among individuals living in small cities. For small city participants, there was little ability to hide in plain sight in a familiar space where they had lifelong community ties (Weisheit & Wells, 1996). For example, Kenneth indicated that the transition from prison to his rural riverside community of 18,000 people approximately 100 miles from a major metropolitan area had been negative and uncomfortable. Kenneth described, “You know, everyone I see has known me from my past life. And now I must recalibrate every social interaction.” Kenneth felt that he could no longer relate to others who knew him before his incarceration, particularly those outside of his family. Kenneth experienced rejection while working at a retail store in his small city where he would often would see teachers from his childhood. Kenneth reflected, “The thing that happens now is they, uh, pretend they don’t know me in our social interactions. . . . they talk around me.” For Kenneth, the stigma of his sex offense rendered him essentially socially invisible in his community. He stated, “You can’t ever escape.” For small city residents, the slim social distance between residents meant the new “normal” was one that also blocked opportunities for assuming a new or noncriminal identity.

Different from residents of more populated communities, residents of rural areas and small cities had access to fewer social spaces, like grocery stores, making it more difficult to escape negative interactions. For example, George returned to his grandmother’s rural lakeside home in an unincorporated area of less than 1,000 residents. This rural community prided itself on privacy for its residents and had long traditions of family-owned businesses. George felt shunned running errands in the neighboring town. He described the following:

*I go to the store. There’s only one store within 30 miles. Everybody goes to that store. I know the guy that owns the store. He knows me from when I was a kid, but they knew I got out of the penitentiary. They know what for. I go in and I would get disapproving glances. If I was walking down the aisle, people would actually walk out of the aisle then wait until I was done in the aisle and then walk back. That’s just small town living.*

For George and Kenneth, the label “sex offender” dissolved any prior reputation they had in the community, making this master status their new normal. Despite chalking it up to “small town living,” this characteristic of the community adds to the tension experienced upon return.

These daily routines and activities were exacerbated for small city residents when their cases were continually broadcast in local newspapers, a form of media that maintains its stronghold in smaller communities. Raymond, who returned to a small city of slightly more than 2,000 after his release from prison, experienced the effects of being publicly shamed by local residents. Raymond described it as follows:

*Even though my case wasn’t high profile, there was enough in the newspaper of people who knew me, and since I was in broadcasting and frequently on the air, using my real*

*name, it didn't take long for people that really wanted to be nosy to put two and two together and come up with the right answer.*

Raymond's experience with social stigma was magnified as he was employed as a radio broadcaster prior to his offense. Being well known in his tight-knit community meant he could not escape the stigma associated with his offense.

Participants living in rural communities and small towns also reported being rejected and even actively harassed by local residents because of the nature of their crime and the acquaintanceship density that comes with knowing everyone in a small city (Leverentz & Williams, 2017; Wodahl, 2006). The harassment often led participants to feel anxious in social situations as a result of the fear of being confronted or potentially attacked. For instance, George reported some vandalism to his vehicle after returning home from prison, including "beat marks all the way up from the driver's side to the roof." He felt that he was harassed, "not because of my prison time. . . it was because of my charge," referring to his specific conviction for a sexual offense. This type of harassment in rural and small city spaces also took the form of citizen watch groups. For example, Brian returned to live with his wife in their farmhouse on a rural route outside a rural community with a population of approximately 2,000 residents. He did not feel safe in town because he felt that everyone knew of his crime. Brian described the following:

*[In] my town, there's a group of people that goes around looking for sex offenders. I live out in the country. That's why I go nowhere without my wife. I want a witness to what's going on. I've got people that come into my drive two or three times a week and turn around then they go back to town.*

Brian felt there was no escape from the harassment and perceived that the local police, who would often stop by his house to "check up on him," would not protect him if he was harmed or needed help. Brian felt he had no rights, and even though he was free from incarceration, he was not free from the social stigma of his offense, stating, "So you're in a prison anyway."

Some participants were able to draw on their close-knit family structure to buffer the mark of their conviction, which was most prominent in the narratives of small town residents. In these cases, participants reflected that the embeddedness in the social fabric allowed for family and friends to act as a "witness" to their transformation from "sex offender" to citizen (Maruna, 2001). Many of these participants also had long family histories in the community that afforded them the social capital to navigate and helped buffer the social stigma of a sex offense conviction. For example, Elizabeth, who returned to live with her parents in a small riverside town of approximately 18,000 residents, noted, "The people that know me, which is the vast majority of town, are aware of [her offense] and they accept me for who I am and what I've done." Unlike Kenneth, who could not escape stigma in a similarly sized small city, Elizabeth had wider family networks that helped her obtain employment, and establish housing, as well as provide social support to manage the sex offender label.

Rural residents were more likely to report avoiding stigmatizing interactions by relying on the physical distance afforded by their rural community where there were fewer encounters with others. Respondents voiced a narrative of self-preservation emphasizing protecting themselves from negative situations by eliminating the possibility altogether (Harding, Dobson, Wyse, & Morenoff, 2017). In this way, rural participants mimicked the anonymity experienced by those in large cities and urban areas. Victor lived in an urban city center prior to incarceration and almost secured a home plan in this same community upon release, but while arranging the lease, a daycare opened adjacent to the home and he was forced to move. Victor decided to move out of the city and into a rural community with a population



of 186 residents. He remarked, “With all the regulations, rules, [and] stipulations on sex offenders, it’s easier to live in a rural area without having to worry about who you might be offensive to because you live too close to them.” In essence, moving away from any locale posing the risk of heightened social stigma, like rural and small cities, meant these individuals were retreating further away from society. Brian, who already lived on a rural route outside of a small city, also noted that he planned to move to an even smaller community “and go deeper out away from everybody.” He felt frightened and hopeless to change the criminal label and believed that he could escape the harassment and stigmatization by moving farther away.

Other rural residents, however, were able to develop or join familial enclaves outside of traditional rural communities. For example, Steven returned home to live with family and described his rural home in a village of 2,500 residents as “out in the country on a gravel road.” Steven was not concerned about stigma from others as “the neighbors that we do have are all family members.” Steven returned to an environment where he was surrounded by his entire family, who were also leaders in the community, and who knew about his crime. His family was able to vouch for him as a reformed citizen and helped him find work as a stocker at a friend’s small grocery store. The close family network provided an alternative pathway to the normative routines otherwise blocked to individuals convicted of sexual offenses. In turn, he was able to practice a normative identity through work, family reinforcement, and the standing in the community afforded vicariously by these relationships.

## 7 | DISCUSSION

Through the current study, we give voice to the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated persons who were convicted of a sexual offense, building on extant work on reentry, stigma, and place. Stigma was an omnipresent part of the reentry process for the men and women in our study. Participants reported an oppressive stigma resulting from their sex offense conviction, which they felt went beyond the traditional mark of a criminal record. The experience of stigma was most prevalent through structurally reinforced discrimination when searching for housing and the social stigma associated with public knowledge of participants’ criminal history. In each case, the features of the reentry locale informed the ways in which study participants received and reacted to the stigma they encountered. That is, place matters when considering the nature of stigmatization upon reentry.

Our findings contribute to this literature in several important ways. Structural stigma, particularly in the form of residence restrictions, was a barrier and a substantial source of stress for many participants. Residents of urban areas were more likely to experience the effects of structural stigma when looking for housing, finding less suitable and safe housing stock outside of restricted zones, and fewer property owners amenable to renting to individuals convicted of sex offenses, which comports with findings from previous research (Burchfield & Mingus, 2014; Hipp et al., 2010). The sprawling nature of large cities allowed for greater housing availability within the confines of residence restrictions, but it added obstacles to find suitable homes near work, particularly in communities without reliable public transportation. Despite urban areas and large cities appearing more similar than different, the nuances of place reveal greater specificity in the challenges faced by this unique population.

In contrast, rural and small city residents’ search for housing was more likely to be stymied by conditions of parole and the ad hoc nature of enforcement by criminal justice agencies. We underscore the centrality of considering structural stigma, which in this study exacerbated social stigma. Most research of this type has been focused on social stigma, but institutional constraints and legal restrictions, like residence restrictions, broaden and deepen the cost of a criminal conviction. We also bring into question the efficacy of residence restrictions as these legal restrictions have not been shown

to be effective in reducing crime and criminal behaviors (Huebner et al., 2014; Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008). Yet, these restrictions persist, and results from this research indicate that such laws can be barriers to integration and in some cases may increase violence or potential vigilantism toward individuals.

Our findings lead us to diversify and specify our understanding of offense-related stigma and place. Most criminological researchers have taken a unitary view of reentry, resulting in a set of default programming that primarily applies to those returning to urban locations. Use of such narrow solutions likely overlooks the important nuances of the reentry experience that exist across the place continuum and may not be responsive to residents of these communities. In this work, we further focused the lens needed to understand the reentry transition and related experiences with social and structural stigma. For instance, rural areas and small cities are not homogenous or downtrodden places (Lobao, 2004); rather, they present a variety of advantageous characteristics that may assist with reentry such as the acquaintanceship density that facilitates links to employment and social support (Wodahl, 2006). Scholars and practitioners should capitalize on these features to identify and develop programming aimed at returning citizens to these areas. At the same time, communities between the urban and rural poles on the continuum require more research and theoretical development as these “regions still remain largely black boxes, both conceptually and methodologically” (Lobao, 2004, p. 24).

The results from our analysis also contribute to the theoretical literature on stigma. They highlight the import of documenting, in their own words, how individual perceptions of stigma are shaped by their environment. The results of our analysis give us a starting point for demarcating the implications of these perceptions, in particular, how individuals work to buffer the “stickiness” of the criminal label (Uggen & Blahnik, 2016), especially a “sex offender” one. A strong theme of self-preservation emerged as participants expressed a desire to protect themselves from the social stigma of the sex offense label and did so in ways that varied by place. Residents of urban areas and some large cities felt that they could hide in plain sight given the physical geography and social anonymity of the city, but several residents reported active and frequent contact from law enforcement. These experiences should be chronicled in more depth by scholars to develop our understanding of these social and structural stigma experiences.

Conversely, some rural participants indicated that they retreated from the close social fabric of their community to mitigate the stigma. For returning citizens, isolation is a double-edged sword; it allows for individuals to manage stigma but they can sever social ties and access to services, which therefore becomes a maladaptive coping strategy. For individuals convicted of sexual offenses, this may be an especially critical issue as isolation could elevate risk for reoffending (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Participants made agentic moves away from others to mitigate stigma that disconnected them from the hooks for change that may help them successfully reintegrate (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). Social integration is a vital part of reentry as peers and family members can serve as essential links to employment and other social opportunities (Berg & Huebner, 2011), but residential instability, and isolation overall, can disrupt social networks and alter social capital (Sharkey & Sampson, 2010).

In contrast to the isolation narrative, evidence showed that social support in these tighter knit communities can mitigate the strain of the criminal label. Although many participants relied on some type of family support, those living in small cities, with strong social capital, relied on having upstanding family members vouch for them as good citizens, which aided in their reentry (Maruna, 2001). Although not observed in the current work, much more remains to be learned how urban residents draw on familial and other social ties and how the isolation and potential transitory nature of relationships in some communities, like the nonfamilial ties described in the fictive kin literature (Desmond, 2012; Stack, 1974), influences the reentry experience. Together, the results indicate a need

for a more holistic understanding of stigma within an ever-changing social, cultural, and economic landscape.

The centrality of the social support theme also highlights the need for correctional programming that can assist with mitigating stigma by developing connections to pro-social persons and institutions and avoiding isolation. Nearly all respondents were mandated to sex offense treatment programs, but access to treatment in rural areas and small cities is limited (Zajac et al., 2014). One way to bolster access to resources and connection to others across space is with innovative technology. Specifically, emerging evidence indicates that the use of telehealth, or online community interactive platforms, can help build social support for residents who lack easy access to services or support groups. Goh, Gao, and Agarwal (2016) suggested that participating in virtual treatment and support groups could provide social value for participants, helping members develop a shared identity and motivating all participants to help and support one another. Virtual groups leverage the abundance of participants in urban areas with the scarcity of rural participants and provide supportive communities that can transcend geographic restraints. According to some evidence, individuals convicted of sex offenses might be open to this sort of group treatment modality and it may hold promise for managing social and structural stigma. For example, Evans and Cubellis (2015) found that individuals convicted of a sexual offense often sought out similarly situated persons to manage the stress of the criminal label. An online community could bring members together to provide coping strategies. Future research should continue to be aimed at exploring how technologies can be used to help narrow social and physical distance among correctional populations.

Researchers and policy makers should also reflect on the role of line-level criminal justice staff in reinforcing or mitigating structural stigma. Recently, some scholars have suggested that staff can exacerbate structural stigma in certain justice settings. For example, Lara-Millán and Van Cleve (2017), in an ethnographic study of courts and jails, found that prosecutors and jail intake workers can limit citizens' due process by preventing access to resources. Admonishing litigants as the moral "other" revealed the shared culture of these criminal justice adjacencies that reinforced structurally shaped stigma, thereby perpetuating inequality and strengthening the power differential (Lara-Millán & VanCleve, 2017). Similarly, participants in the current study reported variability in the enforcement of residence restrictions, particularly in rural areas and small cities where restricted areas could shift quickly with the establishment of a "pop-up" daycare center. The structural stigma associated with institutionalized responses can dramatically affect one's life chances (Link & Phelan, 2001).

There is opportunity to capitalize on the ability for community corrections staff to help mitigate structural stigma and improve the nature of practices across locales. In our research, some participants relied extensively on parole officers to help find suitable housing. This type of support can be critical for individuals returning to rural communities and small cities where social support and treatment services are less available (Applegate & Sitren, 2008; Weisheit & Wells, 1996; Zajac et al., 2014). Researchers have suggested, however, that high staff turnover and fewer qualified staff can challenge the efficacy of supervision in rural areas (Edmond et al., 2015; Hipp et al., 2009; Logan et al., 2004), which perhaps exacerbates our finding about ad hoc enforcement. Although beyond the scope of the current work, there is a potential opportunity to train correctional staff on the unique needs of individuals under correctional supervision in smaller towns and rural areas as most correctional practices are developed for metropolitan populations.

Our research findings contribute to the theoretical and policy literatures on reentry, but several limitations should be considered. First, these results reflect the reentry experiences of individuals convicted of sex offenses returning to communities in one state, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. These methods should be replicated with other justice-involved populations to understand the

effect of offense-related stigma and in other areas to understand the deeper dimensions of place across the country and around the world. To that point, our definition of place likely does not capture the extent of potential variation in community experiences. Despite recent attention to the connectivity across spaces, agreed-upon definitions of place remain elusive. Of particular concern to the current study is the small city measure that includes communities adjacent to but physically distant from metropolitan areas. Understanding adjacency particularly as the blurring of traditional rural–urban symbolic and social boundaries continues to be a critical need in the literature (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). We also did not explore the implications of the sex offense type on individuals returning to their community. Although some participants provided detailed information about their crime and their victim, many did not as it was not the focus of the interview. It is likely that the nature of the offense, particularly when the victim is a child or a stranger, changes the public response to the crime, especially in small city and rural communities where there is less opportunity for anonymity.

In sum, the enduring stigma of a sex offense conviction is a near-universal experience among participants and across place. It is clear that place contextualizes the mark of a criminal record, particularly for individuals with a sex offense conviction, and the challenges of reentry abound and emerge in nuanced ways. The findings highlight the importance of understanding both social and structural stigma within and across social space, as well as how the effects of, and subsequent responses to, the label itself are conditioned by community context to provide a place for respite or retreat. In this way, residential location should be considered as an exogenous factor in understanding reentry, as well as a response to social and structural stigma experienced by individuals convicted of a sexual offense.

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