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Is Positive Social Support Available to Re-Entering Prisoners? It Depends on Who You Ask

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Re-entering prisoners have complex needs. Growing attention has turned to the role of informal social support in successful post-release outcomes. Research indicates informal supports are available to re-entering prisoners, yet this support can be experienced negatively and contribute to poor outcomes. We examined anticipated and received quality, source, and types of support for re-entering prisoners from perspectives of 60 re-entering prisoners and corrections professionals. We found re-entering prisoners anticipated and received what they considered positive support. Alternatively, corrections professionals perceived limited positive support as available and instead reported negative support as more likely. Corrections professionals also questioned whether re-entering prisoners' accurately differentiate positive and negative support. Results indicate key practice implications.

The nearly 700,000 people released from prison in the United States each year (Carson & Sabol, 2012) have multiple and complex needs and many rely heavily on informal social supports once in the community (Pettus Davis, 2012). When compared to the general population, prisoners have disproportionate

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experiences of extreme poverty, poor education and employment trajectories, trauma and victimization histories, substance use disorders, physical illnesses (e.g., HIV, hepatitis C), and mental health problems (Pettus Davis, 2012) and thus may have a greater need for both formal and informal supports. However, because for the first time in many decades more people are being released from prison than entering prison, the capacity of formal social support structures (e.g., social and health services) to meet the needs of this population is diminishing.

The national shift back toward the "rehabilitative ideal" of correctional care has received greater federal financial support since the 1990s, starting with President Clinton's Going Home Initiative, followed by the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative and the Second Chance Act of 2007 (Cullen & Gilbert, 2013). Despite the increase in resources to develop programming for re-entering prisoners, many of these programs have strict eligibility criteria or cannot meet the demand for treatment (see Lattimore et al., 2012). As a result, a significant proportion of re-entering prisoners still do not have access to critical formal support services. For example, Taxman, Perdoni, and Caudy (2013) found that existing drug treatment services have the capacity to meet the treatment needs of only 10% of people under correctional supervision. Moreover, overburdened social service systems not specific to re-entering prisoners, but which re-entering prisoners access, are likely to be further strained because of the increasing number of released prisoners following decades of mass incarceration practices. Furthermore there is a general trend toward decreased public funding for social and health services nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Once released, but lacking critical formal supports, former prisoners have a greater likelihood of returning to high-risk behaviors. As a result, between 43% and 68% of prisoners are re-incarcerated within 3 years of their release, further perpetuating the negative effects of crime and prison on individuals and their families and communities (Langan & Levin, 2002; Pew Center on the States, 2011).

In light of limited and increasingly strained formal support services, more attention is being given to the role that informal social support (e.g., from family, mentors, loved ones) may play in the lives of prisoners re-entering communities (Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, & Denver, 2011; Pettus-David et al., 2011; Scheyett & Pettus-David, 2013). Much of the extant research on social ties has captured the quantity of social support perceived as available to re-entering prisoners (e.g., how many family members does the prisoner have), but few studies (Brooker, 2005; Naser & La Vigne, 2006) have examined whether expected support is similar to support received by former prisoners. In addition, although research has focused on the amount of informal social support available to re-entering prisoners, less attention has been paid to the quality of such support. Because informal social support can be experienced negatively (i.e., what typically would be perceived as social support contributes to poor outcomes), it is critical to policy and program development

to better understand not only whether former prisoners have social support available to them, but if this social support is experienced positively so as to best promote postrelease success. Finally, researchers have not explored whether the perceptions of social support differ between correctional professionals and re-entering prisoners. Because correctional professionals can facilitate connections between re-entering prisoners and informal social supports, it is important to investigate these professionals' understanding of support mechanisms for re-entering prisoners. As a whole, the lack of knowledge regarding whether perceptions of the availability, type, and quality of social support change over time (before and after imprisonment) and by group (e.g., prisoner, correctional professional) underscores the need for research that provides a better assessment of support resources for re-entering prisoners (Visher & Travis, 2003).

Social workers play an important role in prisoner reentry because social workers are equipped to provide re-entering prisoners with much-needed tangible supports via a variety of treatment, correctional, and social service settings. Irrespective of client population, social workers often aim to engage the informal social support networks of clients to bolster program effects on client outcomes. When working with re-entering prisoners, social workers might rely on both clients and correctional professionals to inform their understanding of client supports. Therefore, it critical that social workers have a more nuanced understanding of how re-entering prisoners and correctional professionals perceive and experience social support; yet, the current literature provides little guidance.

The purpose of this study was to examine the expected and received quality, source, and type of informal social support available to prisoners returning to communities. We explored the experience of social support from the perspectives of current and former prisoners as well as prison staff and parole officers to assess different pre- and postrelease perspectives regarding the availability and quality of social support for re-entering prisoners. Our study provides an improved understanding of the multidimensionality of social support and factors that contribute to discrepant views on the availability and quality of social support for re-entering prisoners. Findings indicate important practice and program development implications that are rarely discussed in the current literature.

BACKGROUND

Social Support

Social support is linked to multiple positive health, mental health, and behavioral outcomes in populations of interest to many disciplines (Sarason & Sarason, 2009). Social support is the provision or exchange of resources

that are available or perceived as available (House, 1981). Sources of social support include formal support that is publicly or privately financed (e.g., doctors, counselors, social workers) or informal support (e.g., volunteers, clergy, family, friends), in which formal payment is not exchanged for support (Sarason & Sarason, 1985). Subtypes of support are categorized as affective related support (i.e., emotional, listening, task support) and instrumental forms of support (i.e., information, tangible, personal assistance; Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Hardy, 1993).

Defining the quality of support acknowledges that recipients may experience social support positively or negatively. Positive support is evident when a recipient's physiological or psychological well-being is objectively enhanced (Sarason & Sarason, 1985). Negative support is present when the outcome of the support is negative (e.g., reinforcement of substance abuse) regardless of how the recipient perceives the support (e.g., recipient perceives being provided housing as positive, but is exposed to illegal activities by living there). Support is also considered negative if the recipient (a) perceives the support as stressful (Antonucci, 1985; Wilcox & Vernberg, 1985); (b) is not ready to receive the proffered support; or (c) is in conflict with a supporter (Rook, 1992). Quality of support is often more indicative of positive outcomes than quantity of support (Sarason, Sarason, & Peirce, 1990).

Social Support and Re-Entering Prisoners

In his 1994 presidential address to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Dr. Francis Cullen argued for social support to be the organizing principle of criminological research. Dr. Cullen based his social support paradigm on the rich history of theoretical propositions and empirical evidence in criminological literature concerning the importance of social ties and social bonds to involvement in and desistance from criminal behaviors (Cullen, 1994). However, since that seminal address, most studies of social support among re-entering prisoners have emphasized measures of quantity of support versus quality of support. Descriptive studies have indicated that the majority (66%–92%; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Naser & La Vigne, 2006; Visher & Courtney, 2006) of re-entering prisoners rely heavily on informal social supports (Brooker, 2005; Graffam & Shinkfield, 2012; Naser & La Vigne, 2006) but that these networks tend to be small (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009; Skeem, Louden, Manchak, Vidal, & Haddad, 2009) and prisoners underestimate the amount of social support they will receive postrelease (Brooker, 2005; Naser & La Vigne, 2006).

Social support is generally associated with a host of positive outcomes for re-entering prisoners. Social support during incarceration is linked to improved adjustment to prison life (Jiang & Winfree, 2006) and better transitions after release (Bales & Mears, 2008). Social support after incarceration is positively correlated with improved father–child relationships (Swanson, Lee, Sansone, & Tatum, 2012; Walker, 2010); decreased psychiatric symptoms

(Draine & Solomon, 2000); reduced stress (Garrity et al., 2006); less substance misuse (Binswanger et al., 2012; Brochu et al., 2006; Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2007; Tseng, Hemenway, Kawachi, & Subramanian, 2010; Walters, 2000); and fewer acts of violence (Ullrich & Coid, 2011). Much of the extant literature has demonstrated that social support is linked to overall reductions in criminal behaviors and criminal justice involvement (Bersani, Laub, & Nieuwbeerta, 2009; Brown, St. Amand, & Zamble, 2009; Duwe, 2012; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009; Skeem et al., 2009; Swanson et al., 2012). However, some studies suggested no relationship exists between social support and criminal outcomes or that there are poorer criminal justice outcomes associated with social support (e.g., Breese, Ra'el, & Grant, 2000; Gideon, 2007; Jacoby & Kozie-Peak, 1997; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Studies on the quality of social support have provided some guidance regarding these differing outcomes.

The few studies that have examined quality in addition to quantity of social support indicated the role of social support in the outcomes of re-entering prisoners is complex. Skeem and colleagues (2009) found that 55% of probationers' network members provided positive social support, 31% provided needed support but had a negative role in probationers' life (i.e., mixed support), and nearly 14% of network members contributed only negative support (e.g., reinforced substance abuse). Poorer criminal justice outcomes (e.g., probation violations) were inversely associated with mixed and negative social support ($p < .01$). A 13-year longitudinal study by Giordano, Cernkovich, and Holland (2003) of social relationships and recidivism among 254 re-entering prisoners found that marital status and peer contact alone were not significant predictors of criminal behavior, but that spousal and friend criminality (i.e., negative support vis-à-vis reinforced criminal thinking) were predictors of self-reported criminal behavior ($p < .05$). The profound role of friends' criminality in propensity to offend has also been reported in studies of adults without incarceration histories (Akers, 1997; Warr & Stafford, 1991). Other studies indicated that in some cases publicly perceived positive social support (e.g., mother provides a place to live) that produces a sense of overwhelming obligation, conflict, or distress for re-entering prisoners (therefore negative support) is associated with poorer postrelease outcomes (Gideon, 2007; Martinez & Abrams, 2013; Seal, Eldrige, Kacanek, Binson, & MacGowan, 2007). Collectively, research on quality of social support has suggested that what society would identify as positive support (e.g., lend a helping hand, provide a place to stay) can be experienced negatively vis-à-vis obvious mechanisms such as drinking and drug use, but also through more subtle factors such as "being controlling" (something that may be common among concerned family members) or having strained relationships with loved ones. Little is known about the extent to which re-entering prisoners and prison and parole employees experience the quality of informal support available to re-entering prisoners and define the types

and amount of positive support. Perspectives from re-entering prisoners are important because they respond to the support. Perspectives from correctional professionals are important because they influence with whom re-entering prisoners establish and maintain connections.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Our study explored key dimensions of social support that are likely integral to the reentry process, including positive support as determined by those involved in the reentry process and subtypes of affective and instrumental support. We sought the perspectives of 60 re-entering prisoners, prison staff, and parole officers to examine experiences of support at different points in time during the reentry process—pre- and postrelease—as well as any variations in perceptions between correctional professionals and re-entering prisoners. The research questions guiding our study were (a) Is positive social support available to re-entering prisoners? (b) What types of positive support are available to re-entering prisoners? (c) Who provides expected and received positive social support? This study contributes to emerging practice research seeking to unravel the key dimensions of quality of social support related to postrelease outcomes.

METHOD

Study Design

We used a cross-sectional, mixed-method study design with purposive sampling procedures to explore the expected and received positive support for re-entering prisoners. Most studies of social support have relied solely on reports from re-entering prisoners to assess social support. We sought multiple perspectives in hopes of establishing a deeper understanding of expected and received positive support. We sampled current prisoners to examine expected support, former prisoners to collect in-depth accounts of received support, and prison staff and parole officers to assess their perceptions of the availability and quality of postrelease informal social support. Study protocols were approved by the University Behavioral Health Institutional Review Board as well as the Department of Correction Human Subjects Committee.

Procedures and Participants

Current and former prisoners

The study was conducted between March and September 2009. Eligible current prisoners were recruited from two prisons representing all custody

levels in one southeastern state. Prospective participants were within 45 days of release from prison, planned to release to one large urban county where former prisoners and parole officer study participants also resided, were aged 18 or older, and were English-speaking men capable of giving informed consent. Because social support operates differently for re-entering men prisoners than women prisoners (Leverentz, 2006), a single-gendered sample was selected for this study. Researchers actively recruited participants through information sessions coordinated by administrators at each of the two prisons. Interested prisoners completed the formal consent process and interviews after the information session. Thirty-four men (90% response rate) completed a structured interview about their expected postrelease social support.

Eligible former prisoners had been released from prison to the county study site within the preceding 9 months, were serving a minimum 9-month parole sentence, and otherwise met the same criteria as current prisoners. Parole office staff referred potential participants to a research team member. Researchers and potential participants met in a private office and the researcher described the voluntary study. Consenting participants then completed one audiorecorded qualitative interview with a researcher in private that lasted 30 to 60 min. Eight men completed the interviews (80% response rate) about their received postrelease informal social support. We sought a smaller sample of former prisoners than current prisoners because qualitative interviews provide a more descriptive account of study phenomenon and trends are more readily identifiable with smaller sample sizes than in quantitative surveys. For both current and former prisoner samples, the primary reason for declining to participate was lack of time. Ninety percent of participants were African American, which occurred by chance.

Correctional professionals

Two focus groups were conducted with prison-based case managers and one group was conducted with parole officers. Researchers were given a list of eligible personnel and email addresses from administrators. Once 5 to 8 people responded that they were interested, a focus group was scheduled. Consent procedures occurred immediately before the focus group. No one declined to participate. Eighteen prison-based case managers and parole officers participated in one of three focus groups. Nearly 70% of case managers ($n = 11$) and 50% of parole officers ($n = 7$) from the recruitment sites participated in focus groups. No correctional professionals directly declined to participate, but instead did not respond to contact attempts. Correctional professional participants had been employed in their current position for at least 1 year and met with re-entering prisoners daily as a part of their job duties. All case manager participants had active caseloads of prisoners and all parole officers had active caseloads of parolees who had a minimum of 9 months of postrelease supervision. Of consenting participants, 22% were

African American women, 28% were African American men, 33% were Caucasian men, 11% were Caucasian women, and 6% were Latina women.

Measures

Current and former prisoners

Current prisoners completed the Social Support Survey (Richman et al., 1993), a 34-item interview about five subtypes of informal social support. Content, construct, and concurrent validity of the instrument has been established with a clinical sample (Richman et al., 1993). Participants were asked to report on the support they expected to receive after release from prison. Participants were instructed to think only about people they believed would help them abstain from drugs and crime after release who do not get paid to provide such support.

Prisoners were then asked to list all individuals who would provide the following subtypes of support: (a) listening (listens without giving uninvited advice or forming an opinion); (b) task appreciation (recognizes the recipient is working to reach his goals); (c) emotional (tells recipient that they are on his side and provides comfort); (d) emotional challenge (challenges the recipient to think differently about his ideas, attitudes, and feelings); (e) tangible assistance (provides money, food, or other legal products); and (f) personal assistance (helps with transportation, filling out job applications, finding services, or other opportunities).

Qualitative interviews with former prisoners included questions such as: (a) What types and quality of social support did you have after prison? (b) How did you connect with your social support? (c) If you did have social support, how did you seek help from others? (d) How did social support help you in your transition? (e) What were the most important things people did to help you? Researchers asked former prisoners to think only about people whom they considered to be entirely positive influences (e.g., helped them abstain from drugs and crime). Definitions of subtypes of support consistent with the quantitative survey were provided.

Correctional professionals

Focus groups with correctional professionals included questions such as: (a) What types of informal social support do prisoners have pre- and postrelease? (b) How do you find out about re-entering prisoners' informal social support? (c) What role does informal social support play in re-entry planning? (d) How do re-entering prisoners perceive the quality of their informal social support? (e) What are your perceptions of the quality of their informal social support? Subtypes of support were defined for correctional professionals. Participants

were asked to respond based on their routine practice experiences with re-entering prisoners.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analyses were conducted by the researcher who facilitated the focus groups and assisted with the interviews, and by a second researcher. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis-based coding (Padgett, 1998) for sources, types, and quality of social support. Researchers then compared codes and came to a consensus on code meanings and themes (Padgett, 1998). Data from the structured interviews are reported as frequency and percentage statistics.

RESULTS

Results are provided by subtype of support first for correctional professionals followed by perspectives obtained from current and former prisoners. As the detailed results indicate, correctional professionals and current and former prisoners reported widely different perspectives of the quality and availability of social support for re-entering prisoners.

Correctional Professional Perspectives by Subtype of Support

In general, correctional professionals had different perceptions than re-entering prisoners about the availability of positive social support. Correctional professionals believed that re-entering prisoners mistook any support provision as positive and did not recognize when this support may be provided under negative circumstances.

LISTENING

Case managers did not describe postrelease listening support as being available from positive informal support providers. Parole officers described one source of listening support, 12-step programs, but otherwise believed that listening support was not available to former prisoners. "If it is a good sponsor and a good group, [Narcotics Anonymous] and [Alcoholics Anonymous] can really work because the sponsor does prosocial modeling and because the sponsor talks to the guy a few times a day or at least daily." Several officers discussed at length feeling obligated to provide listening support to former prisoners because it was not available from their informal support networks. One officer said,

> A lot of times you know, with the guys that I get to come in, they will pour everything out on and me, and I am like, oh my god, you

> know . . . how they are scared, nervous, and the hyperventilating that they go through. That is something that they don't discuss with their family, so I think counseling [would be helpful].

Another officer agreed, stating,

> You would be amazed at the amount of offenders that come into your office; they have never had the opportunity to just talk to someone without putting up the facade about being a tough guy. Just somebody that they can talk to without being prejudged, and they appreciate that a lot. You will find that they will open up and tell you anything.

Task appreciation

Unlike perceptions of re-entering prisoners, correctional professionals stated that task appreciation support was unavailable or provided on damaging terms to re-entering prisoners. Case managers felt it was more likely that former prisoners would receive negative task appreciation support from informal support providers. For example, one case manager described a scenario involving 12-step programs: "But then they get with their old friends who say 'Why are you going there, that is crazy.' And instead of remaining in a 12-step program, they will listen to the friends and stop attending sessions." Another case manager said that friends may encourage former prisoners to maintain a job because they intend to exploit the former prisoner: "You see when they get paid the people's friends out there are waiting on them, and a lot of them are not strong enough to pull back." Officers did not discuss task appreciation support from informal support networks but did state this type of support was important. Officers described trying to provide task appreciation support in the absence of such support from informal providers. One officer explained trying to "recognize the tough living situations, mental health problems, substance abuse problems, and try to encourage them in the face of it all."

Emotional

Correctional professionals described groups and organizations as sources of emotional support rather than family members or other individuals that former prisoners often reported. Case managers did not discuss the extent to which they felt emotional support was available to former prisoners after release but did note this type of support from positive others was important to success. Some case managers said they can predict how well a prisoner will do in the community based on whether or not his mom called the prison regularly before his release. Case managers said phone calls from mothers are a good indicator of positive support after release.

Officers believed Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous sponsors were important sources of emotional support to former prisoners. Officers did not mention other sources of emotional support from informal support providers. Both officers and case managers felt that faith-based organizations, including churches, could be a good source of positive emotional support if the religious beliefs matched those of the former prisoners. Officers and case managers felt that this "matching of belief systems" was often not the case. Officers and case managers also mentioned instances in which faith-based organizations damaged the trust of former prisoners. For example, they described faith-based mentors who engaged in illegal behaviors and temporary halfway houses that took advantage of former prisoners. Correctional professionals did not indicate that these instances were frequent but rather that the effects were lasting.

Emotional challenge

Similar to re-entering prisoners, correctional professionals did not perceive emotional challenge support as available to re-entering prisoners. However, officers said that they felt this type of support was important and they tried to challenge re-entering prisoners in the context of supervision. One officer explained, "I will let them play their games and listen to them. Then I will let them know that I know they are playing games . . . I encourage them to put those thoughts into something productive."

Tangible assistance

Correctional professionals and re-entering prisoners had inconsistent perceptions of the availability of positive tangible assistance. Correctional professionals described detailed scenarios in which tangible assistance, unlike any other type of support, was provided to re-entering prisoners but on negative terms. Case managers stated that tangible assistance is available to re-entering prisoners but had mixed reports about whether family members were positive sources of tangible assistance. Case managers said they tried to build support from family so that the prisoner would have somewhere to live after prison. However, one case manager said, "Most releasing prisoners know they cannot return to the same [family] environment they came from because it is negative, but that sometimes it is their only choice". A parole officer described a similar complicated situation,

> There might be other criminal offenders whether they are in the system or out of the system that live at that address and they get sucked right back into it. Because here we are putting them in a residence where family members and even parents who are involved in illegal activity and they are supposed to be their support network.

One of the two groups of case managers estimated that re-entering prisoners return to bad family situations in 75% to 90% of cases and that only 10% return to good family situations. The other group of case managers perceived family options as primarily positive while also describing limitations to otherwise positive tangible assistance from family members. "The majority of the guys have good families. Unfortunately, a lot of the moms are older and sick. The guys get in trouble when they leave the family's' home and they start making bad choices."

Depicting the complexity of social support, case managers stated that when positive family members only provide temporary support, the re-entering prisoner is at greater risk of failure in the community. "It [home plan] is verified and then the momma may say you can stay here for a week, but then you have to find somewhere to go and then it starts the cycle all over again." Some case managers felt tangible assistance was mostly negative and described support from intimate partners as temporary, related to finances, and leading to poor results. One case manager said,

> The relationship between girlfriends and baby mommas always comes down to finances. Things go well for the first 30 days and then they realize that the guy is not contributing. So they tell him to go back to the streets to get money for the food and kids' clothes.

Case managers and officers felt re-entering prisoners have difficulty discerning between positive and negative support from family members and because of the basic survival benefits of tangible assistance. One case manager explained, "Sometimes the inmates can't differentiate positive relationships with negative ones because they are family. So if they deal drugs with their sister they will not see that as negative." Displaying a similar sentiment, a parole officer said,

> I think a lot of them are going to name their parent or their family as support, but that sometimes can be misguided as them being a positive source, because sometimes the people they identify as a positive support is much more of a negative influence.

Case managers and officers talked about their attempts to educate re-entering prisoners about the difference between positive and negative support. One case manager stated,

> How do you say that your sister is not a positive relationship and knowing the time constraints on our job duties, we can't spend 3 hours with them counseling them on positive relationships? Even if we do 3 hours [other participants laugh], 3 hours probably wouldn't be enough. But with a quick one liner try to make as many positive comments as you can and encourage them the best you can and hope that something takes hold.

Officers said they tried to partner with positive family members to provide tangible support while the former prisoners struggled to find their way out of troubled behavior patterns.

Personal assistance

Case managers differed from all other study participants in that they perceived little positive personal assistance as available to re-entering prisoners. Instead case managers said positive family members were too "burnt out" to support the re-entering prisoner because of his past behaviors. Case managers also stated that family members were negative sources of support and their personal assistance came in the form of enabling former prisoners to continue irresponsible behaviors. Case managers said, regardless of positive or negative sources of personal assistance, that the utility and sustainability of such support is entirely up to the re-entering prisoner. Case managers made statements such as,

> It is contingent on the guy on whether the support from family ends up being helpful or not. At some point they have to decide if they want to hang with their family or go back to hanging with their old friends. Then the family doesn't want to have anything to do with them and they just end up back at square one.

Presenting a similarly troubling picture, officers said that the mere presence of positive personal assistance might not be enough to counteract the effects of otherwise negative contexts. One officer described a case in which a wife and church worked together to support a former prisoner who was living in a negative community after release. Ultimately the negative environment overrode the positive support.

> It was really intimidating over there, but I was nervous for him, but she [wife] stayed positive and he [former prisoner] stayed positive. She kept him in the church, and they were in church like 4, 5 times a week. And the church members there, they took him up and they made sure that he had what he needed. They helped him try to find work and even though some of the work that he did was under the table, he did at least feel like he was contributing. So, he had that support and unfortunately, I just talked to her and he is back on drugs.

Unlike case manager reports, but consistent with responses from re-entering prisoners, officers generally believed family members could be important sources of positive personal assistance. For example, an officer said, "I have offenders who we had to base an entire case plan around the grandmother's schedule, but she was his only transportation." Officers engaged family members by telling them, "If you don't want him to go back then you need

to become my best friend. If you want to keep your son home, then you need to let me know if he is sneaking out after curfew." Officers described these situations as attempts to facilitate positive support by getting family members to communicate with correctional professionals.

Re-Entering Prisoners' Perspectives by Subtype of Support

Listening

Current prisoners expected more listening support than former prisoners received. Sixty-two percent of current prisoners expected postrelease listening support would be available from three or fewer support providers. One person said no one would provide this support. Almost half of current prisoners (45%) felt family members would provide such support. (See Table 1.)

Consistent with officers' perspectives, only two (25%) former prisoners reported receiving listening support and the support was from mentors or volunteers. One participant said listening support he received from Narcotics Anonymous was important to maintaining his sobriety and mental health, saying, "If I ever felt the urge to wanna go pick up something, I can call them and they would be there to guide me through that. Um, basically, that is a network. I got a network of people that I can deal with or call whenever I feel in one of those depression moods." The other participant referred to volunteers he met in prison as providing listening support.

Task appreciation

Current and former prisoners gave consistent reports of expected and received task appreciation support. Fifty-eight percent of current prisoners

TABLE 1 Current Prisoners' Expected Positive Social Support: Type, Quantity, and Source

Support	Listening support % (*n*)	Task support % (*n*)	Emotional support % (*n*)	Emotional challenge % (*n*)	Tangible assistance % (*n*)	Personal assistance % (*n*)
Amount of support	*N* = 34	*N* = 33	*N* = 34	*N* = 34	*N* = 33	*N* = 33
No one	3% (1)	9% (3)	3% (1)	15% (5)	15% (5)	15% (5)
1 person	97% (33)	94% (31)	97% (33)	85% (29)	88% (29)	88% (29)
2 people	82% (28)	76% (25)	79% (27)	53% (18)	60% (20)	64% (21)
3 people	62% (21)	58% (19)	56% (19)	35% (12)	45% (15)	58% (19)
4 people	47% (16)	36% (12)	32% (11)	26% (9)	18% (6)	21% (7)
5 or more	21% (7)	27% (9)	24% (8)	9% (3)	12% (4)	15% (5)
Source of support	*N* = 33	*N* = 30	*N* = 33	*N* = 29	*N* = 28	*N* = 28
Parent	45% (15)	43% (13)	45% (15)	24% (7)	46% (13)	29% (8)
Sibling	15% (5)	10% (3)	15% (5)	14% (4)	11% (3)	11% (3)
Friend	15% (5)	13% (4)	9% (3)	17% (5)	18% (5)	21% (6)
Partner	6% (2)	6% (2)	3% (1)	3% (1)	7% (2)	11% (3)
Other family	3% (1)	10% (3)	6% (2)	17% (5)	4% (1)	4% (1)
Other	15% (5)	17% (5)	21% (7)	24% (7)	14% (4)	25% (7)

reported expecting three or fewer persons would provide them with task appreciation support and 9% said no one would provide this support postrelease. Almost half (43%) of current prisoners expected parents would provide this form of support.

Several former prisoners said they received task appreciation support from their family and specifically from their mother. Two former prisoners specified that their family supported them by recognizing that they are making an effort to succeed postrelease and by not making them feel like a burden. "The encouragement that they giving me, I don't feel like a burden to nobody." Another participant explained that when he felt discouraged, his mom reminded him that many people without criminal histories couldn't find a job and to keep up his efforts.

Emotional

Emotional support was equally described as available and needed by current and former prisoners. More than half (56%) of current prisoners expected three or fewer persons would provide them with emotional support. One person said no one would provide emotional support. Parents were the most frequently reported source of support (45%), followed by nonfamily or friend support providers (21%) such as church members or sponsors.

Former prisoners reported receiving emotional support in various ways. Participants said people would talk about positive things and tell them to stay out of trouble, give them advice and encouragement, and say they wanted them to succeed. Former prisoners received this support from church members, mothers, and other family members. A few participants talked specifically about how important it was to feel welcomed, accepted, loved, and needed by nearby family members. "You know when you put that stuff on a scale it really outweighs the other stuff. You realize what's worth it and what's not worth it." One participant expressed a similar feeling about family members who live far away but send him letters of support. "I know that I get plenty of support from them for that. I know that I love them and that they love me and I know that they want me to succeed, especially my aunt." Former prisoners said emotional support was particularly important for them when they had self-doubts about adjusting to life after imprisonment.

Emotional challenge

Participants had difficulty understanding the definition of emotional challenge support and some participants disagreed that being challenged was positive. Consistent with the experiences of former prisoners, current prisoners expected much less emotional challenge support, if any, when compared to other types of social support. More than half of current prisoners (53%) said two or fewer people would challenge them to think differently. Five

current prisoners (15%) said no one would provide this support. Former prisoners said they did not receive emotional challenge support.

Tangible assistance

Compared to perceptions about other types of social support, participant reports of tangible assistance varied most widely between current and former prisoner samples. Current prisoners expected less tangible assistance from others relative to other types of support. Yet, former prisoners reported receiving substantial tangible assistance from others that they perceived as positive.

Sixty percent of current prisoners expected two or fewer people would provide them with tangible support. Five participants (15%) said no one would support them in this way. Close to half (46%) stated their parents would be the source of support.

Almost all former prisoners received tangible assistance from family (i.e., mothers, fathers, siblings, uncles, cousins) such as clothing, housing, food, and money. Participants felt this support was critical to their success. "Right now I got a roof over my head, I am eating good. There is no telling what would happen if they [mom and cousins] were gone." Some described support from multiple family members: "Well, my mom gave me a car. My sister, you know, gave me a place to stay. My dad always helped me financially." A few participants received support from churches, including clothes, furniture, bus passes, and, in one case, money to attend school.

Personal assistance

Similar to tangible support, current prisoners appeared less confident in receiving personal assistance from others after their release. However, former prisoners reported frequent instances of personal assistance.

Fifty-eight percent of current prisoners named three or fewer people they expected would provide personal assistance. Five people (15%) said that no one would provide this type of support. Fewer participants expected parents would provide this type support (29%) compared to other types of support. Instead, they stated friends (21%) and other nonfamily members or partners (25%) would be likely providers.

Former prisoners described frequently receiving personal assistance, mostly in the form of getting rides from brothers and uncles to look for employment or attend appointments. Two participants described support from churches. "They take me to temp [temporary employment] services, they just try to help me out, you know what I am saying, and keep me off the streets and from hanging around the old crowd." Another participant stated,

> They are real genuine people . . . If there wasn't anything that I didn't know, or some type of information that I needed, they would look it

> up for me or you know try to help me find it. I guess it's all about having somebody or some type of organization to point you in the right direction.

Several participants said friends and family would tell them if they heard about a job or educational opportunity. "My brother-in law . . . he is trying to see if he can get me down there for a job in the warehouse." A few participants reported that family members helped connect them with specific jobs. One participant employed as a financial advisor by his family explained, "My sister, my mom, my pops, they have given me a job. I mean I work for them. They have helped me get back situated." One participant described another form of personal assistance: His mother moved out of their old neighborhood to keep him away from bad influences. "She did that for me, for me, she did that two months before I got out. So, that's one of the most important things that she really done for me."

DISCUSSION

Participants in this study represented a small sample of re-entering prisoners and the correctional professionals who work with them. In combination, their perspectives highlighted the complexity of social support for re-entering prisoners and the need for more practice and research attention to the potential of informal social support to improve postrelease outcomes of prisoners. Although not represented in the study sample, social workers are increasingly in the position to provide important tangible support to re-entering prisoners through formal support services in both criminal justice and noncriminal justice settings (Epperson, Roberts, Ivanoff, Tripodi, & Gilmer, 2013). However, the capacity for formal support services to meet the needs of the growing population of re-entering prisoners is becoming strained as the nation continues to face fiscal challenges (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Therefore, regardless of practice setting, it is important that social workers learn how to leverage informal social support for re-entering prisoners to increase the likelihood that the impact of formal support services is sustained (Pettus-Davis, 2012; Pettus-Davis et al., 2011).

Mounting evidence has indicated that crucial to promoting the post-release success of re-entering prisoners is learning how to best maximize support from their informal social support networks. The risk–needs–responsivity (RNR) model of correctional rehabilitation provides some rationale as to why it is important to determine the correct sources and types of informal social support to target during case planning for re-entering prisoners. Backed with ample empirical support, the RNR model emphasizes that services for criminal justice-involved adults should be matched to each individual's crime-producing (i.e., criminogenic) needs, dynamic risk factors

(those factors predictive of future criminal behavior), and responsivity characteristics (Andrews & Dowden, 2007). Decades of research have outlined major categories of criminogenic needs and dynamic risk factors (see Andrews & Bonta, 2010, for a review). Although a discussion of those factors is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that in terms of both needs and risks related to criminal behaviors, the nature of an individual's interactions with informal social support networks (e.g., family, friends) is highly predictive of future offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Yet, little correctional programming and practice attention is given to the informal social support interactions of re-entering prisoners.

Determining which members of re-entering prisoners' networks provide needed positive support can be time consuming and difficult for correctional professionals and social workers. Because many social workers may interact with re-entering prisoners in noncorrectional settings, social workers may obtain information about social support from multiple sources. As indicated in the current study, these sources may provide different accounts of social support depending on the source of the information (e.g., the client or a parole officer). Recognizing the difficulty of assessing the availability, types, and quality of social support for re-entering prisoners may help social work and correctional professionals to better serve this population. This study demonstrated that perceptions of positive social support varied by context and type of support for both professionals and re-entering prisoners, with prisoners and prison case managers reporting perspectives that differed from recently released prisoners and parole officers. Thus, answers to our guiding research questions varied depending on the sample and type of support in question.

Is Positive Social Support Available to Former Prisoners? What Types?

Affective support

Former prisoners in this sample did seek and receive a fair amount of informal social support from individuals in their networks whom they considered to be positive. Expectations of positive social support among current prisoners were consistent with former prisoners' accounts of receiving support for most subtypes of affective social support. Current prisoners expected and former prisoners experienced expressions of care and concern for their well-being (emotional support) and encouragement toward reaching their goals in the face of adversity (task appreciation). Listening support was the only type of affective support for which current and former prisoners' perspectives varied. Current prisoners expected much listening support, whereas former prisoners received limited listening support.

The findings also suggested that few supporters of current and former prisoners challenge re-entering prisoners to think differently about their

attitudes or behaviors because participants did not expect and did not receive emotional challenge support. Two prominent reintegration frameworks, the RNR model previously mentioned and reintegrative shaming theory, highlight the troubling reentry implications of this finding. According to RNR adherents, criminal thinking is one of the "big four" dynamic risk factors for continued criminal behavior (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006), yet participants in this study reported that few informal support providers challenge thinking patterns that are potentially criminogenic. Braithwaite's (1989) reintegrative shaming theory proposed that a key explanatory factor in whether individuals continue to offend is the extent to which others invoke moral regret in the offender via shaming. Braithwaite argued that shaming must occur in the context of a loving and respectful behavior, be focused on the act and not the individual, and allow for social approval and forgiveness. The re-entering prisoners in this sample may experience little shaming vis-à-vis emotional challenge support as suggested by the absence of such support. Thus, although the prisoners felt love and encouragement, it is unclear based on reports of minimal emotional challenge support whether these re-entering prisoners were encouraged by their supporters to seek moral rectitude for their behaviors, thus leaving them less vulnerable to future involvement in criminal behavior.

Correctional professionals seemed less aware of whether former prisoners received positive affective subtypes of support compared to other subtypes. Officers noted strongly that former prisoners received almost no listening support from people other than the officers themselves. Officers and case managers stated the availability of positive support neither indicated the use of positive support nor protected against negative homes and neighborhoods.

Instrumental support

Greater variation in perceptions of positive support occurred in terms of subtypes of instrumental support—support that helped meet basic survival needs (tangible) and promoted independent living (personal assistance). Current prisoners expected much less tangible and personal assistance support than former prisoners received. Former prisoners discussed frequent instances of instrumental support. Current prisoners may underestimate the instrumental support available to them because they feel they don't need this help from individuals, that they shouldn't need this type of help, or that the people who have provided this type of support in the past may have tired of doing so. Like former prisoners, correctional professionals also believed former prisoners received instrumental support, but differed in that they felt the support was not often offered and received in ways that would promote positive outcomes.

Who Are the Sources of Positive Support for Former Prisoners?

All three samples had slightly different perspectives regarding who provided positive support to former prisoners. Current prisoners most frequently identified parents as the expected sources of support for all subtypes except emotional challenge support and personal assistance. Frequency reports revealed that current prisoners expected to receive emotional challenge support from any source except intimate partners or parents. Expectations regarding sources of personal assistance support were almost evenly divided among parents, friends, and others (e.g., church members, sponsors, volunteers). Across support types, friends and others were the second-most frequently source of support identified by current prisoners. This suggests that re-entering prisoners diversify their support-seeking behaviors, possibly in response to the types of support that providers are able or willing to provide. The possibility that re-entering prisoners plan to rely on friends presumably known to them prior to incarceration is cause for some alarm. Another of the risk factors included in the RNR model is having antisocial associates (Andrews et al., 2006), most likely an individual's friends prior to incarceration. If friends with negative qualities (e.g., involved in criminal activity or drugs) are relied upon for support after release, correctional professionals may be accurate in their assessment that re-entering prisoners are not adept at distinguishing between positive and negative sources of support. The frequent identification by current prisoners of other individuals beyond friends and family as sources of support is also noteworthy. This suggests that current prisoners may have less confidence in their prior support providers or that they have weak connections to informal support networks, and thus plan to contact volunteer organizations to meet their support needs.

Former prisoners' accounts of received support after prison suggest that the lack of confidence among current prisoners in their support networks may be unfounded. Former prisoners received task appreciation, emotional, tangible, and personal support, predominately from parents and siblings. Counter to current prisoners' expectations, former prisoners had fewer reports of friends providing support. This discrepancy may be because friends were inaccessible after release or because former prisoners quickly identified that support from friends was provided on negative terms. However, because this sample was drawn from former prisoners actively on parole, it could be that this specific sample of former prisoners was better functioning than those who had violated parole and thus less likely to be enmeshed in formerly troublesome friend networks.

In general, correctional professionals were less attuned to or distrusted support received from family or other loved ones. Instead, correctional professionals identified formal support sources (e.g., parole officers) and informal support groups (e.g., churches, volunteers) as primary sources of reliable positive support and described other sources of support as likely to

be negative. Parole officers also expressed feeling a certain level of obligation to provide affective support to former prisoners because they believed former prisoners were not getting this type of support from informal social support providers. However, former prisoners had a markedly different view and rarely spoke of correctional professionals in a positive manner. The discrepancy between whom former prisoners seek and receive support from and whom correctional professionals believe are reliable sources of support has important implications for future policy and practice, particularly as social work, correctional, and other social service professionals are increasingly encouraged to instill positive informal social support into reentry planning and programming.

Practice Implications

Overall, study results indicated that some positive postrelease social support is likely available to re-entering prisoners. However, the way in which prisoners define and experience positive social support may differ from how correctional professionals (and other service providers) define that same support. This difference in definitions is relevant because it could influence postrelease outcomes.

The person-in-environment orientation of social work has positioned the profession to lead the development of systematic efforts to incorporate informal social support for re-entering prisoners into correctional programs and practices. As social workers embark on this effort, they must recognize that discrepant perspectives of support mean that as they try to actively engage social support providers in transitional planning, they may inaccurately identify positive sources of support. Misidentification could be a result of former prisoners mistaking negative support for positive support, or a result of the preconceived notions of correctional professionals who provide social workers with background information. Differences in expected support among current prisoners and received support among former prisoners also suggest that understanding of sources of support among re-entering prisoners may shift over time. Thus recurring and collaborative assessment may need to occur among social workers, correctional professionals, and re-entering prisoners before and after release to ensure the best fit of support needs and resources to promote positive postrelease outcomes.

Understanding differences in perceptions of quality of support—namely, what is positive versus negative support—deserves considerable attention from social work researchers and practitioners as well. Former prisoners may need assistance from social workers and correctional professionals in distinguishing between positive and negative support, understanding how negative support could affect their postrelease success, and creating strategies for limiting time spent with support providers that offer social support on negative terms. Social workers and correctional

professionals can collaborate to locate and develop tools to help re-entering prisoners objectively identify and engage sources of positive support rather than engaging sources of any support at all (e.g., creating a plan for a prisoner to return to a high-risk home environment because it is the only housing option). Alternatively, if correctional professionals and social workers overestimate the amount of negative support former prisoners receive, they could miss out on critical resources of positive support that may remain long after correctional supervision and any other formal services and treatment support cease.

Another possible scenario remains. The social support networks of re-entering prisoners may be composed of people who provide mixed support, in which some support is positive and some support is negative (e.g., sister provides a place to stay but sells marijuana). If mixed support is indeed a frequently occurring scenario, it may be that both the social support recipients and providers could benefit from targeted interventions that promote access to and engagement in positive exchanges of social support in otherwise complicated relational and societal contexts.

Limitations

Although the findings of the current study will help to advance understanding of social support for re-entering prisoners, the study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The study was conducted with a small sample only representative of the people who agreed to participate. Former prisoners were selected from people actively on parole, suggesting that at the time of the interview they had a successful transition; their access to social support may be different than people who failed supervision. The study was cross-sectional and thus did not depict how experiences of support changed over time for this sample. The perceptions of correctional professionals were based on routine practice with re-entering prisoners; in other words, they had not necessarily conducted formal assessments of re-entering prisoners' social support to inform the opinions they expressed in focus groups. However, because correctional professionals can act as gatekeepers between re-entering prisoners and sources of informal social support, we felt it was important to capture their perceptions of social support regardless of whether these perceptions were data driven. Current prisoners comprised a sample that was different than the former prisoners in this study. Therefore, we could not test whether current prisoners actually received the support they expected upon release. However, the intention of the study was not to assess predictors of social support, but rather to understand from multiple perspectives the extent to which postrelease positive social support was perceived as available and received by former prisoners.

CONCLUSION

Re-entering prisoners present unique challenges for social workers and other professionals aiming to encourage engagement with sources of social support. Re-entering prisoners have been physically (and possibly psychologically) isolated from their social networks, often being held very far from their communities. This isolation may lead re-entering prisoners to believe that they have access to or deserve less formal and informal support than may be available to them in the community. In addition, re-entering prisoners are likely to have strained relationships with social network members as a result of their criminal behaviors. Nonetheless, re-entering prisoners are often connected to family members and other loved ones and have previously been meaningful contributors in those relationships. Social workers and correctional professionals are well positioned to facilitate positive connections and reconnections between re-entering prisoners and their informal social support networks. As study results indicated, social support providers known to prisoners prior to incarceration are potential positive sources of support that will sustain well beyond correctional or other social services and treatment support has ended. However, given the diverse perspectives of the quality of social support available to re-entering prisoners revealed in this study, caution should be taken not to solely assess the mere presence of social support (i.e., whether a person has a friend or family member). Rather, social workers must seek to better understand the complexities of social support for re-entering prisoners; to differentiate between the positive aspects and unintended negative effects of those support relationships; to assess the specific support needs of re-entering prisoners and their social support providers; and to develop dynamic programs to promote access to and engagement with sources of positive informal social support among re-entering prisoners.

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