



Implementing Family Support Mechanisms among Formerly Incarcerated People

Damian J. Martinez
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
School of Criminal Justice
(joint appointment with Department of Social Work)





Outline

- Significance
- Existing Literature
- Research Design
- Findings
- Implications for Practice and Policy

Significance

■ National

- 95% of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).
- More than 600,000 individuals are released from prisons annually (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).

■ State—Illinois

- In 2001, more than 30,000 individuals were released from prison, almost a 160% increase since 1983 (LaVigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004).
- 51% of released prisoners returned to Chicago, and 1/3 of them returned to just 6 of Chicago's 77 communities, including North Lawndale (LaVigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004).

Existing Literature

- Former prisoners often reside and interact with their families of origin (Fishman, 1986; LaVigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999; Nurse, 2002; O'Brien, 2001).
- Focuses on the perspective of the former prisoner (Breese, Ra'el, & Grant, 2000; Ekland-Olson, Supanic, Campbell, & Lenihan, 1983; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999).
 - Neglects perspectives of family members.
- Evidence that families give support to former prisoners (O'Brien, 2001; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999).
 - Previous studies have defined support as fixed and unidirectional.
- Various aspects of (informal) social support are evident in research.
 - Similar definitions of support have not been used across studies and poorly operationalized.



Research Aims

- To investigate how former prisoners reintegrated back into family relationships.
- To understand the perspective of the former prisoner *and* family member.
- To examine informal social support as a process for former prisoners and family members.
- To operationalize informal social support to be used in practice and policy contexts.



Research Questions

- 1) Do former prisoners and family members exchange social support?
- 2) If so, how do they exchange that support?

Social Support

- Types/Categories (Wills & Shinar, 2000)
 - Emotional
 - Instrumental
 - Informational
 - Companionship
 - Validation

Sample

- Evaluation Project of Illinois Going Home Program
- Characteristics: 12 Interviews (6 dyads)
 - Former Prisoners
 - Between 19 and 24
 - 5 African American males and 1 Hispanic/Latino male
 - Family Members
 - Between 18 and 51
 - 2 Mothers, 2 Aunts, 1 Sister, and 1 brother

Finding I

- The Desire to Exchange Social Support

- Former Prisoner

Well, if I would need her, she knows I am trying to do better for myself, and if I needed her, she would come through for me, but if she know I am on the same bullshit as when I got locked up, she would say the hell with me, so there ain't too much I can ask for. [As for now,] I go over there, talk to her for a while. Tell her how it is with the Going Home Program I am in.

- Family Member

If he needs me he'd come by and tell that he needed money for a pack of cigarettes or that he needed, if I had the money in my pocket, I would give him some and sometimes he would come by and if he had the money, he would give me money. If I needed something, like we'd order something from the restaurant or, you know, I mean, like, I said, he's very generous-hearted, you know, he has it, you know. Sometimes I would get money from him.

Finding II

■ The Commitment to Exchange Social Support

□ Former Prisoner

Yeah, I help them sometimes like with the phone bill or electricity bill or just putting groceries in the refrigerator. I really don't need help from them. I don't ask for nothing 'cause they know I can support myself, but if I do need it, if I didn't have a job and couldn't support myself, they would help me financially.

□ Family Member

I always give him information on different things like when I went to the doctor. You know how they have a conflict about AIDS and all that? Well, I talk to him about it and tell him, if you do have sex, protect yourself no matter what the girl tells you that she doesn't have anything. Just protect yourself. I talk to him about drugs, about drinking. I always give him [phone] numbers about the GED. Like I said, he called already to this place, but they told him to call back in May. I always give him the newspaper so he can go to jobs if they're available.



Implications for Practice and Policy

- Policy makers and practitioners can work to create and maintain informal supports that encourage positive social roles.
- Assist former prisoners to make the transition to home using existing social support.
- Focus on bi-directionality and multidimensional aspects of social support.
- Provide information about developing a relationship where interactions are, and both people perceive it to be, supportive.