

## The Influence of Social Distance on Community Corrections Officer Perceptions of Offender Reentry Needs

Jacqueline B. Helfgott, Ph.D. [✉](#)

Elaine Gunnison, Ph.D.

Seattle University

**APPROXIMATELY 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 percent were rearrested within three years (Langan and Levin, 2002). Offenders' ability to reintegrate successfully is hindered by obstacles such as difficulty in obtaining employment, acquiring housing, and admission to colleges and universities (Allender, 2004; Cowan & Fionda, 1994; Graffam, Shrinkfield, Lavelle, & McPherson, 2004; Harris & Keller, 2005; Hunt, Bowers, & Miller, 1973; 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). Newly released offenders encounter stigmatization (Bahn & Davis, 1991; Funk, 2004; Steffensmeier & Kramer, 1980; Tewksbury, 2005) and loss of social standing in their communities (Chiricos, Jackson, & Waldo, 1972), and are in need of social support (Cullen, 1994; Lurigio, 1996) and substance abuse and mental health treatment (Lurigio, 2001; Petersilia, 2003).

Many communities recognize the importance of assisting offenders in the reentry process and provide services to newly released offenders. Recognizing this importance at the federal level, the U.S. Congress has introduced [update info] the Federal Second Chance Act of 2005, which calls for the expansion of offender reentry services (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan, & Blitiz, 2005). 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 to determine the extent to which ex-offenders' needs were being met by transition agencies and gestures of support extended to them by the community in the reentry process in Seattle. Helfgott (1997) [✉](#) found that housing acquisition and coordination of services were major obstacles for offenders. Further, ex-offenders believed that their community corrections officers (CCOs) did not truly understand their needs, and offenders interviewed in the study 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). A missing piece in the study was data on community corrections officers' views of ex-offender reentry needs and challenges as well as their perception of whether or not officer-offender social distance influences the reentry process.

Recent research has explored whether criminal justice professionals are aware of ex-offenders' needs and the challenges they face upon reentry (Brown, 2004a; Brown, 2004b; Graffam et al.,

2004; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2007). Brown (2004a) examined perceptions of federal parole officers regarding ex-federal offenders' needs in Canada and found that federal officers are well aware of the needs faced by offenders. Graffam et al. (2004) examined criminal justice professionals' perceptions of needs of ex-offenders in Melbourne, Australia. More recently, Gunnison & Helfgott (2007) examined community correction officer 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. Since both Brown's (2004a) and Graffam et al.'s (2004) research was conducted outside of the United States, the findings from their studies are not necessarily consistent with community officer perceptions of ex-offender needs in the United States or in the city of Seattle. Additionally, the research conducted by Brown (2004a), Graffam et al. (2004), and Gunnison and Helfgott (2007) did not include variables related to perceptions of social distance of offenders or officer. It is not clear from the existing research whether social distance does indeed impact the officer-offender relationship in ways that hinder reentry process, as suggested by ex-offenders in Helfgott's (1997) research, or whether, like offenders, community corrections officers also see social distance between themselves and offenders as an obstacle in assisting offenders to succeed upon release.

As a follow-up to previous research (Brown 2004a; Brown 2004b; Graffam et al., 2004; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2007; Helfgott, 1997), this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by examining community corrections officers' perceptions of the influence of officer-offender social distance on the reentry process. The study addresses two questions: 1) *What is the relationship between officer-offender social distance and CCO perceptions of offender needs, challenges, and the ability of offenders to develop niches in the community upon release?* 2) *What is the relationship between officer-offender social distance and attitudes of community corrections officers towards offenders?*

## **Literature Review**

This study draws from the research literature on offender reentry needs and challenges, officer-offender social distance, and officer perceptions of offenders. The needs of ex-offenders and the challenges they face, whether community corrections officers 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 upon release.

### *Ex-Offender Needs and Challenges in Reentry*

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 offenders face (Corden, Kuipers, & Wilson, 1978; Cowan & Fionda, 1994; Graffam et al., 2004; Harding & Harding, 2006; Helfgott, 1997; Paylor, 1995; Starr, 2002; Wodhal, 2006). Ex-offenders often have limited credit, rental history, and finances, which closes the door on many housing opportunities (Helfgott, 1997). Many landlords are reluctant to rent to ex-offenders due to their fear for community safety (Harding and 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). Additionally, ex-offenders may find that the only place that they can find housing is in impoverished neighborhoods where they are less likely to find employment, which is another key obstacle to successful offender reentry (Bradley et al., 2001; Petersilia, 2001; Visher, Baer, & Naser, 2006).

Many ex-offenders have few employment prospects. The National Institute for Literacy (2001) reports that 7 in 10 prison inmates function at the lowest levels of prose and numeric literacy. Searching for employment is hampered by their inability, after long-term imprisonment, to search for employment via the internet or newspaper or even fill out a job application and many offenders rely on personal connections to find a job (Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). Many employers are reluctant to hire ex-offenders (Buikhuisen & Dijksterhuis, 1971; 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 & Kellar, 2005).

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

### *Community Corrections Officers' Perceptions*

Most research on officer perceptions has focused on correctional officers in institutional contexts. Studies of correctional officers' attitudes about their job, offenders, or rehabilitation philosophy have highlighted 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 towards inmates (Crouch & Alpert, 1982; Cullen, Lutze, Link, & Wolfe, 1989; Jurik, 1985; Shamir & Drory, 1981). However, recent research shows that officer characteristics are significantly related to officer perceptions of offenders. Officers with higher levels of education are more likely to possess favorable attitudes towards rehabilitation (Hepburn, 1984; Robinson et al., 1997) and more highly educated respondents have greater empathy, punitiveness, and support for rehabilitation (Lariviere, 2002). In an examination of 358 corrections officer in five state prisons, Hepburn (1984) found that officer education, employment length, and job satisfaction influenced whether or not the officer perceived that the offenders had a right to protest. Hemmens & Stohr (2000) found that age & education have little impact on perceptions of the correction officer role, but gender plays an important role in perceptions of the correction officer role. 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 towards inmates.

Findings on officer perception of newly released offenders' needs has been recently emerging. Seiter (2002) examined parole officer perceptions of what is important to offender reentry and how their own job contributions could be a factor in successful reintegration. More recently, Brown (2004a; 2004b) examined perceptions of federal parole officers 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 (1997) found that community corrections officers could readily identify offender needs and challenges upon release, and their findings were consistent with previous research (Brown 2004a; Brown 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) suggested that offenders perceived social distance as the differences in education, income, lifestyle, and background characteristics between themselves and their community corrections officers and believed that officers who came from backgrounds of higher social class, education, and prosocial lifestyle have too little in common with most offenders 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.

Whitehead & Lindquist (1989) and Freeman (2003) used Klofas & Toch's (1982) social distance scale to measure officer-offender social distance and its influence on officer perceptions. In an examination of 258 correctional officers in Alabama, Whitehead & Lindquist (1989) found that officers hired at early age preferred greater distance than officers hired at a more advanced age. Freeman (2003) 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, although there were no significant gender differences.

The present study seeks to fill in the gaps left by previous research by examining community corrections officer perceptions of officer-offender social distance and its influence on officer perceptions of offender reentry needs and challenges. In this study, officer-offender social distance is conceptualized as the extent to which officer-offender social backgrounds differ. Prior research (Helfgott, 1997) suggests that offenders perceive their community corrections officers 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 community corrections officers (CCO) as allies in the reentry process. The present study utilized data from a survey administered to federal and state community corrections officers in the Western Washington/ Seattle-Tacoma area. Survey items in the study were designed to measure CCO perceptions of offender needs and challenges in the first 60-90 days upon release, attitudes toward offenders and the CCO role, officer characteristics, and officer-offender social distance. This paper addresses the question – *does social distance between the officer and offender influence officer perceptions of/style of interacting with offenders?*

## **Method**

### *Sample*

The data used in this study was gathered from a voluntary self-report survey of state (n=110) and federal (n=20) community corrections officers in the Seattle-Tacoma region in Washington State. The survey collected information on officers' identification, perceptions, and the importance of the needs and challenges that newly released offenders face during reintegration and 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. 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.

The mail survey method of data collection was selected for several reasons. First, 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. Due to the number of community corrections agencies, the researchers needed the assistance of supervisors to disperse the surveys because individual site visits were time prohibitive. In the weeks prior to the mailing of the surveys, the researchers contacted supervisors at each office by phone to explain the purpose of the survey and to ask for their cooperation and assistance with the distribution of it. Supervisors were mailed a sufficient number of surveys for their staff and were instructed to distribute the survey to them. To further increase our response rate, several e-mail announcements were sent to officers by their supervisors on our behalf. To ensure anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of responses, after the officers completed the surveys, they placed them in manila envelopes with no identifiers and returned them to their supervisors. The supervisors then returned all completed surveys by their staff in self-addressed stamped envelopes.

At the time of this research investigation, 368 state and 26 federal community officers were employed in Seattle. A total of 132 surveys were completed, for a response rate of 34 percent, which included 110 state and 20 federal officers (a response rate of 30 percent for state officers

and 77 percent for federal officers). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (66 percent), male (51 percent), and held a bachelor's degree (80 percent), and the average age was 39. (See Table 1 for additional detail.)

Table 1. Respondent Demographics (N = 132)

Characteristic	Mean	Sd
AGE	39.32	10.69

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	67	50.8
Female	62	47.0
Missing	3	2.3
<b>RACE /ETHNICITY</b>		
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
Bi-Racial	12	9.1
Other	1	.8
Missing	5	3.8
<b>EDUCATION</b>		
Bachelors Degree	106	80.3
Graduate Degree	22	16.7
Missing	4	3.0
<b>STATE/FEDERAL</b>		
State	110	83.3
Federal	20	15.2
Missing	2	1.5
<b>CARRY FIREARM WHILE WORKING</b>		
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

#### *Measures of Constructs*

The researchers created several needs and challenges variables from needs and challenges identified by previous researchers (see Brown 2004a; 2004b; Helfgott, 1997) to acquire a better understanding of officer perceptions. To determine inter-officer agreement on the variables, we solicited educational and job experience information from our participants. To measure perceptions of social distance, we constructed a social distance scale, including items from the National Youth Survey that solicited information about drug and alcohol use in childhood and adolescence, delinquent behavior and association with delinquent peers, and social disorganization of the neighborhood/community in which the respondent grew up.

#### *Officer Perceptions of Offender Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities*

**Needs.** According to Aubrey and Hough (1997), offenders have multiple needs that should be met while they are under supervision. Thus, several measures of needs were included in the current analysis. Adapting from Brown's (2004b) research, subjects were asked, "In the first 90 days of post-release, what do offenders need to succeed while on supervision?" Respondents were first asked to check the needs of six categories that also were largely adapted from Brown (2004b). The six need categories included: basic supplies (such as medical care, bus pass), community supervision (such as realistic supervision conditions), life skills (such as money management counseling), insight into problems (ex. conflict resolution skills), corrections programs (such as drop-in workshops, cognitive-behavioral programs), and education and employment (such as job placement services, funding for education). After identifying the needs, respondents were then asked to rate the importance of the identified needs by indicating 1=not important, 2=somewhat important, 3=important, and 4=very important.

**Niches.** Studies of offender adaptation to the prison environment suggest that offenders better adapt to the prison setting if they can create "niches" (Johnson, 2002; Seymour, 1981) or a match between individual needs for meaningful/constructive activity, privacy/relaxation, personal safety, emotional feedback, support for self-advancement, structure (environmental stability), and personal autonomy, with opportunities within the institutional environment to meet these needs. This notion of need-opportunity matching has been extended to offender reentry with the

understanding that an ecological fit between the offender's needs and the opportunity to meet those needs in a given community is also critical in the reentry process (Helfgott, 1997; Joyce, 1996). To determine the extent to which CCOs perceive ex-offenders as being able to meet their needs and to create niches in the community, respondents were asked, "Based on your observations, to what extent are offenders able to meet the needs upon release?" on a scale of 1-10 where 1=no opportunities to meet needs and 10=many opportunities to meet needs. Next, respondents indicated "how important are each of these needs in terms of enhancing offender success?" on a scale of 1-10 where 1=not important at all and 10=extremely important. Finally, the officers were queried as to "What do you see as the primary factor obstructing offenders' ability to get their needs met?" in order to determine how officers perceive offenders who can't get needs met or are unable to create niches.

**Challenges.** As Brown's (2004a) research suggests, offenders face a myriad of challenges upon release. Several measures of challenges were included in the current analysis. Adapting from Brown's (2004a) research, subjects were asked, "What challenges do offenders face in the first 90 days of release?" Officers were first asked to check the challenges of seven categories that were also largely adapted from Brown (2004a). The seven challenge categories included: low income (such as finding housing), lack of work experience and skills such as lack of education), establishing family support (such as difficulty reintegrating with family), finding community support (such as no community support), return to previous behaviors (such as poor work ethic), using old coping strategies (such as returning to substance use), and corrections programming (such as lack of female programs). After identifying the challenges, respondents were then asked to rate how challenging the obstacles are to offenders by indicating 1=not very challenging, 2=somewhat challenging, 3=challenging, and 4=extremely challenging.

#### *Prior Experience*

**Officer Education.** If officers have a higher educational level, they may better understand the needs and challenges of new released offenders. Since we wanted to assess the level of inter-officer agreement on the items, we created an education variable to ascertain if there were any similarities/differences in the identification and assessment of needs and challenges. Education was coded as 1=high school diploma, 2=GED, 3=some technical school, 4=technical school diploma, 5=some college, 6=associate's degree, 7=bachelor's degree, and 8=graduate degree.

**Job Experience.** With greater experience on the job, perhaps more seasoned officers would identify different needs and challenges faced by newly released officers compared to more novice officers. We included several items to assess job experience. We first asked, "Have you ever worked in the corrections field prior to your current position?" If officers answered yes, they were asked to indicate how many years that they worked in that prior position. Next, we asked "how many years have you worked as a community corrections officer?" and officers recorded their years of job experience.

**Officer Style.** Previous research on officer style (Farkas, 1999; Seiter, 2002) suggests that style plays an important role in how officers perceive offenders and approach their jobs. To obtain information about officer style, we asked respondents an open-ended question to, "Describe your personal style of interaction with ex-offenders."

#### *Social Distance*

To obtain information on officer-offender social distance, the survey included questions from the National Youth Survey Neighborhood Problems scale regarding early peer influences, community disorganization, and community/pro-social support (see Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton 1985 for detailed explanation of items). These survey items were included as a proxy for social distance based on the assumption that, as compared to community corrections officers as a group, the backgrounds of offenders would be more likely to include antisocial peer influences, community disorganization, and less of pro-social support. We created a "Social Distance Scale" comprised of three subscales (Neighborhood Social Distance, Peer Social Distance, and Positive Support). The "Neighborhood Distance Scale" included 15 items measuring community disorganization

The Cronbach alpha for this scale is .95. The “Peer Social Distance Scale” included 13 items measuring peer influence with a Cronbach alpha for this scale of .95. The “Positive Support Scale” included 7 items measuring prosocial community support with a Cronbach alpha for this scale of .81. The “Total Social Distance Scale” consisted of all three subscales and had a Cronbach alpha of .64 [3]. The Total Social Distance Scale was recoded into a dichotomous variable (Hi/Low Social Distance).

## Results

Analyses of the relationship between social distance and officer perceptions of offender needs, challenges, niches, and attitudes toward offenders were conducted. Additional analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between social distance, attitudes toward offenders, and select officer characteristics. A series of Chi Squares and T-tests analyses were conducted. *Offender-CCO Social Distance & Officer Perceptions of Offender Needs, Challenges, & Niches*

Results from Chi-square analyses demonstrated that of the 60 needs listed on the survey, a significant difference with respect to low/high social distance was found on identification of only two needs and level of importance of four needs. Community corrections officers (CCOs) with high social distance from offenders are significantly more likely than CCOs with low social distance to identify long-term ( $\chi^2=10.8$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p>.00$ ) and transition programs ( $\chi^2=5.2$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.02$ ) as a need. Of the 41 challenges listed on the survey, results show significant differences with respect to low/high social distance on identification of only two challenges and level of importance of two challenges. Specifically, CCOs with high social distance from offenders are significantly more likely than CCOs with low social distance to identify housing ( $\chi^2=7.1$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and developing positive associations ( $\chi^2=4.3$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ) as challenges in the first 90 days post-release. High Social Distance CCOs were also more likely than low social distance CCOs to identify having a bank account ( $t=2.36$ ,  $df=54$ ,  $p<.02$ ), a community plan ( $t=-2.25$ ,  $df=103$ ,  $p<.03$ ), and understanding risk factors ( $t=-2.52$ ,  $df=102$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and interpretive services ( $t=-2.06$ ,  $df=51$ ,  $p<.05$ ) as important needs. Of the 7 niches/opportunities listed on the survey, results show a significant difference with respect to only one. CCOs with low social distance from offenders were significantly more likely than high social distance CCOs to identify support for self advancement as a critical reentry need ( $t=2.17$ ,  $df=107$ ,  $p<.03$ ) (See Table 2).

<b>IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS (Yes/No)</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% (n)</b>	<b>Chi Sq.</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Long-term Programs	LSD = 35	63% (22)	10.8	1	.00
	HSD = 81	89% (72)			
Transition Programs	LSD = 35	60% (21)	5.2	1	.02
	HSD = 81	80% (65)			
<b>IMPORTANCE OF NEEDS</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Sd</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Df</b>
<i>1 = Not Important – 4 = Very Important</i>					
Bank Account	LSD=16	2.13	.89	2.36	54
	HSD=40	2.58	.75		
Community Plan	LSD=30	3.13	.82	-2.25	103
	HSD=75	3.48	.67		
Understand Risk Factors/Relapse Program	LSD=31	3.10	.83	-2.52	102
	HSD=73	3.49	.69		
Interpretive Services	LSD=15	2.47	.83	-2.06	51
	HSD=45	2.53	.66		
<b>IDENTIFICATION OF CHALLENGES</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% (n)</b>	<b>Chi Sq.</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig.</b>

(Yes/No)					
Finding Housing	LSD = 35	91% (32)	7.1	1	.01
	HSD = 81	100% (81)			
Developing Positive Associations	LSD = 35	88% (30)	4.3	1	.05
	HSD = 81	96% (78)			
<b>LEVEL OF CHALLENGE</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Sd</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Df</b>
<i>1 = Not Very Challenging – 4 = Extremely Challenging</i>					
Lack of Transportation	LSD=16	2.77	.73	-2.10	103
	HSD=40	3.12	.79		
Lack of Patience	LSD=27	3.48	.64	2.25	87
	HSD=62	3.15	.65		
<b>IMPORTANCE OF NICHEs</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Sd</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Df</b>
<i>1 = Not at all Important – 4 = Extremely Important</i>					
Support for self advancement/improvement	LSD=33	8.67	1.271,48	2.17	107
	HSD=76	8.03			

*Offender-CCO Social Distance and Officer Attitudes Toward Offenders*

Of the 25 Likert statements included in the survey, results showed a significant difference with respect to only 4 of the statements. Significant differences were found with respect to several attitude variables. CCOs with low social distance with offenders were significantly more likely to agree with the statement, “I do not think it is possible to predict when an offender will reoffend” ( $t=2.52$ ,  $df=114$ ,  $p<.02$ ) and less likely to agree, “I cannot fully understand the past experiences of an offender,” ( $t=-2.22$ ,  $df=114$ ,  $p<.03$ ) “I believe that all human beings are inherently good,” ( $t=-2.13$ ,  $df=113$ ,  $p<.04$ ) and “The community and other agencies need to play more of a role in helping offenders to reintegrate.” ( $t=-2.26$ ,  $df=113$ ,  $p<.03$ ) (See Table 3).

<b>ATTITUDES TOWARD OFFENDERS</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Sd</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Df</b>
<i>1 = Strongly Disagree – 4 = Strongly Agree</i>					
“I do not think it is possible to predict when an offender will reoffend.”	LSD=35	2.74	.89	2.52	114
	HSD=81	2.32	.67		
“I cannot fully understand the past experiences of an offender.”	LSD=35	1.69	.80	-2.22	114
	HSD=81	2.06	.86		
“The community and other agencies need to play more of a role in helping offenders to reintegrate”	LSD=34	3.15	.89	-2.26	113
	HSD=81	3.51	.67		
“I believe that all human beings are inherently good”	LSD=34	2.29	1.00	-2.13	113
	HSD=81	2.69	.88		

Respondents were also asked whether or not they see social distance as a barrier to reentry

success. Analysis of qualitative data revealed that the majority of CCOs (66 percent) do not see social distance as a barrier to offender reentry success. When CCOs were asked: "Previous research suggests that some offenders feel 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 CCOs a problem that hinders offenders' success upon release?": their responses could be categorized into three themes. First, *offenders use social distance as an excuse not to take responsibility*. Officers reported: "Offenders use anger at anything as an excuse for their behavior, we all don't need to commit crime... to know it's a bad... path to take," and "I may not have grown up in the hood, but I am an educated man. I realize and appreciate the struggle low income offenders have ...." Second, *social distance is necessary, desirable, and appropriate*. For example, officers stated: "We're law enforcement, they're criminals;" "We're not here to be their best friend;" and "A CCO is a role model. Offenders should look at CCO's lifestyles as the norm..." Third, *CCOs attitudes are more problematic than social distance*. Responses included: "Sometimes depends on the CCO if they have a superior attitude or not," and "Many CCOs believe they are better. This feeling can be communicated to offenders."

Offender-CCO Social Distance, Officer Characteristics, & Officer Attitudes Toward Offenders  
Results of the analyses of the interaction between social distance, officer perceptions, and officer characteristics such as gender, agency (federal/state), years employed, firearms use, and officer style were also conducted. Results show that state CCOs with low social distance were less likely to agree, "Most offenders are good people who made bad choices" ( $\chi^2=5.3$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.02$ ), "I believe some human beings are born evil" ( $\chi^2=4.21$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ), "I believe that all human beings are inherently good" ( $\chi^2=5.40$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.03$ ), and "I think most offenders on my caseload see me as an ally" ( $\chi^2=4.73$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.03$ ). Federal officers with low social distance were more likely to agree, "I often feel sorry for the clients on my caseload" ( $\chi^2=6.7$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.02$ ).

Male CCOs with low social distance were significantly more likely than female and male CCOs with high social distance to agree with the statement, "I do not think it's possible to predict whether an offender will reoffend" ( $\chi^2=4.01$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and to disagree: "I believe some human beings are born evil" ( $\chi^2=4.99$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.03$ ). Low social distance officers employed under five years were more likely to agree: "I do not think it is possible to predict when an offender will reoffend" ( $\chi^2=5.1$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.04$ ). Less experienced CCOs (under 10 yrs) with high social distance were more likely to agree: "I do not understand what makes a person lead a life of crime" ( $\chi^2=4.1$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.04$ ).

CCOs with low social distance who do not carry firearms were more likely than CCOs with high social distance who do not carry firearms to agree, "Most offenders feel sorry for what they have done" ( $\chi^2=4.7$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.04$ ), "I often feel sorry for clients on my caseload" ( $\chi^2=4.6$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.04$ ), "I think few offenders have the capacity to succeed upon release" ( $\chi^2=4.7$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.03$ ). CCOs with low social distance who carry firearms are more likely than high social distance CCOs who carry firearms to agree, "I often feel sorry for clients on my caseload" ( $\chi^2=10.5$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.00$ ). CCOs with high social distance who carry firearms are more likely than low social distance CCOs who carry firearms to agree, "I cannot fully understand the past life experiences of ex-offenders" ( $\chi^2=5.5$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.02$ ), "Most offenders have the ability to choose whether or not to commit crime" ( $\chi^2=6.4$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and "I believe some human beings are born evil" ( $\chi^2=5.1$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.03$ ). No significant differences were found with respect to officer style.

## Discussion

While offenders have indicated concern that the community corrections officers (CCO) do not adequately understand their needs as a result of differences in social background, the results of the present study suggest that, from the perspective of community corrections officers, social distance is not an important determinant of CCO identification of needs and challenges, nor is

social distance an important determinant of CCO identification of niches, and social distance is not significantly related to CCO style. The results suggest that social distance is minimally related to CCO attitudes, and that officer characteristics such as gender, years employed, type of agency (federal/state), and whether or not the officer carries a firearm interact with social distance to influence CCO attitudes toward offenders. While social distance is significantly related to officer identification of some offender needs and challenges and officer attitudes towards offenders, it does not appear to play a large role in officer ability to identify offender reentry needs. Furthermore, results from narrative responses suggest that officers do not collectively perceive officer-offender social distance as a hindrance in the reentry process.

One of the more interesting findings is the relationship between social distance and officer firearms use. While there were some significant differences with respect to gender, years worked in corrections, state/federal x social distance, results show that *whether or not the CCO carries a firearm is associated with the greatest number of significant differences when social distance is also considered*. Thus, whether or not the CCO carries a firearm appears to be a strong determinant of CCO attitudes. Future research should further explore the relationship between CCO firearms possession, social distance, and officer attitudes. Such research is especially important in light of findings by Parsonage (1997) that showed that officer style is a critical variable in worker safety in community corrections in Washington State. Future research is also needed on the relationship between political ideology, social distance, and CCO attitudes.

This study represents one of the few to examine the relationship between officer-offender social distance and perceptions of community corrections officers. 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 community corrections officers in other jurisdictions. Second, while we were able to sample a greater number of community corrections officers than previous researchers, the sample size was small and the survey response lower than desirable, perhaps due to utilizing a mail survey, which tends to produce a low response rate (see Singleton et al., 1999). Ideally, future research with a larger sample could expand upon the current research. The current findings are only one small piece in making sense of the offender-officer relationship within a much larger context that contributes to reentry success/failure.

Recent research by Lutze et al. (2004), evaluating the implementation of Neighborhood Based Supervision Programs that co-locate 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.

An important next step in reentry research is to bring together the research literatures in correctional rehabilitation (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; Gendreau et al., 1996; Harland, 1996; McQuire & Prestly, 1995; Van Voorhis, Braswell, & Lester, 2000), institutional adaptation (Johnson, 2002), community supervision practices (Cullen, & Bonta, 1994; Cullen, Wright, & Applegate, 1996; Gendreau, Jackson, DeKeizer, & Michon, 1995; Petersilia, 2003; Petersilia & Turner, 1993), the officer-offender relationship and community context for offender reentry (Brown, 2004a, 2004b; Helfgott, 1997; Lutze et al., 2004), and the interaction between statistical predictors of recidivism and contextual factors (Schwaner, 1998; Van Voorhis, Cullen, & Applegate, 1994). Future research is needed examining offenders' situational contexts and the interaction between offender risk, need, and responsivity in the community corrections context. Officer-offender social distance is an important variable to include in future research examining offender risk, need, and responsivity (Andrews & Bonta, 2003) in institutional and community corrections contexts.

The results of this investigation bring us one step closer to understanding factors that may

influence community corrections officer perceptions, offender perceptions, and the officer-offender relationship. 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, to what extent does this create a negative offender-officer dynamic that may influence offender responsivity and receptivity to assistance offered by the CCO? How can this misperception be addressed within the context of orientation to community supervision or interactions between the officer and offender in the context of office visits? This misperception may represent a large hindrance to offender success in the minds of some offenders. Furthermore, if, as some of the officers in the present study indicated in their narrative responses, some offenders use social distance as an excuse or deflection of responsibility, findings from the present study offer CCOs evidence to suggest that social distance does not have a large impact on their ability to identify offender needs and challenges.

This research adds to the literature on community corrections officers and should serve as a stepping-stone for further research on the role of officer-offender dynamics in reentry success/failure. Understanding how officer characteristics and officer-offender dynamics potentially influence officer perceptions is important to ensure equity in delivery of services to offenders in the reentry process. Research on the responsivity principle in correctional rehabilitation suggests that the offender-officer interaction and dynamics may play a critical role in rehabilitative and reentry success/failure. Knowledge of officer-offender dynamics and the relationship between officer-offender perceptions can inform policy and practice regarding appropriate matching of offenders and officers and/or training of officers to enhance constructive officer-offender relationships. Future research should examine how the offender perception of the role of social distance hinders offender success, in particular what role the possible misperception of officer-offender social distance plays in the perpetuation of criminal thinking patterns such as victim stance (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976) and general deflection of responsibility.

#### **Author Note**

Jacqueline B. Helfgott, PhD, Associate Professor/Chair, Department of Criminal Justice, 330E Casey Building, Seattle University, 900 Broadway, Seattle, WA 98122. Elaine Gunnison, Assistant Professor, Department of Criminal Justice, 328E Casey Building, Seattle University, 900 Broadway, Seattle, WA 98122.

A previous version of this paper was presented at the *Western Society of Criminology Annual Meeting* in Seattle, Washington, February, 2006.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jacqueline B. Helfgott, Department of Criminal Justice, Casey 330E, Seattle University, 900 Broadway, Seattle, WA 98122. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to [[jhelfgot@seattleu.edu](mailto:jhelfgot@seattleu.edu)].

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### **The Influence of Social Distance on Community Corrections Officer Perceptions of Offender Reentry Needs**

<sup>1.</sup> Please direct all correspondence to Jacqueline Helfgott, Criminal Justice Department, Seattle University, 901 12th Ave., P.O. Box 222000, Seattle, WA 98122-1090, [jhelfgot@seattleu.edu](mailto:jhelfgot@seattleu.edu). This research was made possible due to a grant award from the College of Arts and Sciences at Seattle University. This research was presented at the Western Society of Criminology Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington, February, 2006.

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<sup>2.</sup> Helfgott (1997) suggested that if prisons are ecologically constructed so that prisoners have opportunities to make meaningful choices to live constructively while incarcerated, communities must also provide opportunities and niches to enable ex-offenders to reintegrate successfully into society upon release

<sup>3.</sup> While this value is below the often cited .70 level recommended by Nunnally (1978) and others (e.g., Carmines & Zeller, 1979), Devellis (1991) indicates that alpha coefficients between .65 to .70 are minimally acceptable.

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#### **"Looking at the Law"**

#### **A Guide to Statutory Retroactivity in the Revocation Context**

<sup>i.</sup> A "retroactive statute" is a new "law [that] changes the legal consequences of acts completed before its effective date." *Weaver v. Graham*, 450 U.S. 24, 31 (1981); see also *Landgraf v. USI Film Prods.*, 511 U.S. 244, 269 (1994) ("[a] court must ask whether the new provision attaches new legal consequences to events completed before its enactment"); Charles B. Hochman, *The Supreme Court and the Constitutionality of Retroactive Legislation*, 73 Harv. L. Rev. 692, 692 (1960) ("A retroactive statute is one which gives to preenactment conduct a different legal effect from that which it would have had without the passage of the statute.") (footnote omitted).

<sup>ii.</sup>

## References

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