

Can Social Support Overcome the Individual and Structural Challenges of Being a Sex Offender? Assessing the Social Support-Recidivism Link

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Abstract

Social support is important for individual's successful reentry; however, little is known about how it operates or is influenced by individual and structural factors. Understanding how social support matters for individuals convicted of a sex offense is especially important as they may have a different reentry experience due to the nature of their crime and post-conviction restrictions. This study examines the nature and effects of instrumental and expressive social support from family, friends, intimate partners, and parole officers on recidivism for a sample of men convicted of sex offenses using mixed methods. Results show that family, friend, and intimate partner support had no effects on recidivism, however participants reporting a positive relationship with their parole officer were more likely to return to prison. Qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews sheds light on how the nature of these relationships might explain the social support-recidivism link in a high stakes population.

Keywords

social support, reentry, sex offenders, recidivism, mixed methods

Introduction

Recidivism rates are high in the United States. Totally, 4 years post-release, nearly three-quarters of offenders return to prison, making reentry an important topic for

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study (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). Despite the well-established body of literature about reentry, we know little about the underlying mechanisms related to success or failure upon release (Wright & Cesar, 2013). Social support has emerged as a “black box” factor for understanding this linkage (Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon, & Yessine, 2008). Numerous studies show social support acts as a protective factor against recidivism (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Harker Armstrong, 2010; Hochstetler, DeLisi, & Pratt, 2010; Petersilia, 2003; Visher, Knight, Chalfin, & Roman, 2009), but its core processes remain under-developed in the literature. In particular, the cultural and structural factors influencing how social support is delivered to and received by individuals has not often been considered in relation to recidivism (Wright & Cesar, 2013).

Individuals convicted of sex offenses present a unique challenge to the social support-recidivism link. First, regardless of actual risk level, this type of offenders are deemed as “high stakes” (Turner, 2011). Compared to other types of offenders, individuals convicted of sex offenses are deemed most dangerous and as such face additional challenges when returning to the community, such as residency restrictions, registration requirements, and enhanced monitoring, which might impact their reentry experience (Levenson, 2008; Sample & Bray, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Willis & Grace, 2009). The additional restrictions imposed on those convicted of sex offenses may increase stress thereby heightening the risk of recidivism (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Veysey & Zgoba, 2010). Social support networks may mitigate this stress amid the added challenges of reentry for individuals convicted of sex offenses, but the stigma, shame, and the loss of contact with family and friends due to their crime may reduce chances of successful reintegration (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Robbers, 2009). In the face of tenuous support networks and community acceptance, the most stringent test of the social support-recidivism link might be with individuals in this offending group. Thus, this study answers two important and interrelated questions: (a) does instrumental and emotional social support as provided by family, friends, intimate partners, and parole officers relate to recidivism, and (b) how these do these types of support elucidate upon the social support-recidivism link.

The Social Support Paradigm

Social support acts as a mediating or moderating variable with crime in a number of criminological theories, such as ameliorating strain or enhancing social bonds, but is nearly always seen as having an inverse relationship with crime (Cullen, 1994). Cullen (1994) advanced social support as an organizing principle for studying crime that specifies the types of support needed and who delivers that support. Social support is defined as “perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners” (Lin, 1986, p. 18). Instrumental support consists of material and financial assistance such as providing money or transportation, and expressive support refers to the emotional and psychological assistance that enhances a person’s self-esteem or provides a way to cope with negative life circumstances (Lin, 1986).

Social supports are identified as many different actors including family, intimate partners, and friends. Support from friends and family can enhance levels of informal social control, and mitigate the negative effects of chronic stressors, such as those associated with reentry experiences (e.g., financial problems, housing issues, and substance abuse) because they can provide tangible resources or emotional coping (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Farrell, Barnes, & Banerjee, 1995; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Vaux, 1988). Studies show the objective features of a social relationship, such as the frequency of engagement or resources provided, can translate into positive effects on well-being (Semmer et al., 2008; Thoits, 1986). This may be particularly salient for individuals returning from prison who might not have the physical or emotional resources to address the challenges they face.

A unique feature of the social support paradigm is the inclusion of criminal justice agents as support actors who can provide formal social control (Cullen, 1994). Wright and Cesar (2013, p. 377) propose that social support from criminal justice agents, when consistently applied, "is in line with a continuum of care approach to offender reentry." The prevailing approach to reentry considers the working relationship with the Probation and Parole Officer (PO) to a core correctional practice successful at reducing recidivism, and one of these mechanisms is via support of meeting goals, achieving sobriety, and remaining crime-free (Bonta et al., 2008).

Scholars distinguish between the delivery and perceptions of support as positive or negative (Cullen, 1994; Lin, 1986). Perceptions of support are important to understand because the cognitive interpretations influence affective states and may ameliorate negative behavioral responses more so than the objective nature of the support received (Listwan, Colvin, Hanley, & Flannery, 2010; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Support can be positive or negative, or both, but depends on how the individual interprets it. For example, Pettus-Davis, Howard, Roberts-Lewis, and Scheyett (2011, p. 480) assert, "a family member that provides encouragement, but who models substance using behaviors or a romantic partner that offers material support, but who is abusive is negative social support." Even if combined with positive qualities, social support can be perceived as negative by an individual if the outcome (such as return to substance use or emotional distress) is negative.

Social Support and Reentry

Reentering individuals encounter many challenges that may increase their risk of recidivism, such as obtaining employment and finding adequate housing (Petersilia, 2003). To address these needs individuals often rely on support of family and friends, as well as community resource agencies. Social support is important upon reentry because it emphasizes the use of networks and resources to address problems and challenges related to reintegration (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002). Despite the breadth of scholarship on social support for returning individuals in general, less is understood about the nature of social support networks for individuals convicted of sex offenses. This is an important gap to address considering structural conditions of reentry related to the restrictions and regulations for individuals convicted of sex

offenses and collateral consequences, especially structural stigma (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Link & Phelan, 2001; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005).

Family. Family support is central to successful reentry (Mills & Codd, 2008; Naser & La Vigne, 2006; Visser & Travis, 2003), and parents are the most likely providers of this support (Pettus-Davis, Scheyett, & Lewis, 2014). Visser and Courtney (2007) found that 63% of participants in their sample identified family support as the most important factor in avoiding return to prison. Other studies show that families provide emotional support, housing, financial assistance, and improve sobriety for individuals after their release from prison (Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008; Solomon, Visser, La Vigne, & Osborne, 2006). For individuals convicted of sex offenses this support may be diluted due to residency restrictions forcing housing options farther away from support systems or in locations that are more socially disorganized (Hipp, Petersilia, & Turner, 2010; Hughes & Burchfield, 2008; Kras, Pleggenkuhle, & Huebner, 2016). Despite this, recent studies demonstrate that family support is associated with reduced offending among samples with sex offense convictions (Walker, Kazemian, Lussier, & Na, 2017).

Intimate partners. Positive, prosocial relationships with a spouse or intimate partner are also associated with success as they can provide informal social control (King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Vaux, 1988). Research suggests that being married is a strong predictor of success after release as indicated by lower levels of subsequent criminal activity and drug use and enhanced social capital (Laub & Sampson, 2003; La Vigne, Visser, & Castro, 2004; Visser et al., 2009). The research on marriage for individuals convicted of sex offenses is mixed. Some studies have shown that sexual recidivism is associated with poor social relationships, loneliness, isolation, and never being married (Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson, Steffy, & Gauthier, 1993; Robbers, 2009; Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997), while other studies find no link (Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000; Lussier & McCuish, 2016). As in other research, the quality of marriage may matter for desistance. In one study, participants convicted of sex offenses who were in a committed relationship and with residential stability were less likely to be rearrested (Meloy, 2005). Two recent studies (Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2015; Lytle, Bailey, & ten Bonsel, 2017) found sex offending desisters who were married did not attribute desistance to marriage, rather it was a result of "support reciprocity," reflecting deeper and more prosocial features of the support relationship.

Friends. Friends can also be a source of social support. Friends can provide positive instrumental and expressive support, such as employment connections and improved self-esteem (Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008). However, friendships are complicated by the fact that most offenders' friends are part of their criminogenic social network (Cobbina, Huebner, & Berg, 2012; La Vigne et al., 2004; Visser & Travis, 2003). In Visser and Courtney's (2007) sample, only 22% men in the study had positive peer support, and a similar sample admitted that over half of their friends were involved in illegal activity (La Vigne et al., 2004). Cobbina and colleagues (2012) found that men

who had criminal friends failed on supervision more quickly than those without friends or who had positive friendships. There remains a gap in the literature regarding peer networks of individuals convicted of sex offenses, but some research suggests these relationships can be supportive of positive reentry due to shared experiences of treatment and structural reentry barriers (Perrin, Blagden, Winder, & Dillon, 2017).

POs. POs provide formal social control through supervision and sanctions, and informal social control through rapport building with individuals and their social supports (Grattet, Lin, & Petersilia, 2011; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Mills & Codd, 2008). In one study, Blasko, Friedmann, Rhodes, and Taxman (2015) found that a better relationship between the PO and individual, regardless of caseload type, resulted in fewer violations. In contrast, a punitive style is associated with increased anxiety and reactance among probationers (Morash, Kashy, Smith, & Cobbina, 2015). This caring and fair relationship between POs and individuals on supervision seems to be most important to reducing negative outcomes and increasing motivation to stay away from criminogenic situations (Rex, 1999; Skeem, Louden, Polaschek, & Camp, 2007; Yahner, Visser, & Solomon, 2008). In the face of the structural limitations on individuals convicted of sex offenses the relationship with criminal justice system actors is an important source of formal and informal social control, but little research explores the relationship. In one study, Bailey and Sample (2017) found officer-parolee dyads with greater social distance was marked by negative attitudes of the PO, which the participant attributed to their label and prevailing sex offender stereotypes. In a study by Cooley, Moore, and Sample (2017), 40% of their sample did not think their PO deterred their deviant behavior, with some citing increased strain because of enhanced surveillance. However, some participants noted that their PO helped them obtain the treatment they need (Cooley et al., 2017), and in another study POs linked them with informal networks (Meloy, 2005).

Studies considering desistance from sex offending tend to highlight the important role of social support, but not specify the effects of support from distinct actors or consider the structural and cultural factors that may impede access to or variation of support. The present study adds to the scholarship regarding social support and reentry by examining the nature and quality of social support and its effects on recidivism among a sample of men convicted of sex offenses. It is expected that positively perceived social support by all actors will be associated with reduced recidivism. Qualitative analyses elucidate on the quantitative analyses to address the gap in our understanding of *how* social support influences outcomes and informs measurement of social support for individuals convicted of sex offenses.

Method

Study Design

The present study is part of a larger research project on reentry experiences of individuals convicted of sex offenses. Data for this study come from in-depth interviews

and official records with a sample of men convicted of a sex offense ($n = 72$) and supervised on probation or parole by Missouri Department of Corrections (MoDOC).¹ This study utilized concurrent embedded mixed methods design, in which quantitative data are extracted from qualitative interviews through interpretive approaches and then linked with outcome data in a follow-up data collection (Creswell, 2008). This methodology is consistent with trends in criminology and criminal justice research to rely on smaller-sized quantitative samples where the “qualitative inspection of individuals cases” can inform future theory and empirical studies (Wright & Bouffard, 2016, p. 2).

With cooperation from MoDOC, seven sites were selected for qualitative interviews, including three probation offices ($n = 25$), one prison ($n = 20$), and three community supervision centers ($n = 27$). As a primary goal of the original research was to explore an array of reentry experiences, a nonprobability quota sampling procedure was used to obtain a relatively equal number of respondents from each location. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be on probation, parole, or in prison for a sex offense and subject to residency restrictions and registration requirements.² Participants who were interviewed in prison are included in the sample because they were within weeks of their release date (average of 36 days) and had begun the reentry process, including establishing forms of social support. Although prisoners might display a different level of access to support, interviewing them close to their release date and with reentry planning in place provides a comparable experience of support to those who were recently released.

Interviews in the community were conducted at probation and parole offices on random report days and eligible participants who reported on those days were asked to participate. Participants interviewed in prison or the community release centers were first identified by corrections personnel as eligible for the study and close to their release date and then randomly selected from this list by the research team. Interviews occurred in private offices at each location and lasted 90 minutes on average. Participants were provided information regarding the study, assured confidentiality, and signed a consent form. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Participants on parole received an incentive of US\$20.

The interview guide was semi-structured and modeled after prior research on reentry (see Visher, La Vigne, & Travis, 2004). The interview guide covered a range of domains including prison life and reentry, housing, employment, substance abuse, treatment, and sex offender restrictions. Participants were also asked to describe the nature of various support actors, including family, intimate partners, and friends. To gather information about participants’ relationship with their PO, questions such as “Overall, how helpful has your parole officer been in making the transition back to the community?” and “Describe an experience that has been helpful/detrimental” were asked. Considerable probing in each domain gathered more detailed information about these networks. Using these types of open-ended questions allowed all participants to self-define the support in their lives.

Data

Quantitative data were extracted from interviews regarding the type (instrumental or expressive) and quality (positive or negative) of support provided by each actor: family, intimate partners, friends, and POs. In the criminological literature, the influence of social support on reentry has been measured by the presence of various social support actors (La Vigne et al., 2004), and counts of social support events, like prison visits (Hochstetler et al., 2010); however, fewer studies have examined the qualities of these social supports on reentry success via qualitative data from the perspectives of the offenders (see Ward et al., 1997). The current coding scheme was developed based on validated social support measures (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), methodology used in other sex offender research on social relationships (Ward et al., 1997), and the theoretical propositions of Cullen (1994).

Dependent variables. The two dependent variables are derived from official records provided by MoDOC 3 years post-release. *Technical violations* (no = 0, yes = 1) are measured by the first violation incurred following the participant's release from prison. Technical violations are considered because they may indicate failure or triggering behaviors indicative of relapse for those convicted of sex offenses (English, 1998). Over half of the sample received a technical violation (51%) during the post-release period. *Reimprisonment* (no = 0, yes = 1) documents the return to prison for a new offense (sexual or nonsexual) or technical violation. Reimprisonment is considered as opposed to rearrest or reconviction because for individuals convicted of sex offenses, it is often the case that heightened restrictions and supervision conditions mean they may incur a violation and be revoked more often and more quickly than other types of offenders (Meloy, 2005). In this study, reimprisonment is measured as a return to prison, as opposed to jail, and must be determined through a revocation hearing by a judge or the parole board. In this sample, 25% of participants were reimprisoned after 3 years.

Independent variables. Social support variables of *Instrumental* and *Expressive* support were assigned to three actors: family, intimate partners, and friends. If the participant received support and considered it positive, it was coded as 1; and if they did not receive support, did not have that actor in their lives, or indicated the support was negative, it was coded as 0. The social support perspective infers that negative and nonexistent support will have the same effects on crime because the outcome perceptions will be the same (Cullen, 1994; see also Cobbina et al., 2012). For family, friends and intimate partners, *Instrumental Support* captures if participants received positively viewed financial support or other tangible resources from family, intimate partners, and friends (positive support = 1; negative or nonexistent support = 0). For example, if a participant reported they had received money and transportation from a parent this would be coded as 1. *Expressive Support* from family, intimate partners and friends is a dichotomous variable scored 1 if the participant indicated he received emotional, psychological, or spiritual assistance, and 0 if he reported negative or nonexistent

expressive support. For instance, if a participant reported their significant other as someone they could talk to it was coded as 1. *PO support* is a dichotomous measure of the perceived quality of the support relationship (positive support=1; negative or non-existent support = 0). A solitary measure was chosen because officers are not authorized, in most cases, to provide instrumental support in the same ways other social support actors can.

Additional variables collected from close-ended interview questions and official data were included as controls. Variables for *age* (at time of release), *black* (white = 0; black = 1),³ and number of *prior imprisonments* are included. A control for being in prison at the time of the interview (*incarcerated*) was also included to account for differences among those interviewed in prison and those in the community.⁴ Finally, research demonstrates a link between offense and victim characteristics and increased likelihood of sex offender recidivism (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000). To account for this, analyses include a measure of *minor victim* (1 = victim was 17 or under; 0 = victim was over 17).

Qualitative data come primarily from the excerpts captured in the in-depth interviews pertaining to social support from various actors. Because aspects of social support and its relationship to the structural experiences of being labeled a sex offender were present throughout interviews, the entire narrative was included in initial analyses. Relying on the entire narrative provides additional context for analyses to consider the individual and structural dimensions of social support.

Analytic Strategies

Quantitative analyses consisted of both bivariate and multivariate approaches. First, bivariate analyses examined differences between recidivism groups on all variables of interest. Second, logistic regression models assess the relationship between the measures of social support and the dependent variables, controlling for relevant factors. A power analysis determined that an appropriate sample size was achieved for power at .84 when considering a large effect size and significance value of .10 (Cohen, 1992). In mixed methods studies with small samples, these thresholds are appropriate.

To elucidate upon statistical relationships between social support and recidivism, and uncover how the nature of social supports acts as a mechanism, interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a “theoretically-flexible” strategy allowing the researcher to rely upon both indicative and deductive coding techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). This is useful in mixed methods studies when researchers rely on a priori coding schemes but also aim to enrich them through inductive approaches. To begin, interview excerpts related to social support were inductively coded using the qualitative software program NVivo. NVivo allows for systematic coding of themes and patterns in the data, enhancing the efficiency and rigor of the analyses. To strengthen the integrity of the coding strategies, initial coding was conducted prior to knowledge of recidivism outcomes. NVivo also assists in the comparative analysis of participant characteristics, themes, and outcomes to deepen analysis. Matrix queries were built focusing on comparing the rich

descriptions of social support, both positive and negative, to contextualize experiences. Only the most representative excerpts from interviews are presented and language remains intact to preserve the integrity of the participant's voice.

Results

Quantitative Results

Summary statistics and bivariate analyses indicating statistically significant differences between those who were successful and those who recidivated on explanatory variables are presented in Table 1. Black participants were more likely to incur a violation than white participants (43% vs. 14%), while those who had an offense against a minor (80% vs. 59%) and were incarcerated at the time of the interview (19% vs. 37%) were less likely to receive a violation. Participants who violated supervision were also more likely to report intimate partner instrumental support (38% vs. 20%). Participants who were reimprisoned were more likely to report intimate partner instrumental (50% vs. 22%) and expressive support (72% vs. 48%), as well as positive PO support than successful participants (78% vs. 46%).

Next, separate models for family, intimate partners, friends, and PO support were estimated using logistic regression. No statistically significant relationships emerged between the measures of instrumental and expressive support and the occurrence of a technical violation (results not shown). However, it should be noted that age and race were significant factors in each of the models in that being younger and black predicted the occurrence of a technical violation in the follow-up period. The models predicting reimprisonment are presented in Table 2. Models for family, intimate partners, and friends did not yield statistically significant relationships between social support and being reimprisoned. As shown in Model 4, positive PO support significantly predicted reimprisonment for participants in this sample. In fact, participants who perceived receiving positive PO support were four times more likely to be reimprisoned than those perceiving negative support. Notably, in the reimprisonment models race and age did not predict a return to prison.⁵

Qualitative Results

Analysis of participant narratives augments the quantitative findings by contextualizing social support with the structural and cultural aspects of being labeled a sex offender. There were few substantive qualitative differences in the experience of family, friend, and intimate partner support domains between recidivists and nonrecidivists as also reflected by the lack of statistically significant findings, however, qualitative analysis reveals *how* support is provided. Regarding PO support, analysis illuminates on the quantitative finding that positive PO support is associated with increased incarceration.

Family. Family support is the most often reported support among recidivists and nonrecidivists in this study. Nearly half of the sample (43%) reported receiving instrumental

Table 1. Summary Statistics (n = 72).

Variable	Total sample (n = 72)	Technical violators (n = 37)	Nonviolators (n = 35)	Reimprison (n = 18)	Nonreimprison (n = 54)
	M/% SD	M/% SD	M/% SD	M/% SD	M/% SD
Dependent					
Technical violation	51%	51%	49%		
Reimprisonment	25%			25%	75%
Independent					
Age	41.03 (13.01)	38.91 (12.27)	43.26 (13.57)	42.38 (10.45)	40.58 (13.82)
Black	29%	43%**	14%	39%	26%
Minor victim	69%	59%	80%**	61%	72%
Prior imprisonment	1.85 (1.14)	1.98 (1.23)	1.71 (1.04)	2.09 (1.14)	1.77 (1.14)
Incarcerated	28%	19%	37%*	17%	31%
Family support					
Instrumental	43%	46%	40%	39%	44%
Expressive	71%	70%	71%	67%	72%
Intimate partner					
Instrumental	29%	38%*	20%	50%**	22%
Expressive	54%	59%	49%	72%*	48%
Friends					
Instrumental	14%	11%	17%	11%	15%
Expressive	38%	35%	40%	33%	39%
PO support	54%	59%	49%	78%**	46%

Note. Significant differences found between violators and nonviolators or reimprisoned and those not reimprisoned.
 PO = parole officer.
 *p < .10. **p < .05.

support from family via housing, transportation, paying bills, paying for treatment classes, and providing spending money. Almost three-quarters of the sample (71%) reported receiving expressive support, such as holding the individual accountable, showing care, acceptance, and “just being there.” The experience of both instrumental and expressive support from family is often intertwined (Pettus-Davis, 2012; Semmer et al., 2008). For example, Ernest (nonrecidivist) stated, “My parents been (sic) helping me out financially . . . support, advice, just about anything my parents can do to help me out, they have been. I actually feel like my family wants me around.” Feeling the entire family’s support was important to Ernest, but even more so was the feeling of being wanted. This sentiment was common among participants in the face of being shunned by others in society due to the sex offender label. However, for some participants, family support was not enough to overcome the stigma and restrictions of being a sex offender. Andrew (recidivist) stated his sister “covers it all . . . anything she can do, she does. She’s real frank with me, real nice, honest to a fault. And uh, like I say . . . that’s a strong reason for me staying out.” Despite the support from his sister, Andrew had difficulty finding a home plan within the residency restrictions and returned to prison for a new misdemeanor offense and residency violations 4 months after release.

Table 2. Social Support and Reimprisonment Models ($n = 72$).

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	(Exp[b])	SE	B	(Exp[b])	SE	B	(Exp[b])	SE	B	(Exp[b])	SE
Age	0.00	(1.00)	0.02	0.01	(1.02)	0.02	0.01	(0.67)	0.02	0.01	(1.01)	0.02
Black	0.63	(1.86)	0.63	0.51	(1.67)	0.63	0.49	(0.44)	0.64	0.47	(1.60)	0.63
Minor victim	-0.52	(0.59)	0.67	-0.39	(0.68)	0.63	-0.31	(0.62)	0.62	-0.33	(0.72)	0.64
Prior imprisonments	0.21	(1.23)	0.26	0.18	(1.19)	0.26	0.18	(0.48)	0.25	0.34	(1.40)	0.26
Incarcerated	-1.10	(0.33)	0.77	-1.02	(0.36)	0.79	-1.2	(0.12)	0.79	-1.03	(0.36)	0.81
Family support												
Instrumental	-0.54	(0.58)	0.70									
Expressive	0.04	(1.04)	0.72									
Intimate partner support												
Instrumental												
Expressive				0.60	(1.82)	0.80						
Friend support				0.57	(1.76)	0.78						
Instrumental							0.08	(0.94)	1.03			
Expressive							-0.30	(0.68)	0.73			
PO support (positive)										1.41	(4.09)	0.70**
Nagelkerke R ²							.165		.114			.196

Note. PO = parole officer.

** $p < .05$.

Participants also experienced a fair amount of negative or nonexistent support from family (36%). Both recidivists and nonrecidivists reported that their families rejected them due to the nature of their crime. In some cases, the family shunned the participant by not speaking to them or moving away. For those who reported no support from family, the nature of their offense was often identified as the reason. For example, Justin (recidivist) discussed how much things had changed in his family while he was in prison. Justin recalled, "When I got out things had changed a lot. You know, family members, half of them, they really didn't have nothing to do with me and that's why most of the time I was, you know, all alone." Justin's experience typifies being isolated from family and the difficulty dealing with feelings of loneliness. Justin violated his probation for failing to complete treatment and to comply with special conditions and was returned to prison less than 2 years after release.

Intimate partners. A majority of the sample (71%) indicated they were in a committed relationship at the time of the interview. One discernable pattern emerged across interviews regarding this support. Over half (52%) of nonrecidivists reported positive intimate partner support, while 68% of those who were returned to prison felt that way. In fact, those who returned to prison made twice as many statements about receiving both positive instrumental and expressive support. While this thematic difference is consistent with the bivariate findings linking positive intimate partner instrumental support with reimprisonment, this relationship did not reach statistical significance in the multivariate model.

Nonrecidivists highlighted the expressive features of their relationships more so than the instrumental. Nonrecidivists described financial assistance and transportation from their partners, but more often and referenced accountability, advice, and positive feelings. Brian (nonrecidivist) felt his girlfriend kept a positive attitude and provided accountability:

She keeps me on the straight and narrow, if you will. She keeps me looking forward and not backwards. That makes a lot of difference. I know she cares. Most people don't give a damn. But she does. She's one of the few that do.

Brian reflects that despite many others in this life not caring about him, his girlfriend provides enough support to overcome that deficit. In contrast, recidivists' statements revealed that support was related to tangible resources: they were being "taken care of" with food, shelter, clothing, and transportation. The relative lack of expressive support statements in these narratives compared to nonrecidivists suggests that instrumental support was perceived as more important than expressive support, despite not actually impacting the ultimate outcome. Joseph (recidivist), who was returned to prison 7 months after his release for violating the law and other technical violations, described the instrumental and expressive nature of the support from his girlfriend. Joseph felt his girlfriend expected greater commitment than he was ready for in return for all she does for him, and this caused strain in their relationship:

If I need anything all I got to do is ask her to come help me out. Laundry, she helped me with laundry . . . she always has towels and showers ready for me if I need to come take a shower, because you need somebody to support you. You need help, you need somebody you can rely on . . ., but also there's, there's the part where she wants me to be there all the time and . . . expects me to be more responsible to her than my responsibilities.

Joseph's narrative reflects the stress and strain of pursuing relationships in the face of the numerous restrictions, requirements, and responsibilities of sex offenders while on supervision in the community. Joseph's commentary also suggests that recidivists who relied on their partner's instrumental support were not receiving or recognizing the emotional support offered by them, or the accompanying relationship demands caused stress. In contrast, nonrecidivists who highlighted the mental and emotional support of their intimate partner may have had a greater incentive to desist because of their commitment to them, or perhaps felt compelled to prove they had changed (Lytle et al., 2017).

Friends. Participants reflected that friend relationships were detrimental to their success, stating that friends were a bad influence on them to participate in criminal activity (61%). Most of the sample indicated they received negative or no instrumental support from friends (86%) and more than half (62%) felt that expressive support was negative. Shawn (nonrecidivist) stated, "Got a lot of those [bad friends]. 'C'mon man, let's skip school.' Drugs, or do dope. That's not a friend. That's a trouble-maker." Some also reported losing friends because of the sex offense conviction. Arthur stated,

I had a real good friend of mine for the longest, and when I got out this time, I looked him up and he came over, and I talked to him, and I told him what I got in trouble for, and that was the last time he talked to me.

When participants described positive support from friends, it was primarily expressive and most often in the form of job connections or leads to tangible resources, or acting as a positive example of someone who has been in trouble with the law. Andrew (recidivist) stated, "They've helped me a little bit, they network for me, they give me job tips. I mean, I've got really good support from the few friends that are not involved in criminal enterprises."

PO. According to the social support perspective, positive perceptions of the PO relationship should result in positive outcomes, yet in this sample participants reporting a helpful officer are four times more likely to go back to prison. Qualitative analysis reveals the complexity in this relationship. Although some nonrecidivists felt their PO was helpful in their transition back to the community, nearly half (46%) felt their officer was not helpful at all or hindered their transition. The most common theme among nonrecidivists was a sense of judgment for their offense, highlighting sex offenders' stigmatization (Robbers, 2009). Some nonrecidivists perceived that their officer did not like supervising individuals convicted of sex offenses. Terry (nonrecidivist), who served 3 years in prison, stated,

He didn't want to deal with me because I was a sex offender. The first two [POs] were not willing to listen. They were very prejudicial. That was just my side of the story. God knows how many stories they had heard. How many unique criminals that they had to deal with before they got me. When I told them something, I meant what I said. I was trying to be honest and truthful. They looked at me like I was a P.O.S.⁶

In contrast, many recidivists highlighted the positive aspects of their relationship with their PO. Kirby (recidivist), who served 16 years in prison, said, "He's been in my corner. We talk, you know what I'm saying, but, I trust him, I can say things to him, and I know he's not going to go out and tell his people." Kirby felt his PO was one person he could trust to reveal things related to his offending behavior. However, Kirby was returned to prison 3 years after his release for drug use and not complying with his sex offender conditions. As Kirby's return to prison resulted from failing to comply with conditions of being supervised as a sex offender, the nature of disclosure to the PO reveals an important dynamic about the heightened surveillance of these individuals in the community.

Arthur (recidivist) detailed his experience with several different POs. Having a PO who acted as if she cared was meaningful for Arthur, although he was eventually returned to prison for new misdemeanor charges and unauthorized travel outside the jurisdiction:

I've had some [POs] that just really don't care. I'm just a number. Don't really do nothing. The ones I got now have been . . . pretty positive, I mean as far as POs go. They give me a little bit more slack probably, you know, where I can actually breathe and actually do something, instead of just being, "This is what you have to do, you have to do exactly like this, and there's no ifs ands or buts." And that's it. You know, every home plan I've turned into her she's checked on it and found out, and been sympathetic when it don't (sic) work. And job wise when I got out, she was on top of it, and 'Oh here's some numbers if you wanna call 'em and this that and the other.'" They actually act like they care.

Despite having a PO who cared, and assisted him with aspects of reentry, the relationship alone was not enough to keep Arthur from violating his parole and returning to prison (Cooley et al., 2017). Many participants who were returned to prison highlighted that their officer had shown leniency when they made a mistake which was an important factor for building trust (Kras, 2013), perhaps causing them to feel too comfortable in the relationship (Bailey & Sample, 2017). But, a positive relationship with a PO did not always reflect full disclosure and trust. Eric (recidivist) valued his relationship with his PO so much that he did not want to tell her about his drinking problem for fear of disappointing her. Eric stated,

My biggest problem with Martha (PO) is I get to looking at her as a friend, somebody that helps me, when I start to stumble and fall I don't want to tell her 'cause I don't want to disappoint her. It's just like both times that I got revoked for drinking. There were so many times that I wanted to tell her that I was in trouble that I was drinking. But I thought so highly of her that I didn't want to tell her cause I didn't want to disappoint her.

Eric was returned to prison for violating his parole after being arrested and failing to comply with his sex offender conditions 3 years post-release. Eric's "friendly" relationship with his PO reflects deficits in his abilities to form normative and prosocial relationships with adults (Ward et al., 1997).

Discussion

This study considers the perceived positive and negative instrumental and expressive support provided by family, friends, intimate partners, and positive or negative support by POs to uncover the underlying mechanisms of the social support-recidivism link among men convicted of sex offenses. Contrary to prior research and the prevailing theoretical connections, quantitative analyses produced no statistically significant relationships between perceived support from family, intimate partners, or friends, and recidivism, and a positive association between perceptions of a helpful PO and recidivism. However, qualitative analyses revealed the individual and structural elements that may condition the prosocial effects of social support.

Participants reported needing the support, both instrumental and expressive, of family, intimate partners and friends. Participants indicated the instrumental support received from family members improved their reentry circumstances and translated to expressive support (Semmer et al., 2008). However, neither instrumental nor expressive support affected recidivism and there were no distinctions between recidivists and nonrecidivists in their perceptions of support from family and friends. It may be that the individuals' perception of support from their family member was different from the actual support received. Future studies should consider triangulating data by including support dyads to assess the perceived vs. actual occurrence of support (Pettus-Davis et al., 2011; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). As there was no relationship between these sources of support independently, it may be that there are specific interactions, such as positive family support and negative peer support, which may cancel out the potentially positive effects on reentry (Boman & Mowen, 2017).

Despite no statistically significant relationship between intimate partner relationships and recidivism in the multivariate analyses, the qualitative analysis suggests that most support received by recidivists was instrumental in nature. This may be explained by the same reasoning as the receipt of instrumental support from family translates into expressive support; however, an alternate explanation may be more consistent with this study's findings. It may be that intimate partners of men who returned to prison enabled deviant or criminal behavior by providing financial support, housing, and transportation, but not the type of accountability needed for the individual to remain in the community (Lytle et al., 2017; Simons & Barr, 2014). Other studies have shown intimate partners can be detrimental to success because they do not engage in treatment or have unrealistic expectations for the individual's success, or contribute to negative behaviors and cause distress, conflict, and anxiety (Gideon, 2007; Pettus-Davis et al., 2011). Recent research suggests that the quality of the intimate partner relationships plays a much larger role in desistance than simply being in one (Simons & Barr, 2014). For recidivists, receiving instrumental support from a partner was

important to them in their reentry process, but it may not have translated into the “support reciprocity” necessary for change, whereas nonrecidivists wanted to achieve success despite their challenges and not be solely reliant on their partner (Farmer et al., 2015; Lytle et al., 2017). An additional explanation for tenuous intimate partner relationships involves considering intimacy deficits in sex offenders (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Ward et al., 1997). Although the nature of participants’ relationships with intimate partners was not probed regarding specific features, future research should explore differences between those with identified deficits in relationship building or where these deficiencies contribute to sexual offending cycles (Ward et al., 1997).

The most contrary finding of this study is that a positive relationship with a PO was associated with increased likelihood of reimprisonment. While a positive working relationship is a core correctional practice (Bonta et al., 2008) and theoretically linked to reduced recidivism (Cullen, 1994), the contrary finding in this study may speak to several potential mediating processes as revealed by the qualitative analysis. First, it could be the case that the individual feels an exaggerated relationship with their PO such that they are disclosing more information about their behaviors that result in violations. As all participants were under heightened supervision those who were more likely to return to prison may have perceived their officer as taking an interest in their case or have a skewed or unrealistic perspective about their chances for success or the genuineness of their relationship with the officer (Applegate, Smith, Sitren, & Springer, 2009). For example, some participants saw their PO as a friend and did not want to disappoint them, which may signal deficits in interpersonal skills that are linked with recidivism (Ward et al., 1997). Perhaps this study’s findings suggest a unidirectional relationship in the face of stigma and lack of other types of social support, where participants see the PO as the only or best source of social support available because they are always in the context of them being a sex offender (Waldrum, 2010). Second, the PO may not be delivering the humanist approach as supported by Evidence-Based Practices, and rather presenting greater social distance (Bailey & Sample, 2017; Bonta et al., 2008). While some participants reflected that their PO saw them as a “human being,” it may not have been enough to overcome the nature of stigma and lack of social support in other arenas. Limited knowledge of PO style, aspects of case management, and nature of initiatives geared toward sex offender supervision warrant further exploration.

Third, and perhaps most likely, POs could be responding to the participant’s disclosures in ways consistent with organizational goals or norms about sex offender case management in the vein of the high risk/high stakes protocol (Turner, 2011; Wright & Cesar, 2013). While the working relationship between POs and their supervisees is positive and acts in ways that will ultimately help the individual desist from sexually reoffending, the current management strategy of this class of offenders involves the justice system responding to behavior differently than with other types of caseloads that might result in reimprisonment for less serious infractions or behavior. As the prevention of sexual reoffending is a necessary role of community supervision, future research should explore the complexity of the working relationship with the sex offender caseload, and the policies and procedures used to guide PO decision making

in response to behavior. A growing body of work examines the relationship between POs and their clients, but this relationship has yet to be explored with sex offenders (see Bailey & Sample, 2017). As a positive working relationship is an evidence-based practice with probationers and parolees (Bonta et al., 2008), how this relationship might be further refined and developed by considering the type of offender on the caseload and their risks and needs, as well as the complex relationship with other social support actors may be important.

While this study contributes to the larger body of sex offender recidivism research by considering the relationship and nature of social support through mixed methodology, the results should be considered in context of some limitations. First, while the sample size is consistent with mixed methods approaches, it is small so future studies with larger samples are needed to explore statistical relationships. Second, a strength of this study is the measurement of positive and negative aspects of instrumental and expressive support from a variety of actors however, they are cross-sectional. It may be relationship between social support variables and recidivism is very different 3 years following the initial account. A recent study by Walker and colleagues (2017) accounted for variation in support over time among a sample of individuals convicted of sex offenses and detected that stable support was linked with reduced reoffending. In addition, participants may have had other factors inhibiting the mechanism of social support from acting in protective ways not included here. For example, a binary measure of victim age is a common method of controlling for impacts of offense characteristics in samples of individuals convicted of sex offenses; it is limited in that some offenses against victims of different ages are perceived in different ways. That is, someone abusing a very young person, compared to a "Romeo and Juliet" relationship, is perceived drastically different, therefore, presenting different structural barriers from social support actors. In addition, the inability to capture risk and need information, or histories of abuse, or substance abuse, presents a limitation to accounting for other impediments to reintegration for which social support is key. The qualitative results also revealed greater complexity in the perceived receipt of social support suggesting there is more to the construct than a binary measurement of instrumental and expressive. Future quantitative studies including repeated measures of degrees of support over time may reveal the dynamic nature of social support, as well as strengthen multivariate models by including time-varying covariates (Colvin et al., 2002).

Despite these limitations, this study presents avenues for future research. While prior studies have shown an inverse relationship between social support and crime at the macro-level (Colvin et al., 2002; Pratt & Godsey, 2002), little research has evaluated how social support works at the individual level across offender types and in different social strata and political climates (see Wright & Cesar, 2013). Future work should consider including contextual measures such as political orientations and legal restrictions to link macro- and micro-level indicators. Research also suggests that community support for offenders might result in reduced levels of crime (Chamlin & Cochran, 1997). The highly regulated nature of residency and supervision for individuals convicted of sex offenses may affect the nature and value of social support for this group so future research should explore other measures of community-level

social support. Current strategies to address this in other countries include Circles of Support and Accountability, which attend to the individual and structural dimensions of reentry and stigma for individuals convicted of sex offenses returning to the community and might provide avenues for future research regarding community-level social support (see Fox, 2014). The current study also highlights the important contribution of mixed methods research. Contextualizing quantitative relationships with case information, especially narrative accounts, allows the field to make deeper theoretical connections between data points (Wright & Bouffard, 2016). Furthermore, mixed methods research provides an avenue for uncovering social processes in ways previously undetected. Importantly for desistance research, the current study demonstrates support for critics of the value of traditional mechanisms of change such as marriage (Leverentz, 2006).

This research contributes to the growing body of literature surrounding reintegration of individuals convicted of sex offenses and the social support-recidivism link. By using mixed methodology, and measures of instrumental and expressive support, this study allowed for the analysis of social support actors in the lives of those convicted of sex offenses. Although the measures of social support were not linked with recidivism outcomes in expected directions, the qualitative analyses demonstrate that social support is relevant, and the importance of family and other social support networks, like POs, for individuals returning to the community is undeniable; however, the individual, cultural, and structural dimensions of reentry for this population condition the experience such that the underlying mechanisms of social support require more theoretical and empirical approaches.

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Notes

1. In Missouri, both probationers and parolees are supervised by one agency. In most cases, sex offenders are a specialized caseload where a PO supervises both probationers and parolees. A comparison with the total sex offender population provided in the *2010 MoDOC Profile of the Institutional and Supervised Offender Population* suggests the present sample is

- representative of sex offenders supervised in Missouri in regard to type of offense, criminal history, age, and race (Lombardi, 2010).
2. Individuals with a sex offense conviction may not reside within 1,000 feet of a school, park, or daycare, and must also register on the public sex offender registry for life.
 3. No other races were represented in this study. Although a limitation of the sample, this distribution is consistent with the distribution of sex offenders in Missouri (Lombardi, 2010).
 4. Participants interviewed in prison were within an average of 36 days prior to release. Individuals interviewed while in prison were originally selected to diversify the sample, and they were also asked the questions related to social support. Robustness check indicates there were no significant differences for those who were interviewed in prison and those on community supervision.
 5. Multiple checks of the robustness of findings were performed to rule out possible bias due to research design and data limitations, such as the small sample size. Although it is common in research on individuals convicted of sex offenses to rely on small sample sizes (see Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989), power analysis supports the use of the current procedures, recognizing caution in interpretation and being considered in context of the larger purpose of mixed methods studies (Creswell, 2008). Second, participants interviewed while in prison raise concerns about sample selection bias as these individuals may differ in recall and reporting of social support experiences. Tests for group differences revealed that individuals interviewed in prison were more likely to have a current conviction for a sex offense against a minor, 85% vs. 63%; $\chi^2(1) = 3.158, p = .064$, less likely to think their PO was helpful, 35% vs. 65%; $\chi^2(1) 4.098, p = .039$, and less likely to incur a technical violation upon release, 35% vs. 58%; $\chi^2(1) 2.978, p = .072$.
 6. "Piece of shit."

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