

International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology

<http://ijo.sagepub.com/>

Factors That Hinder Offender Reentry Success: A View From Community Corrections Officers

Elaine Gunnison and Jacqueline B. Helfgott

Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol 2011 55: 287 originally published online 12 March
2010

DOI: 10.1177/0306624X09360661

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ijo.sagepub.com/content/55/2/287>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative
Criminology* can be found at:**

Email Alerts: <http://ijo.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ijo.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://ijo.sagepub.com/content/55/2/287.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Mar 28, 2011

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Mar 12, 2010

[What is This?](#)

Factors That Hinder Offender Reentry Success: A View From Community Corrections Officers

International Journal of
Offender Therapy and
Comparative Criminology
55(2) 287–304

© 2011 SAGE Publications

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0306624X09360661

<http://ijo.sagepub.com>



**Elaine Gunnison¹ and
Jacqueline B. Helfgott¹**

Abstract

Within the institutional correctional literature, much has been written about the differences in authority between correctional officers and inmates. Recently, researchers have begun exploring the differences in authority between ex-offenders and community corrections officers (CCOs). Emerging literature in the correctional field suggests that ex-offenders perceive CCOs as being socially distant from them and have doubt as to whether CCOs are genuine in their attempts to assist the ex-offenders in reintegrating back into the community. Using qualitative data from a sample of 132 federal and state corrections officers in Seattle, Washington, this investigation advances previous research by examining officers' perceptions of social distance with their clients. Results from the survey responses and policy implications are presented.

Keywords

social distance, community corrections officers, offender reentry

It has been approximated that 600,000 offenders return to society from federal and state prisons every year (Petersilia, 2003). Of approximately 300,000 offenders released in 15 states in 1994, 67.5% were rearrested within 3 years (Langan & Levin, 2002). Obstacles hindering successful reintegration for offenders include difficulty in obtaining employment, acquiring housing, and admissions to colleges and universities (Allender, 2004; Cowan & Fionda, 1994; Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle, & McPherson, 2004; Harris & Keller, 2005; Hunt, Bowers, & Miller, 1973; Levenson & Hern, 2007;

¹Seattle University, Washington

Corresponding Author:

Elaine Gunnison, Criminal Justice Department, Seattle University, 901 12th Ave.,
P.O. Box 222000, Seattle, WA 98122-1090

Email: gunnison@seattleu.edu

Lucken & Ponte, 2008; Nagin & Waldfogel, 1993; Paylor, 1995; Starr, 2002; Whelan, 1973). Serious social and medical problems (Petersilia, 2003) and mental health issues ranging from depression to low self-esteem to anger management problems (Fletcher, 2001; Heinrich, 2000; Helfgott, 1997) also hinder successful reintegration for some. Additional obstacles that offenders encounter include stigmatization (Bahn & Davis, 1991; Funk, 2004; Steffensmeier & Kramer, 1980; Tewksbury, 2005), loss of social standing in their communities (Chiricos, Jackson, & Waldo, 1972), lack of social support (Cullen, 1994; Lurigio, 1996), health care (Hammett, Roberts, & Kennedy, 2001), and substance abuse and mental health treatment (Lurigio, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Richie, 2001). Clearly, successful reintegration of ex-offenders into the community is critical in reducing recidivism (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009).

Several researchers have explored whether criminal justice professionals are aware of ex-offenders' needs and the challenges they face on reentry (Brown, 2004a, 2004b; Graffam et al., 2004; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2007; Helfgott, 1997; Helfgott & Gunnison, 2008). In 1997, Helfgott examined the relationship between ex-offender needs and community opportunity in Seattle, Washington, by surveying transition agencies, employers, property managers, colleges and universities, the general public, and offenders. That study focused on determining the extent to which ex-offender's needs were being met by transition agencies and what, if any, gestures of support were extended to them by the community during the reentry process in Seattle. Helfgott found that housing acquisition and coordination of services were major obstacles for ex-offenders. She also found that ex-offenders believed that their community corrections officers (CCOs) did not truly understand their needs, and they did not see their CCOs as a resource in the reentry process. One offender stated, "they [CCOs] just want you to tell a good lie . . . they have no understanding of what it's like . . . take them out [of their environment] and they wouldn't be able to survive on the streets" (Helfgott, 1997, p. 16). Although Helfgott (1997) uncovered many challenges facing ex-offenders and gained insight into their views of CCOs, data on CCOs' views of ex-offender reentry needs as well as their perception of whether officer-offender social distance influences the reentry process was not present.

Other researchers have surveyed officers to determine if they could indeed identify the needs and challenges faced by ex-offenders. For example, Gunnison and Helfgott (2007) examined CCO perceptions' of ex-offender needs, the value officers' placed on the specific needs, and the opportunities available for offenders to meet their needs in Seattle, Washington. However, the majority of the researchers did not explore social distance and, predominately, the research conducted on officer perceptions has been with officers outside of the United States. For instance, Brown (2004a) examined perceptions of federal parole officers regarding ex-federal offenders' needs in Canada and found that federal officers were well aware of the needs faced by offenders. In 2004, Graffam and colleagues examined criminal justice professionals' perceptions of ex-offender needs in Melbourne, Australia. They identified several needs, including stable housing, employment, rehabilitation (e.g., drug dependency), and counseling support.

It is not clear from the existing research whether social distance does indeed impact the officer–offender relationship in ways that hinder the reentry process as suggested by ex-offenders in Helfgott’s (1997) research. In addition, whether, like offenders, CCOs view social distances between themselves and offenders as an obstacle in assisting offenders on release is also relatively unknown from the extant literature. Only recently has the issue of social distance between CCOs and ex-offenders been explored. Helfgott and Gunnison (2008) surveyed CCOs and found that social distance was significantly related to officer identification of some offender needs, offender challenges, and officer attitudes toward offenders. However, social distance did not play a large role in officer ability to identify offender reentry needs, and officers do not collectively perceive officer–offender social distance as a hindrance in the reentry process. Although this research was the first to explore social distance between ex-offenders and CCOs, the data were based on closed-ended survey responses and did not provide CCOs an opportunity to offer their insights and opinions about social distance.

As a follow-up to previous research (Brown, 2004a, 2004b; Graffam et al., 2004; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2007; Helfgott, 1997; Helfgott & Gunnison, 2008), this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by further examining CCOs’ perceptions of the influence of officer–offender social distance on the reentry process using primarily qualitative data.

Literature Review

This study draws from the research literature on offender reentry needs and challenges, officer perceptions of offenders, and officer–offender social distance. The needs of ex-offenders and the challenges they face, whether CCOs can identify ex-offenders’ needs and challenges, and the relationship between officers and offenders are components that have the potential to play a role in the success of offenders on release and will be explored in the following sections.

Offender Reentry Challenges

Prior research has explored offender reentry challenges. Reentry needs consistently identified in the literature include housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment. Housing has been identified as one of the most difficult obstacles ex-offenders encounter in their reentry (Corden, Kuipers, & Wilson, 1978; Cowan & Fionda, 1994; Graffam et al., 2004; Harding & Harding, 2006; Helfgott, 1997; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Paylor, 1995; Starr, 2002; Wodhal, 2006). Ex-offenders often have limited credit, rental history, and finances that limit their housing opportunities and options (Helfgott, 1997). Many landlords are reluctant to rent to ex-offenders because of their fear for community safety (Clark, 2007; Harding & Harding, 2006). Without suitable housing, ex-offenders must resort to being homeless or residing in an environment that undermines their likelihood of successful rehabilitation (Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, & Slayter, 2001; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). In addition,

ex-offenders may find that the only place they can find housing is in impoverished neighborhoods where they are less likely to find employment—another key obstacle to successful offender reentry (Bradley et al., 2001; Petersilia, 2001; Visser, Baer, & Naser, 2006).

One outcome of the get-tough on crime policies is that many ex-offenders have few employment prospects (Lucken & Ponte, 2008). The unemployment rate for ex-offenders is estimated to be at 25% to 40% (Petersilia, 2003). The National Institute for Literacy (2001) reports that 7 in 10 prison inmates function at the lowest levels of prose and numeric literacy. Their search for employment is hampered by the inability, after long-term imprisonment, to search for employment via the Internet or newspaper or even fill out a job application. Thus, many offenders rely on personal connections to find a job (Visser, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). Many employers are also reluctant to hire ex-offenders (Buikhuisen & Dijksterhuis, 1971; Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008; Holzer, 1996; Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2003). Possessing a felony record disqualifies the ex-offender from certain occupations (Petersilia, 2001), and criminal background checks create barriers to employment for ex-offenders (Harris & Keller, 2005).

Substance abuse is also a significant hurdle to reentry success for ex-offenders (Wodhal, 2006). Drug addiction is a struggle for some ex-offenders (McKean & Raphael, 2002), many of whom are also in need of mental health support (Lurigio, 1996; White, Goldkamp, & Campbell, 2006) and some may resort to drastic measures such as suicide in response to the stress (Biles, Harding, & Walker, 1999). LaVigne, Visser, and Castro (2004) found that 11% of their sample of 205 ex-offenders in Chicago consumed alcohol and 8% used drugs within 8 months of release from prison. It is clear that some ex-offenders need assistance with the prevention of relapse into alcohol and/or drug use (Prendergast, Wellisch, & Wong, 1996).

Community Corrections Officers' Perceptions

The majority of research on officer perceptions has centered on correctional officers in institutional contexts. Studies of correctional officers' attitudes about their job, offenders, or rehabilitation philosophy have found differences in attitudes based on an officer's age, education, gender, or years of service (Farkas, 1999; Hemmens & Stohr, 2001; Latessa & Allen, 1999; Maahs & Pratt, 2001; Robinson, Porporino, & Simourd, 1997; Zupan, 1986). Early research found no significant relationship between education and officers' attitudes toward inmates (Crouch & Alpert, 1982; Cullen, Lutze, Link, & Wolfe, 1989; Jurik, 1985; Shamir & Drory, 1981). However, recent research shows that educational characteristics are significantly related to officer perceptions of offenders.

Officers with higher levels of education are more likely to possess favorable attitudes toward rehabilitation (Hepburn, 1984; Robinson et al., 1997) and more highly educated officers have greater empathy, punitiveness, and support for rehabilitation (Lariviere, 2002). In an examination of 358 correctional officers in five state prisons,

Hepburn (1984) found that officer education, employment length, and job satisfaction influenced whether the officer perceived that offenders had a right to protest. Hemmens and Stohr (2000) found that age and education had little impact on perceptions of the correction officer role (i.e., identified as “hack” or “human service worker”), but female correctional officers identified with the “human service worker” correctional role more than their male counterparts. Farkas (1999) found that more mature (i.e., older, more senior) officers favored rehabilitation and that female officers exhibited more of a counseling role with offenders. Finally, Jurik (1985) found that the corrections officers who were interested in and enjoyed the challenge of their job had more favorable attitudes toward inmates.

Findings on officer perceptions of newly released offenders’ needs have been recently emerging. Seiter (2002) examined what parole officers thought was important to offender reentry and how their own job contributions could be a factor in successful reintegration. More recently, Brown (2004a, 2004b) examined what federal parole officers thought regarding ex-federal offenders’ needs and challenges in the first 90 days of release in Canada. Similar to previous research on offender reentry needs, officers identified food, clothing, shelter, transportation, life skills, education, and employment assistance as the most important needs that parolees have when first released. Gunnison and Helfgott (2007) found that CCOs could readily identify offender needs and challenges on release, and their findings were consistent with previous research (Brown 2004a, 2004b; Helfgott, 1997).

Officer–Offender Social Distance

“Social distance” has been defined in the research literature as the level of trust one group has for another (Schnittker, 2004) and the degree of perceived similarity of beliefs between a perceiver and target (Jones, 2004). Findings from Helfgott (1997) suggest that offenders perceive social distance as the difference in education, income, lifestyle, and background characteristics between themselves and their CCOs. Furthermore, the offenders believed that officers who came from backgrounds of higher social class, education, and prosocial lifestyle had too little in common with them to be able to understand, appreciate, and help them meet their needs. Several scales in the institutional corrections literature have been developed to measure social distance between officers and offenders (e.g., Hepburn, 1984; Klofas & Toch, 1982). However, no clear consensus exists regarding the definition or measurement of offender–officer social distance.

Several researchers have used Klofas and Toch’s (1982) social distance scale to measure officer–offender social distance and its influence on officer perceptions (see Freeman, 2003; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1989). Whitehead and Lindquist (1989), who examined 258 correctional officers in Alabama, found that officers hired at an early age preferred greater distance than officers hired at a more advanced age. In 2003, Freeman examined attitudes of 74 correctional officers employed in a female prison and found that corrections officers who prefer high social distance file a higher

number of minor misconduct reports than corrections officers who prefer low social distance. More recently, Helfgott and Gunnison (2008) constructed a social distance scale that was composed of measures of neighborhood social disorganization, peer social influences, and prosocial and community support. Using survey data from a sample of state and federal CCOs in Seattle, Washington, the researchers examined the relationship between offender–officer social distance and officer perception of offender postrelease needs. Results showed that social distance is significantly related to officer identification of some offender needs and challenges and officer attitudes toward offenders. Moreover, it did not play a large role in officer ability to identify offender reentry needs and officers do not collectively perceive officer–offender social distance as a hindrance in the reentry process.

The present study seeks to fill in the gaps left by previous research by examining CCO perceptions of officer–offender social distance using primarily qualitative data. Prior research (Helfgott, 1997) suggests that offenders perceive their CCOs as out of touch with their situations because they do not share the same social backgrounds and that this makes it difficult to see their CCOs as allies in the reentry process. Helfgott and Gunnison (2008) did find the presence of social distance on the part of officers' ability to identify some needs of offenders. The present study used primarily qualitative data from federal and state CCOs in the Western Washington, Seattle–Tacoma area to further explore their views on social distance. The article addresses two primary questions: (a) What is the extent to which offender–officer social distance plays a role in the offender–officer relationship and offender reentry success? and (b) What are the situational and contextual factors that influence offender reentry success?

Method

Sample

The data used in this study were gathered from a voluntary self-report survey of state ($n = 112$) and federal ($n = 20$) CCOs in the Seattle–Tacoma region in Washington State. At the time of this research investigation, 368 state and 26 federal community officers were employed in Seattle. The survey, predominately quantitative, collected information on officers' identification and perception of the needs and challenges that newly released offenders face during reintegration. Officer demographic information as well as data on officer background, including items from the National Youth Survey dealing with drug and substance use in childhood and adolescence and indicators of neighborhood disorganization was also collected. Before data collection began, approval from the institutional review boards at Seattle University and at the Washington State Department of Corrections was sought and granted.

A mail survey method of data collection was used. Surveys were mailed to the supervisors at each field office site to increase response rate. It was thought that if the CCOs knew the research was supported by their respective agencies, they would be

more trusting of the researchers and more willing to complete the survey. Because of the number of community corrections agencies, the assistance of supervisors was needed to disperse the surveys because individual site visits were time prohibitive. In the weeks prior to the mailing of the surveys, the supervisors at each office were contacted by phone to explain the purpose of the survey and to ask for their cooperation and assistance with its distribution. Supervisors were mailed a sufficient number of surveys for their staff and were instructed to distribute the survey to them. To further increase the response rate, several e-mail announcements were sent to officers by their supervisors discussing the nature of the research investigation and the importance of officer participation. To ensure anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of responses, after the officers completed the survey, they placed it in a manila envelope with no identifiers and returned the survey to their supervisor. The supervisor then returned all completed surveys by his or her staff in a self-addressed stamped envelope.

A total of 132 surveys were completed for a response rate of 34% which included 112 state and 20 federal officers (a response rate of 30% for state officers and 77% for federal officers). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (66%), male (51%), held a bachelor's degree (80%), and had 5 years of working experience (57%), and the average age was 39 (see Table 1 for additional detail).

Measures of Constructs

The designed survey was primarily quantitative in nature. However, open-ended questions were also used in order to obtain a deeper exploration into officers' perceptions of social distance, situational and contextual factors contributing to failure of offender reentry, and community resources. Thus, by allowing the officers to respond in their own words and not be bound by binary (e.g., yes/no) responses, this research provides a more comprehensive investigation into these issues.

Officer perceptions of offender-officer social distance. Because Helfgott (1997) found in her research that offenders perceive social distance between themselves and officers, this previous finding was explored in more detail in this research investigation. Respondents were asked the following open-ended question: "Previous research has suggested that some offenders feel that their community corrections officers do not understand their situations because they come from very different social backgrounds. We are interested in obtaining your perspective on this issue. Is social distance (differences in past experiences, economic circumstances, drug/alcohol use, etc.) between offenders and community corrections officers a problem that hinders offenders' success upon release?"

Situational and contextual factors. Given previous research findings that suggest situational factors can inhibit successful reentry, respondents were asked the following question: What situational or contextual factors contribute to the failure of offenders in the transition process? Response categories of neighborhood offender resides in has high crime rates, lack of immediate family support, friends of offenders are criminal,

Table 1. Respondent Demographics (*N* = 132)

Characteristic	<i>n</i> (%)
Age, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	39.32 (10.69)
Gender	
Male	67 (50.8)
Female	62 (47.0)
Missing	3 (2.3)
Race and ethnicity	
Black, non-Hispanic	16 (12.1)
White, non-Hispanic	84 (66.1)
Asian	5 (3.8)
American Indian	4 (3.0)
Hispanic	5 (3.8)
Biracial	12 (9.1)
Other	1 (0.8)
Missing	5 (3.8)
Education	
Bachelor's degree	106 (80.3)
Graduate degree	22 (16.7)
Missing	4 (3.0)
State or federal	
State	110 (83.3)
Federal	20 (15.2)
Missing	2 (1.5)
Carry firearm while working	
No	70 (53.0)
Yes	52 (39.4)
Sometimes	8 (6.1)
Missing	2 (1.5)
Prior work in corrections	
No	42 (31.8)
Yes	88 (66.7)
Missing	2 (1.5)
Number of years work experience as community corrections officer	
0	7 (5.3)
1-5	67 (50.8)
6-10	27 (20.5)
11-15	13 (9.8)
16-20	6 (4.5)
21-24	3 (2.3)
25-30	6 (4.5)
Missing	3 (2.3)

offenders are unemployed, offenders are underemployed (i.e., working below their skill set), and other were provided. The "other" category allowed our respondents to offer their own suggestions.

Results

Themes were identified in narrative responses to the open-ended questions. The following paragraphs provide descriptive results to the questions, and a discussion of identified themes and feedback from respondents in their own words.

Officer Perceptions of Offender–Officer Social Distance

A total of 121 respondents answered the social distance question. Overwhelmingly, 60% of officers ($n = 72$) responded that social distance is not a problem that hinders offenders' successful reentry. On the other hand, 19% of officers ($n = 23$) stated that it was a problem whereas 14% of officers ($n = 18$) stated that it was somewhat of a problem. Other officers (7%, $n = 8$) were conflicted, stating *it was but also was not* a problem. Based on the findings, the authors further explored the officer statements beyond their initial first statement of *yes*, *no*, *somewhat*, or *both* to the question posed.

There were four themes that contributed to officer perceptions of social distance: (a) Offenders use social distance as an excuse for their behavior (15%); (b) offenders make decisions to reoffend or violate/rational choice (13%); (c) officer attitude (11%); and (d) officer training (9%). In regards to the first theme, many officers felt that offenders use social distance as an excuse for their behavior. Overwhelmingly, officers felt that social distance does not hinder offenders' reentry success. One officer suggested that it was merely an excuse stating, "No! The offenders will find all kinds of excuses to lurk behind. It's the offenders that would want to change and the community corrections officer's situation does not matter here." Similarly, another officer reported, "No, it is a ridiculous excuse. I was born and reared very practically and had good parenting. But I was exposed to other cultures and experiences as I matured. You don't need to be an addict to assist an addict. All humans have addictive personalities." Another officer reported, "No, but offenders will attempt to use this until I explain that I was homeless for years and engaged in the same activities. I know the games as I've been there, done that." Echoing similar responses, one officer stated, "No, just an excuse, it's easier to blame the CCO for their failure than it is to take responsibility for their own actions." In addition, another CCO stated, "the issue is that different social backgrounds only become a serious issue when the offender doesn't want to take responsibility for their actions, so they blame the officer. I never hear the comment when an offender finds success." It appears that the officers believe that offenders are not taking responsibility for their behavior and are making excuses. This theme is consistent with existing literature where researchers have found that offenders often make excuses for their criminal behavior (Pogrebin, Stretesky, & Unnithan, 2006; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Other officers felt that offenders make decisions to re-offend, or violate, believing that offender success is primarily due to rational choice decisions. Examples of the second theme include: "No, prosocial living is a choice just as crime and drug use is a choice" and "I don't feel this hinders the offender's success—they are the ones who

choose if they will succeed, my social upbringing has nothing to do with their court-ordered conditions and their choices to comply with them." Another officer reported, "It's difficult to get around that issue, we're law enforcement, they are criminals. It all rotates around choice!" Finally, one CCO stated, "You don't necessarily have to have gone through the exact circumstances to be able to empathize with an offender's situation, a lot of their current problems can easily be linked to clear cycles of problematic choices." Clearly, officers perceive offender success as an outcome of the rational decisions that the offender makes. This theme is consistent with rational choice theory that posits that individuals can make a choice, on their own free will, to commit crime (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). However, rational choice theory also acknowledges that there are various background (e.g., personality or intelligence) and situational factors (e.g., alcoholism, peer influences) that might contribute to an individual making the decision to engage in criminal behavior(s). It appears that the officers do not recognize that there are outside factors that can contribute to the decision to offend by an individual.

The third theme, officer attitude, suggests that successful offender reentry may be inhibited, in part, because of officers' possessing superior attitudes. One officer stated, "Sometimes depends on the CCO if they have a superior attitude or not, if the CCO believes he/she is better than the offender, then offender will see that and act accordingly." Another officer hints at the existence of social distance by reporting, "A CCO is a role model, offenders should look at CCO's lifestyles as the norm and look at them, as the antisocial background and environment do play a significant role on how we relate to offenders, there is a lack of compassion from some probation officers who were raised in middle-class backgrounds." In addition, another officer stated, "Many CCOs believe they are better. This feeling can be communicated to offenders. On the other hand, most CCOs are easily able to get past issues of different social backgrounds and can be a positive force in the offender's positive change." Finally, one officer believed social distance was not a problem but officer attitude could be, "No, but often CCOs forget their past and treat offenders with disrespect." These responses suggest that perhaps the social distance perceived by offenders in Helfgott's (1997) research is reasonable and justified. Freeman (2003), who examined correctional officer attitudes in a women's prison, found that officers possessed two types of attitudes: (a) a belief in treatment and rehabilitation services and (b) social distance. The findings by Freeman (2003) indicate that social distance is indeed an attitude held by correctional officers.

Officer training, the fourth theme, suggests that perceptions of social distance may be due to how officers are trained for their jobs or that training and experience can help reduce perceptions of social distance by offenders. Officers reported, "Offenders may feel like we cannot relate to them but even if a CCO were able to, it's not professional to talk about our personal lives with offenders," and "No, officers are skillfully trained to deal with all offenders respectfully and direct offenders in the right direction and to become productive members of society." Another officer stated, "I think to some degree this could be true but with experience, training, and time this hurdle is

overcome, just as in any job you learn how to deal with people through trial and error, there are always cases that could have been better supervised by an officer.” One CCO suggested that the perception of social distance “can be a great problem, it depends in large part, on the CCO’s job and caseload.” Thus, perhaps it is the CCO’s struggle to balance a large caseload and their experience and training that casts the social distance impression on offenders. Freeman (2003) suggests that “correctional training curricula should instill an appreciation of the influence of SD [social distance] on rule enforcement and the potential consequences of discretionary rule enforcement in employees at every level” (p. 204).

Situational and Contextual Factors

For the most part, there was agreement between officers in regards to situational and/or contextual factors that contributed to unsuccessful offender reentry. Many attributed failures in offender reentry to the following: the neighborhood the offender is residing in was plagued by crime (70%, $n = 94$); the offenders lack immediate family support (70%, $n = 94$); friends of the offenders are criminals (88%, $n = 118$); and offenders are unemployed (90%, $n = 120$). However, the majority of officers did not report that offenders are underemployed (37%, $n = 50$).

Additional feedback gleaned from the “other” category revealed that addiction, lack of treatment or quality treatment, criminal family members or peers, returning to an unhealthy environment, and lack of job skills were further reasons for unsuccessful offender reentry. In regards to the lack of treatment or quality treatment, one CCO stated that one factor that inhibits successful reentry is the offender’s “long-term addiction without long-term treatment and community support.” Along these lines, another CCO stated, “for mentally ill offenders, there is a severe lack of placement options and with limited cognitive abilities they can revert.” Another CCO reported that “lack of employable skills and/or motivation to change lifestyle” was a problem and added that the “length of incarceration period is a significant trigger which often dictates the degree and type of resources available to an offender.” It appears that CCOs are concerned about those underemployed, as another CCO added, “offenders are underemployed, for money, the life of crime is better, more rewarding.” Similarly, another CCO declared, “offenders are unemployed, they revert back to what they do well, crime, drugs, etc., the path of least resistance.” A barrier to employment for offenders is their felony record, which often cross-sects with their ability to find housing. As reported by one CCO, a barrier to reentry success is due to the offender being “unable to become employed with felony conviction and unable to find housing with felony conviction.” Other CCOs stated there was a “lack of jobs and resident opportunities” for newly released offenders and that “employment level affects the environment they choose to live in.” These findings were consistent with previous research on the difficulties of successful offender reintegration (Cowan & Fionda, 1994; Graffam et al., 2004; Harding & Harding, 2006; Helfgott, 1997; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Lucken & Ponte, 2008).

Discussion

Offenders have voiced their concerns about CCOs, indicating that CCOs do not adequately understand their needs as a result of differences in their social backgrounds (see Helfgott, 1997). The present study explored this assertion and the results revealed that CCOs do understand offender needs and also believe that social distance is not a hindrance to offenders' successful reentry into their communities.

The results suggest that CCOs attribute offenders' beliefs about social distance to offender deflection of responsibility. In addition, CCOs reveal that officer training does not specifically focus on the social distance issue. The findings from the current study coupled with previous findings by Helfgott (1997) suggest that social distance is an issue that may hinder reentry success for some offenders. Community correction officer training that addresses the social distance issue would likely improve officer–offender interactions. There are several ways in which the topic of social distance can be implemented in officer training. For example, acknowledging that some offenders might perceive social distance and use it as an excuse not to change might help more officers combat any perceptions of social distance early. Other ways in which social distance can be addressed in training is to provide officers with training on nuanced approaches to develop rapport with offenders in ways that (a) maintain necessary professional officer–offender boundaries and (b) make use of the ways in which officers and offenders are socially similar.

Although CCOs identified unemployment and criminal peers as the primary factors that hinder offender reentry success and many did not view social distance as a major issue in offender reentry success or failure, it is, oftentimes, seemingly small things that have personal meaning to offenders or logistical obstacles that make the difference in the difficult transition process (Helfgott, 1997). This is especially true in the case of long-term offenders who have been incarcerated for many years. Officer training that identifies and acknowledges these issues and provides officers with opportunities to develop approaches to responding to offender perceptions, needs, and challenges has the potential to strengthen offender–officer rapport in ways that will increase the likelihood of offender reentry success.

This study represents one of the few to examine the relationship between officer–offender social distance and perceptions of CCOs. However, it is not without its limitations. First, the data were collected only from officers in the Seattle–Tacoma region in Washington State and are not necessarily generalizable to CCOs in other jurisdictions. Second, although this sample included a greater number of CCOs than in previous research, the sample size was small and the survey response lower than desirable—potentially because of using a mail survey, which tends to produce a low response rate (see Singleton, Straits, & Straits, 1999). Perhaps, some officers might mistrust their supervisors and are not willing to participate in such a research investigation. Ideally, future research with a larger sample and a different survey data collection method (e.g., a lock box) could expand on the current research. Third, because the survey only had a few open-ended questions, we were limited in the

amount of information that we were able to glean in regards to CCOs' insights and opinions on social distance.

An important next step in reentry research is to continue to explore the role of CCO experience and social backgrounds in the creation of offender perception of social distance. A focus study of CCOs may be able to further explore the themes found in this research as well as whether the backgrounds of CCOs and offenders are divergent. Future research should explore solutions for reducing offender perception of social distance. Research by Lutze, Smith, and Lovrich (2004), evaluating the implementation of Neighborhood Based Supervision Programs that colocate CCOs with community-oriented police officers in the offenders' neighborhoods, found that officers who work closely with offenders in their own neighborhoods and social contexts are perceived by offenders as being more supportive and helpful in assisting them in the reentry process. Future research is needed to examine the interaction between officer perceptions, offender perceptions, and the situational–environmental contexts in which offenders attempt to reintegrate. Lutze et al. (2004) note that attempts to change the relationship between the CCO and the offender can only go so far in affecting change related to offender success and that increasing prosocial activities beyond traditional supervision practices is a more difficult challenge that may be beyond the power of correctional agencies. Finally, researchers should continue to investigate factors that hinder offender success.

The results of this investigation bring both researchers and practitioners one step closer to understanding CCO perceptions. The major finding of the present study is that there is a discrepancy between offender and officer perceptions of the role social distance plays in officers' ability to assist offenders in the reentry process. One implication from this research is that officer training should focus on this discrepancy in officer–offender perceptions. If offenders (mis)perceive their officers as unable to help them in the reentry process, this might create a negative offender–officer dynamic that might influence offender responsiveness and receptivity to assistance offered by the CCO. In addition, there are clear policy implications that should be addressed. Based on the feedback of CCOs in the Seattle–Tacoma region, there needs to be a larger portion of the state budget allocated to CCO agencies in the Seattle area. With high caseloads, CCOs are not likely able to effectively provide each of their clients with the time and attention that he or she needs. Without proper time and attention, CCOs will likely not be able to effectively build a strong supportive relationship nor be able to adequately assist offenders with their reentry struggles. It is clear that more CCOs need to be hired in the Seattle–Tacoma region. An increased budget will also assist agencies in delivering more substance abuse treatment, which is severely needed in this region.

Our research suggests that there needs to be a greater development of employment opportunities for ex-offenders in Seattle. With employment already an obstacle for offenders in reentry, the Seattle–Tacoma region may be deficient in providing ex-offenders with adequate employment opportunities. Given that many researchers have found that employers are reluctant to hire ex-offenders, creating employment

opportunities for ex-offenders is a large concern (Buikhuisen & Dijksterhuis, 1971; Holzer, 1996; Holzer et al., 2003). Perhaps the creation of an employment network of those employers who will hire ex-offenders or a job fair specific for ex-offenders would help to close this gap. Job fairs for ex-offenders have been held in many cities across the United States. In 2008, the Northern California League will host its 13th annual ex-offender job fair in San Francisco. With cities such as San Francisco and Indianapolis hosting such events, it seems plausible that such job fairs should be held in the Seattle–Tacoma region. Finally, CCOs consistently identified the need for affordable housing in this region. With public housing agencies able to deny housing to those with criminal backgrounds, ex-offenders have limited options. Because there are no federal laws mandating states to assist ex-offenders with housing, it is clear that city and state officials need to take charge and further develop affordable housing options for ex-offenders.

This research adds to the literature on CCOs and should serve as a stepping-stone for further research on the role of officer–offender dynamics in reentry success and failure. Understanding how officer–offender dynamics potentially influence officer perceptions is important to ensure equity in the delivery of services to offenders in the reentry process. Future research should continue to examine how the offender perception of the role of social distance hinders offender success.

Authors' Note

This research was presented at the *Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Annual Meeting* in Seattle, Washington, March 2007.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Mac Pevey and Keven Bovenkamp from the Washington State Department of Corrections and Bill Corn and Tim McTighe from United States Probation and Pretrial Services for their support, assistance, and for making the study possible. Special thanks to our research assistant Tania Reyes who was instrumental in collecting the data for this investigation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research was made possible due to a grant award from the College of Arts and Sciences at Seattle University.

References

- Allender, D. M. (2004). Offender reentry: A returning or reformed criminal. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 73, 1-10.
- Bahn, C., & Davis, L. (1991). Social-psychological effects of the status of probationer. *Federal Probation*, 55, 17-25.

- Biles, D., Harding, R., & Walker, J. (1999). The deaths of offenders serving community corrections orders. *Trends and Issues Australian Institute of Criminology*, 107, 1-6.
- Bradley, K. H., Oliver, B. M., Richardson, N. C., & Slayter, E. M. (2001). *No place like home: Housing and the ex-prisoner*. Boston, MA: Community Resources for Justice.
- Brown, J. (2004a). Challenges facing Canadian federal offenders newly released to the community. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 39, 19-35.
- Brown, J. (2004b). Managing the transition from jail to community: A Canadian parole officer perspective on the needs of newly released federal offenders. *Western Criminology Review*, 5, 97-107.
- Buikhuisen, W., & Dijksterhuis, F. P. H. (1971). Delinquency and stigmatization. *British Journal of Criminology*, 11, 185-217.
- Chiricos, T., Jackson, P., & Waldo, G. (1972). Inequality in the imposition of a criminal label. *Social Problems*, 19, 553-572.
- Clark, L. M. (2007). Landlord attitudes toward renting to released offenders. *Federal Probation*, 71, 20-30.
- Corden, J., Kuipers, J., & Wilson, K. (1978). *After prison: A study of the post-release experiences of discharged prisoners* (Papers in community studies, 21). New York: University of York.
- Cornish, D., & Clarke, R. V. (1986). *The reasoning criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Cowan, D. S., & Fionda, J. (1994). Meeting the need: The response of local authorities' housing departments to the housing of ex-offenders. *British Journal of Criminology*, 34, 444-458.
- Crouch, B. M., & Alpert, P. (1982). Sex and occupational socialization among prison guards: A longitudinal study. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 9, 159-176.
- Cullen, F. T. (1994). Social support as an organizing concept for criminology: Presidential address to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. *Justice Quarterly*, 11, 527-559.
- Cullen, F. T., Lutze, F., Link, B., & Wolfe, N. (1989). The correctional orientation of prison guards: Do officers support rehabilitation? *Federal Probation*, 53, 33-42.
- Farkas, M. A. (1999). Correctional officer attitudes toward inmates and working with inmates in a "get tough" era. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 27, 495-506.
- Fletcher, D. R. (2001). Ex-offenders, the labour market and the new public administration. *Public Administration*, 79, 871-891.
- Freeman, R. M. (2003). Social distance and discretionary rule enforcement in a women's prison. *Prison Journal*, 83, 191-205.
- Funk, P. (2004). On the effective use of stigma as a crime deterrent. *European Economic Review*, 48, 715-728.
- Graffam, J., Shinkfield, A., & Hardcastle, L. (2008). The perceived employability of ex-prisoners and offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 52, 673-685.
- Graffam, J., Shinkfield, A., Lavelle, B., & McPherson, W. (2004). Variables affecting successful reintegration as perceived by offenders and professionals. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 40, 147-171.
- Gunnison, E., & Helfgott, J. B. (2007). Community corrections officers' perceptions of ex-offender reentry needs and challenges. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 22, 10-21.

- Hammett, T. M., Roberts, C., & Kennedy, S. (2001). Health-related issues in prison reentry. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47, 390-409.
- Harding, A., & Harding, J. (2006). Inclusion and exclusion in the re-housing of former prisoners. *Probation Journal*, 53, 137-153.
- Harris, P. M., & Keller, K. S. (2005). Ex-offenders need not apply: The criminal background check in hiring decisions. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21, 6-30.
- Heinrich, S. (2000). *Reducing recidivism through work: Barriers and opportunities for employment of ex-offenders*. Chicago: University of Illinois.
- Helfgott, J. (1997). Ex-offender needs versus criminal opportunity in Seattle, Washington. *Federal Probation*, 61, 12-24.
- Helfgott, J. B., & Gunnison, E. (2008). The influence of social distance on community corrections officer perceptions of offender reentry needs. *Federal Probation*, 72, 2-12.
- Hemmens, C., & Stohr, M. K. (2000). The two faces of the correctional role: An exploration of the value of the correctional role instrument. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 44, 326-349.
- Hemmens, C., & Stohr, M. K. (2001). Correctional staff attitudes regarding the use of force in corrections. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5, 27-40.
- Hepburn, J. R. (1984). The erosion of authority and the perceived legitimacy of inmate social protest: A study of prison guards. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 12, 579-590.
- Holzer, H. J. (1996). *What employers want: Job prospects for less-educated workers*. New York: Russell SAGE.
- Holzer, H. J., Raphael, S., & Stoll, M. A. (2003). *Employer demand for ex-offenders: Recent evidence from Los Angeles*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Hunt, J. W., Bowers, J. E., & Miller, N. (1973). *Laws, licenses, and the offender's right to work: A study of state laws restricting the occupational licensing of former offenders*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Offender Employment Restrictions.
- Jones, P. E. (2004). False consensus in social context: Differential projection and perceived social distance. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 417-429.
- Jurik, N. C. (1985). Individual and organizational determinants of correctional officer attitudes toward inmates. *Criminology*, 23, 523-539.
- Klofas, J. M., & Toch, H. (1982). The guard subculture myth. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 19, 238-254.
- Langan, P. A., & Levin, D. J. (2002). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994*. Washington, DC: The Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Latessa, E. J., & Allen, L. E. (1999). *Corrections in the community*. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson.
- Lariviere, M. (2002). Antecedents and outcomes of correctional officers' attitudes towards federal inmates: An exploration of person-organization fit. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14, 19-23.
- LaVigne, N. G., Visher, C., & Castro, J. (2004). *Chicago prisoners' experiences returning home*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Levenson, J. S., & Hern, A. L. (2007). Sex offender residence restrictions: Unintended consequences and community reentry. *Justice Research and Policy*, 9, 59-73.

- Lucken, K., & Ponte, L. M. (2008). A just measure of forgiveness: Reforming occupational licensing regulations for ex-offenders using BFOQ analysis. *Law & Policy*, 30, 46-72.
- Lurigio, A. J. (1996). Responding to the mentally ill on probation and parole: Recommendations and action plans. In A. J. Lurigio (Ed.), *Community corrections in America: New directions and sounder investments for persons with mental illness and codisorders* (pp. 166-171). Seattle, WA: National Coalition for Mental and Substance Abuse Health Care in the Justice System.
- Lurigio, A. J. (2001). Effective services for parolees with mental illnesses. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47, 446-461.
- Lutze, F. E., Smith, R. P. R., & Lovrich, N. P. (2004, October). *Influencing the contextual experiences of offenders being supervised in the community: A survey of offenders*. Paper presented at the Western and Pacific Association of Criminal Justice Educators, San Diego, CA.
- Maahs, J., & Pratt, T. (2001). Uncovering the predictors on correctional officers' attitudes and behaviors: A meta-analysis. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5, 13-19.
- McKean, L., & Raphael, J. (2002). *Drugs, crime, and consequences: Arrests and incarceration in North Lawndale*. Chicago, IL: Center for Impact Research.
- Nagin, D., & Waldfoegel, J. (1993). *The effect of conviction on income through the life cycle* (NBER Working Paper Series No. 4551). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- National Institute for Literacy. (2001). *Fact sheet: Correctional education*. Retrieved from www.nifl.gov/newworld/correct.htm
- Paylor, I. (1995). *Housing needs of ex-offenders*. Hampshire, UK: Aldershot.
- Petersilia, J. (2001). Prisoner reentry: Public safety and reintegration challenges. *The Prison Journal*, 81, 360-375.
- Petersilia, J. (2003). *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pogrebin, M., Stretesky, P. B., & Unnithan, N. P. (2006). Retrospective accounts of violent events by gun offenders. *Deviant Behavior*, 27, 479-501.
- Prendergast, M. L., Wellisch, J., & Wong, M. M. (1996). *A study of women on parole who graduated from the Forever Free substance abuse program: Treatment experiences, needs, and services, outcomes*. Los Angeles, CA: Drug Abuse Research Center.
- Richie, B. E. (2001). Challenges incarcerated women face as they return to their communities: Findings from life history interviews. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47, 368-389.
- Robinson, D., Porporino, F. J., & Simourd, L. (1997). The influence of educational attainment on the attitudes and job performance of correctional officers. *Crime & Delinquency*, 43, 60-77.
- Rodriguez, N., & Brown, B. (2003). *Preventing homelessness among those leaving prisons*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice.
- Schnittker, J. (2004). Social distance in the clinical encounter: Interactional and sociodemographic foundations for mistrust in physicians. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 67, 217-235.
- Seiter, R. P. (2002). Prisoner reentry and the role of parole officers. *Federal Probation*, 66, 50-54.
- Shamir, B., & Drory, A. (1981). Some correlates of prison guards' beliefs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 8, 233-249.

- Shinkfield, A. J., & Graffam, J. (2009). Community reintegration of ex-prisoners: Type and degree of change in variables influencing successful reintegration. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 53, 29-42.
- Singleton, R. A., Straits, B. C., & Straits, M. M. (1999). *Approaches to social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Starr, R. (2002). A successful reintegration into the community: One NGRI acquittee's story. *Federal Probation*, 66, 59-63.
- Steffensmeier, D. J., & Kramer, J. H. (1980). The differential impact of criminal stigmatization on male and female felons. *Sex Roles*, 6, 1-8.
- Sykes, G., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review*, 22, 664-670.
- Tewksbury, R. (2005). Collateral consequences of sex offender registration. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21, 67-81.
- Visher, C., Baer, D., & Naser, R. (2006). *Ohio prisoners' reflections on returning home*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Visher, C., LaVigne, N., & Travis, J. (2004). *Returning home: Understanding the challenges of prisoner reentry*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Whelan, C. (1973). *Civil disabilities: The punishment does not fit the crime*. New York: Community Society of New York.
- White, M. D., Goldkamp, J. S., & Campbell, S. P. (2006). Co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse in the criminal justice system: Some implications for local jurisdictions. *The Prison Journal*, 86, 301-326.
- Whitehead, J. T., & Lindquist, C. A. (1989). Determinants of correctional officers' professional orientation. *Justice Quarterly*, 6, 70-87.
- Wodhal, E. J. (2006). The challenges of prisoner reentry from a rural perspective. *Western Criminological Review*, 7(2), 32-47.
- Zupan, L. L. (1986). Gender-related differences in correctional officers' perceptions and attitudes. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 14, 349-361.