(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Gendered effects of social support on housing stability post-incarceration

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Abstract

The United States has witnessed a dramatic rise in incarceration rates over the past several decades, resulting in an increasing number of individuals reentering society each year. This study uses Wave 2 data from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) to examine how different forms of social support peer instrumental, familial instrumental, and familial emotional impact housing stability within the first three months post-release, a critical period for reintegration. A sample of 1,122 formerly incarcerated individuals was analyzed using logistic regression to explore these relationships and whether gender moderates the effects. Findings reveal that peer instrumental support significantly predicts housing stability, but in a gendered manner that is it improves housing outcomes for men but worsens them for women. Neither familial instrumental support nor familial emotional support showed statistically significant effects on housing stability, nor were these relationships moderated by gender. The study highlights the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in reentry programming, particularly in leveraging social support networks to improve housing outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals. Policy recommendations include the development of gender-responsive reentry programs and the expansion of support services tailored to the unique needs of women.

Keywords: Incarceration; Reentry; Social Support; Housing Stability; Peer Instrumental Support; Gender Differences

1. Introduction

The United States holds one of the highest incarceration rates globally, with millions of individuals entering and exiting the criminal justice system annually (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Between 1975 and 2005, the rate of incarceration increased from 111 to 491 per 100,000 people, a 342% increase (DeFina and Hannon, 2013). This trend in imprisonment within the United States continued, with the rate by the end of the 2000s nearly 450% higher than it was in 1975. The steady increase in the number of incarcerated individuals naturally leads to a substantial increase in the number of individuals being released back into society annually. Nearly 95% of incarcerated individuals eventually reintegrate into their communities (Petersilia, 2005); about 700,000 men and women across the country return to their communities each year (Visher & Bakken, 2014). This rise in the number of individuals transitioning from incarceration to freedom has prompted scholars and policymakers to examine the implications of these releases in the broader context of criminal justice, including issues related to reentry, recidivism, and community reintegration. (Guerino et al, 2011). Recent studies also emphasize that reintegration must be understood through the lens of broader social determinants, including housing, income, education, and access to healthcare services (Lawanson, Abu-Halimeh, & Ajiferuke, 2025),which collectively impact post- incarceration outcomes and stability.

Upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals confront numerous obstacles that significantly hinder their successful reintegration into society (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Muthee, 2020; Papaioannou & Anagnou, 2019). Formerly incarcerated individuals often face long-term housing instability (Cho *et al.* 2002; Visher *et al.* 2004; Roman and Travis 2004; Visher and Farrell 2005; Travis, 2005). Many also face problems related to substance abuse (Altschuler and Brash 2004; Teplin et al. 2002). The stigmatization of incarceration can pose additional challenges, as it can lead to

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psychological distress (Rose and Clear 2003). This can lead individuals reentering society to question their capacity for success (Mears and Travis 2004; Sullivan 1989) and result in self-imposed isolation from people, resources, and their surroundings when they return home (Rose and Clear 2003).

Given these challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that a substantial portion of previously incarcerated individuals are rearrested within three years of being released (Levin, 2002). In an analysis of 30 states, Durose and colleagues (2014) found that 67.8% of released individuals were rearrested. Among individuals released from prison in 2005, approximately 49.7% experienced parole or probation violation or were arrested for a new offense within three years, resulting in imprisonment (Durose et al, 2014). Additionally, within a five-year timeframe, approximately 55.1% of released individuals faced parole or probation violations or were arrested, leading to imprisonment. Often the new arrest was directly related to reintegration challenges (Durose, Cooper & Snyder, 2014).

Gender differences in re-offense rates in the criminal justice system are well-documented (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009). Studies show that men tend to have higher rates of recidivism compared to women (Smith, 2019). In an analysis of rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration of incarcerated individuals released in fifteen states in 1994, Langan and Levin (2002) found that males tend to demonstrate higher rates of recidivism compared to females within the criminal justice system. In an examination of reentry barriers across gender, Jones and colleagues (2002) found that successful reentry for men tended to be driven by instrumental factors like job opportunities, education, and existing skills. At the same time, women were more influenced by relational factors and support networks. One possible reason for the variations across genders is differences in the sources and quantities of social support men and women experience during reentry.

Social support refers to the emotional and instrumental assistance that peers, networks, and the community can provide to recently released criminals (Taylor & Becke, 2015). Social support is a fundamental concept in the study of reintegration because it lowers the psychological issues and stigma faced by people who have served time in prison, which in turn lessens the challenges of reintegration. Social support is linked to the likelihood of finding permanent work and housing (Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, & Denver, 2011), as well as reducing recidivism, even among high-risk sexual offenders (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009). Extant research has highlighted the importance of social support to reentry success while also demonstrating the gendered differences in social support (Jiang & Winfree, 2006; McCoy & Miller, 2013; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). Prior studies have also identified females as placing greater value on social support after prison than males (Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2014; Cobbina et al., 2012) and females relying more heavily on social support after release from prison than males (Clone & DeHart, 2014). However, there is still a gap in the study of social support and how it may differentially impact men and women reentering society. This current study will focus on informal social support, and this includes family members, friends, and neighbors (Jiang & Winfree, 2006; McCoy & Miller, 2013; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). This will unravel a perspective of the study yet to be analyzed, as it diverts from what had been carried out by previous authors and goes deep into unraveling the quality and degree of support received by previously incarcerated individuals by their families. Furthermore, this research builds on and enhances earlier studies on the reintegration of previously incarcerated men and women with a specific focus on the gendered differences in the level of social support received (Rose and Clear 2003). The scope of social support will be restricted to familial emotional support, familial instrumental support, and peer instrumental support. Therefore, to ascertain how these supports contribute to the decline in recidivism rates, the study will investigate these supports and their effect on the likelihood that formerly incarcerated individuals would successfully reintegrate into society. It is on the back heel of these variables that this study seeks to unravel whether gender moderates the relationship between peer instrumental support, familial instrumental support, and familial emotional support and the likelihood of securing independent housing within three months of release therefore making necessary recommendations that can aid the development of new policies to improve their stability experience.

2. Methods

The data for this study was sourced from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI)—a federal initiative aimed at improving the reentry experience for individuals transitioning from incarceration back into their communities. By the end of 2003, 69 agencies serving both adult and juvenile offenders received grants between $500,000 and $2 million to implement comprehensive reentry systems. These systems included diagnostic evaluations, individualized reentry plans, and transition teams offering continuous support from pre-incarceration through community reintegration.

This study specifically utilized data from Wave 2, which represents the 3-month follow-up period—a critical window for evaluating early reentry outcomes. The exclusive use of Wave 2 data allows for a focused investigation into how familial and peer social support affect immediate reintegration success, particularly in the areas of housing stability.

The first three months post-release are widely recognized as a high-risk period for formerly incarcerated individuals, during which their access to social support plays a pivotal role in determining whether they can secure stable housing. By concentrating on this early phase, the study captures the short-term effect of social support, as opposed to the gradual adjustments observed over extended periods. While the broader SVORI dataset includes multiple waves, this analysis deliberately focuses on Wave 2 to assess the immediate influence of social support on key reentry outcomes.

The analytic sample used for this study consisted of 1,122 participants drawn from the SVORI dataset. According to self-reported data, the full SVORI dataset includes a total of 2,054 adult participants, comprising 1,697 men (Part 1) and 337 women (Part 2). To be included in the analytic sample, individuals had to meet the following inclusion criteria: they must have been 18 years or older at the time of the interview, part of the SVORI program evaluation, and have complete data for the key variables used in the analysis. The final sample was 80% male and 20% female. In terms of racial and ethnic composition, 36% identified as White, 51% as Black/African American, and 13% as Hispanic or another race. Marital status data showed that 90% of participants were not married at the time of the interview, a category that includes individuals who were separated, divorced, widowed, or never married. The SVORI dataset classifies marital status as "Married," "Separated," "Divorced," "Widowed," or "Never Married." For the purposes of this study, anyone not legally married at the time of the interview was considered "unmarried." Approximately 68% of participants reported having at least one child, and 48% had either obtained a high school diploma or were currently enrolled in educational programs, such as GED courses. The SVORI dataset provides detailed breakdowns of educational attainment, distinguishing between high school diplomas, GEDs, vocational training, and other types of schooling

The analysis focused on two key outcomes. The first outcome is housing stability, defined as having resided in only one place during the reference period, or two places if the move was to secure one's place or a better one (Lattimore et al., 2012). Approximately 25% of participants ($SD = 0.43$) had secured stable housing within three months of release from prison. The second dependent variable in the analysis was stable employment at the three-month mark (yes=1). Employment was defined as having a job or being gainfully employed at the time of the follow-up survey. The mean employment rate was: 0.72 (SD = 0.45). Approximately 72.2% of the individuals were employed during the third data wave.

Table 1 Description of Sample

	mean / f	sd / %	Min	Max
Housing @ t3	0.25	0.43	0	1
Employment @ t3	0.73	0.44	0	1
Peer Instrumental Support	0.01	0.97	-2	1
Family Instrumental Support	-0.01	0.93	-1	3
Family Emotional Support	-0.01	0.94	-1	4
Gender	0.80	0.40	0	1
Marital Status	0.33	0.47	0	1
Children	0.69	0.46	0	1
High School Diploma	0.48	0.50	0	1
Drug Offender	0.30	0.46	0	1
Current Gang Member	0.04	0.19	0	1
# of Years Incarcerated	2.44	2.49	0	26
Family Criminal History	0.76	0.43	0	1
Peer Criminal History	0.79	0.41	0	1
Race/Ethnicity				
White	411	36.63%		
Black	568	50.62%		

Hispanic/Other	143	12.75%		
N = 1122				

The analysis focused on three types of social support: peer instrumental, familial instrumental, and familial emotional support. Peer instrumental support was measured using five Likert-type items. The five items indicated strong internal consistency. ($\alpha = 0.93$). Exploratory factor analysis indicated that all five items were loaded onto a single factor. Standardized factor scores were calculated, resulting in a measure of peer instrumental support with a mean of 0.00 and a standard deviation of 0.96. Family instrumental support was measured using five Likert-type items designed to capture the practical support provided by family members. The items exhibited strong internal consistency. ($\alpha = 0.87$)An exploratory factor analysis confirmed that they loaded onto a single factor. Standardized factor scores were calculated for this measure, resulting in a mean of 0.00 and a standard deviation of 0.94. Family Emotional Support: This variable measured the emotional support provided by family members. Like the other support measures, family emotional support was assessed five using Likert-type items that demonstrated strong internal consistency.($\alpha = 0.89$). An exploratory factor analysis confirmed that the items were loaded onto a single factor. The standardized factor scores for this measure resulted in a mean of 0.00 and a standard deviation of 0.95

3. Results and Discussion

A four logistic regression model was estimated to examine whether gender moderates the relationship between peer instrumental support, familial instrumental support, and familial emotional support and the likelihood of securing independent housing within three months of release. The results of these models are presented in Table 2

3.1. Baseline Model

The first model in Table 2 estimates the relationship between the three social support variables and the likelihood of having stable housing for 3 months while controlling gender and other relevant variables. Results indicate no significant differences in the possibility of having stable housing at the 3-month mark between men and women. However, a significant relationship exists between family emotional support and the likelihood of stable housing. Specifically, a one-unit increase on the family emotional support scale is associated with a 29% decrease in the likelihood of having independent housing within 3 months of release. This negative relationship may exist because independent housing did not include returning inmates staying with relatives. It is possible that the negative relationship exists because individuals with higher levels of familial emotional support were more likely to be living with family members rather than striking out on their own.

Control variables provide additional insights. Being married or partnered significantly increases the likelihood of securing housing, with married individuals being nearly three times more likely to secure stable housing (OR=2.89). Having children also improves housing outcomes, increasing the likelihood of housing by 49% (OR=1.49). Education offers modest benefits, with individuals holding a high school diploma being 34% more likely to secure housing (OR=1.34). However, years of incarceration and criminal history show no significant effects.

Notably, racial disparities emerge as a significant factor. Black participants are 44% less likely to secure housing compared to other groups (OR=0.56), underscoring the persistent systemic barriers faced by this population. Hispanic and Other racial/ethnic groups do not show significant differences in housing outcomes compared to the reference group (OR=0.95).

3.2. Peer Instrumental Support

The second model in Table 2 adds an interaction term to assess the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between peer instrumental support and the likelihood of securing independent housing within 3 months of release. As with the baseline model, the direct effect of gender is non-significant; however, there is a significant direct effect of peer instrumental support on likelihood of securing housing. Specifically, a one-unit change on the peer instrumental support scale is associated with a 33% reduction in the likelihood of securing independent housing within 3 months. More importantly, the significant interaction term indicates that this relationship is moderated by gender. Specifically, while the 33% reduction in likelihood holds for female inmates, a one-unit change is associated with a 3% increase in the probability of securing independent housing for male inmates reentering society.[1]

[1] The net effect of a continuous variable with an interaction with a binary indicator is equal to the direct effect of the continuous variable for the reference group and equal to the sum of the direct effect of the continuous variable and the interaction term for the treatment group (Aiken & West, 1991). In this instance, the net effect of peer instrumental support for females is -0.41 while the net effect of peer instrumental support for males is -0.41 + 0.44 = 0.03

This suggests that the role of peer instrumental support in post-release housing outcomes is gendered. For women, reliance on peer instrumental support may indicate weaker family or institutional connections, which could make securing independent housing more difficult. In contrast, for men, stronger peer instrumental support may serve as a resource that facilitates access to housing opportunities, perhaps through employment networks, informal housing arrangements, or other reentry resources. This finding highlights the importance of considering gender differences in how social support networks function during reentry, as the same type of support may have opposite effects for different groups.

3.3. Family Instrumental Support

The third model in Table 2 assesses whether gender moderates the relationship between familial instrumental support and the likelihood of securing stable housing within 3 months of release. Results indicate that a one-unit increase in familial instrumental support is associated with an 18% increase in the likelihood of securing stable housing within 3 months (OR=1.18). However, this relationship is not statistically significant, suggesting that familial instrumental support alone does not have a meaningful impact on housing stability for individuals in the sample.

The interaction term for gender and familial instrumental support (OR=0.92) is also not statistically significant, indicating no meaningful differences in the relationship between familial instrumental support and housing stability for men and women.

Table 2 Logistic regression predicting housing stability at 3 months

	No Interaction		Peer Instrumental		Family Instrumental		Family Emotional	
	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR	thous	thous
Gender (1 = male)	-0.26	0.77	-0.24	0.78	-0.26	0.77	-0.28	0.76
Peer Instrumental Support	-0.09	0.91	-0.41**	0.67	-0.09	0.91	-0.09	0.91
Family Instrumental Support	0.11	1.12	0.10	1.10	0.17	1.18	0.11	1.11
Family Emotional Support	-0.34**	0.71	-0.33*	0.72	-0.34**	0.71	-0.24	0.79
Gender * Peer Instrumental			0.44**	1.55				
Gender * Family Instrumental					-0.08	0.92		
Gender * Family Emotional							-0.14	0.87
Marital Status (1 = married/partnered)	1.06**	2.89	1.08**	2.93	1.06**	2.88	1.06**	2.87
Has Children (1 = yes)	0.40*	1.49	0.39*	1.48	0.39*	1.48	0.39*	1.48
Education (1 = high school diploma)	0.29+	1.34	0.31*	1.36	0.30+	1.34	0.30+	1.35
Drug Offender (1 = yes)	0.10	1.10	0.09	1.09	0.10	1.11	0.10	1.11
Current Gang Member (1 = yes)	-0.55	0.58	-0.56	0.57	-0.55	0.58	-0.54	0.58
# of Years Incarcerated	0.02	1.02	0.02	1.02	0.02	1.02	0.02	1.02
Family Criminal History (1= yes)	-0.12	0.88	-0.10	0.91	-0.12	0.88	-0.13	0.88
Peer Criminal History (1 = yes)	-0.10	0.90	-0.12	0.89	-0.11	0.90	-0.11	0.90
Race/Ethnicity								
Black	-0.58**	0.56	-0.59**	0.55	-0.58**	0.56	-0.58**	0.56
Hisp/Other	-0.05	0.95	-0.09	0.91	-0.06	0.94	-0.06	0.94
Constant	-1.37**	0.25	-1.39**	0.25	-1.36**	0.26	-1.34**	0.26
N = 1122								
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1								

3.4. Family Emotional Support

The fourth model in Table 2 examines whether gender moderates the relationship between familial emotional support and the likelihood of securing stable housing within three months of release. Results indicate that familial emotional support is not significantly associated with housing stability. This lack of significance suggests that familial emotional support alone does not reliably predict housing outcomes within this sample. Additionally, the interaction term between gender and familial emotional support is not statistically significant. This indicates no meaningful differences in the influence of familial emotional support on housing stability between men and women.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of the logistic regression models indicate that peer instrumental support has a significant impact on housing stability, with notable differences by gender. For men, greater peer support is linked to a 3% increase in the likelihood of securing independent housing within three months of release. In contrast, for women, increased peer support is associated with a 33% decrease in this likelihood. This suggests that peer support may function as a beneficial resource for men, but for women, it might signal a lack of other supportive relationships. In comparison, neither familial instrumental support nor familial emotional support significantly predict housing stability, and their effects do not differ by gender. These findings emphasize the role of gender in shaping how social support influences housing outcomes and point to the importance of tailoring reentry programs to address the distinct ways peer and familial support affect men and women. It is recommended that:

- Reentry support programs that specifically address the differing needs of men and women be designed and implemented
- Access to formal support services for women reentering the community, including housing assistance, counseling, and family reunification services should be increased.

Compliance with ethical standards

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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