

An Exploratory Study of Self-Report Levels of Social Support in Two Justice-Involved Groups

Phillip Galli

Shawn M. Trusten

University of Wisconsin-River Falls

SOCIAL SUPPORT IS often defined as the number of individuals in a person's network who could offer assistance (Lindsey, Norbeck, Carrieri, & Perry, 1981). From another standpoint, social support is viewed from an individual's perception of how adequate and beneficial the support is (Goodenow, Reisine, & Grady, 1990). Social support may act as an insulating factor against such negative life events as health ailments, financial struggles, relationship problems, and other unwanted social issues. More recently, social support has been said to act as an insulating factor against crime involvement (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002; Cullen, 1994; Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006). This is, of course, provided the support is positive, whereas negative social support, or coercion into antisocial behaviors, may drive individuals towards crime (Colvin, 2000). Social support is an often overlooked area in criminological literature, despite many risk/needs assessments considering its impact. Success for individuals on community supervision is at least partly reliant on social support. Practitioners have long recognized this, and more research to contribute to evidence-based practices in this area is needed. In this research, we hope to better understand how some justice-involved individuals self-report support from family in their lives prior to offending. This may also allow for an understanding of how differing levels of social support contribute to or take away from success on supervision.

Capturing social support pre-offending may also allow for a better understanding of how differing levels of support contribute to crime involvement in general. The goal then would be to increase areas where support is lacking to create future protective barriers against adversity, of which crime is one example. Finally, we are especially interested in the role of family social support, as it is particularly salient throughout life.

Background

Researchers have applied the concept of social support to a variety of consequences: stress (Cobb, 1976); mental health (Dressler, 1985; Lakey & Orehek, 2011); physical health (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005; Uchino, 2009; Wallston, Alagna, DeVellis, & DeVellis, 1983); physical activity (Beets et al., 2010; Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2005); and, more recently, crime (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002; Cullen, 1994). Suffice to say, social support is an interdisciplinary theoretical concept. Further, social support is posited as an insulating factor in a variety of negative life experiences: health ailments (Berkman & Syme, 1979), mental health episodes (Cohen & Willis, 1985), sexual victimization (Kimerling & Calhoun, 1994), and physical abuse (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002). White, Bruce, Farrell, and Klierer (1998) describe social support as any influence that either directly helps to adjust or reduces the effect of stress from negative stimuli. Vaux

(1988) refers to social support as information that leads people to believe they are offered care and value and belong to a network of individuals who will provide these. Support can come from a variety of sources such as family, friends, co-workers, and classmates. Social support is also understood as a stress-buffer that can help facilitate adaptation in the face of crises (Cobb, 1976).

Social support allows people to navigate through life feeling a connection. Lin (1986) states it is both social ties (bonds) and social position (access to support) that make up this conception of social support. When experiencing challenges with health, relationships, and other unwanted social issues, support is important. One of these social issues is involvement in crime. Crime involvement generates a number of consequences, not too dissimilar from other negative life events. Of importance is understanding what helps people to cope with these consequences. This is where social support plays a role. Bazemore (2001) writes that social support is a direct reflection of the connections individuals develop through socialization. As Vaux (1988) indicates, infants establish an attachment to a primary caregiver at a very early age. The strength of these relationships may vary, but some sort of social support is established.

Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988) report that social support was conceived in response to a need for a buffer between negative life events and the unwanted and negative

symptoms they produce. Procidano and Heller (1983) state that this buffering of social support protects against distress, negative moods, and other mental health disorders. It is also possible that social support may have some effect on behavioral outcomes as well. For example, in work surrounding social support and mortality, Berkman and Syme (1979) find participants with greater social networks live longer. This may be attributable to exercise and diet, or just overall health, but it shows the impact of social support on a behavioral outcome.

There have been challenges in trying to define exactly what is social support. The term is both interdisciplinary and broad. Attempts not only to define but also to measure social support have been met by researchers and scholars continuously refining language and developing additional tools in an attempt to best capture its essence. In early studies (pre-1980), one could come across as many as 50 different instruments (Vaux, 1988) in sociology alone. This has led to a lack of uniform evaluation in the field. Some of these ways of capturing social support include reporting the frequency of support over a given time period, the number of supportive behaviors provided in a given situation, and rating quality of support (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000). Because of this variation, social support research has received considerable criticism. One main critique is there is no generally agreed upon "best practices" approach for how to measure social support.

Family support is important as these influences help shape behavior, both positively and negatively. While social support can come from a variety of sources (such as peers, co-workers, classmates, and teammates), that which comes from the family is salient throughout life. Patterson and colleagues (1982) spent a great deal of time researching the relationship between family social support and behavioral outcomes of children. One of the most important findings from years of their research is that positive parenting practices, a form of family social support, can dramatically reduce the deviance rates in children.

As previously stated, social support takes many forms, including family, friends/peers, coworkers/classmates, teammates, and others. Similar to other coping strategies to deal with stress, social support does not necessarily prevent a negative outcome. Rather, it may mitigate the chances of future involvement in crime, for example, or soften the effect of criminal behavior.

Social support largely exists in four domains: instrumental, expressive, received, and perceived (Lin & Dumin, 1986; Hochstetler et al., 2010). Instrumental support consists of tangible or material items such as financial help, transportation assistance to school/work, and childcare, to name a few. Instrumental support is resource-based and is important for meeting daily needs in an individual's life. Expressive support (also referred to as emotional support) involves having someone to talk with about problems or praise for successes, as examples. This form of support is not necessarily tangible but is important for positive coping nevertheless. Expressive support focuses on connections between people. It is the idea that an individual has somewhere to turn when struggling with any number of challenges. Anecdotally, justice-involved individuals may struggle to receive this type of support due to broken relationships with family members, family trauma, or pervasive emotional emptiness due to years of social isolation and discrimination in family members. Received support seeks to quantify the number of people available for an individual to count on in times of need. This taps into the idea of having a social network and support system, or what may be referred to as social capital. Received support also considers the availability of help in times of need. Just because someone has support does not necessarily mean they receive it when requested. It also considers support at "face value" versus support that is meaningful. There are many instances where people say they will help, but stop short of actually offering support. Finally, perceived support seeks to better understand the quality of the support received as it may vary in importance from one person to the next based on how it is valued. Other ways of considering this are the impact, helpfulness, or effect that support has on someone. It is

entirely possible to have a brief conversation with someone and leave feeling fulfilled, as opposed to having an hours-long discussion where the person seeking support is left empty. Figure 1 provides further clarification on these four types of support.

The current empirical literature exploring social support and the criminal justice system is limited. The theoretical relationship between the two was proposed over 25 years ago by Cullen (1994) and has received an underwhelming amount of attention since then. We believe it is important to better understand how justice-involved groups self-report social support prior to their crime involvement, but this still leaves several questions unanswered. For example, what is the relationship between the two if someone is on community supervision? This study sets out to begin exploring this question.

To accomplish this, we investigate the relationship between social support and the justice-involved for each of the four dimensions among two different groups of individuals. In exploring this question, we developed a working hypothesis for this research:

H1: Respondents will self-report *instrumental* support as the subscale where they receive the most support.

Methods

Study Site

The current study analyzes social support data collected from a survey with individuals who were justice-involved with the Ramsey County (MN) Adult Probation Department.

In 2018, the Ramsey Co. (MN) Adult Probation Department in St. Paul, MN served a population of 18,460 individuals who were justice-involved in some capacity. In this sense, justice-involved refers to individuals who are on some form of community supervision such as "traditional" probation, pretrial diversion,

FIGURE 1.
Conceptualizations and Types of Family Social Support

Conceptualization/Type	Definition	Example
Instrumental	Tangible support including items such as financial aid and childcare help.	Providing transportation assistance to an individual for work/school purposes.
Expressive	Support that comes in the form of listening to an individual's problems and providing possible solutions.	Making eye contact with a person while they are sharing a story and other forms of engaging behavior.
Perceived	An individual's opinion on the <u>quality</u> of support being offered.	While only spending a small amount of time with a spouse, it is an enriching experience.
Received	An individual's opinion on the <u>quantity</u> of support they get.	An individual is able to count on 5 family members for support.

or other suspended sentence. The department also has high-risk units that supervise specialized caseloads for sex crimes and other violent offenses, which were not part of this study. All participants in this study fit into the category of being on a traditional probation caseload.

The Probation Services Center (PSC) is a low contact, high volume unit within the Ramsey Co. Adult Probation Department. The staff use technology to assist them in case management. In keeping with Risk-Need-Responsivity principles, because clients are low- to medium-risk, those who are compliant with the terms and conditions of their probation have little correctional involvement. That is, they are required to report in person to begin their sentence and then mostly report by phone moving forward. At the PSC, clients have minimal in-person contact with an officer unless they enter into noncompliance status. Clients are still required to check in as they are assessed, based on risk level, and report any changes of address, phone number, employment, etc. Otherwise, clients who are having difficulty complying with their conditions have their supervision level increased and are then required to report to an officer until they again become compliant.

The PSC services clients who are assessed as low- to medium-risk on the LS/CMI case management assessment, as well as clients who are assigned to the unit based on type of offense (such as DUI, theft, and drug possession). These offense types are non-violent in nature and may be the only conviction for an individual on an otherwise clean criminal history. Individuals who are supervised at the PSC are required to make monthly calls to their officer and report any changes of address, phone number, work status, and contact with law enforcement. Call-in days are determined by the last name of the client (alphabetical) and remain the same each month. These monthly call-ins continue as the style of supervision unless an individual is determined to be out of compliance. Noncompliance may be due to violating any number of conditions of supervision, including failing to call in. Failing to call in may result in an individual having to physically report to the probation department and call the officer from the phone in the lobby until a time at which the client again comes into compliance.

Data Collection

Researchers collected data from two groups of clients assigned to the PSC. The first group were clients reporting to the PSC for their

initial contact with the department, the PSC Orientation Group. These clients viewed a PowerPoint presentation that provides general information about the PSC and the expectations of supervision. They then meet individually with an officer to enroll in the technology-based reporting program, which allows them to maintain contact and provide updated information. At that time, their conditions of probation are reviewed and services ordered by the court are brokered. The second group included clients who were non-compliant with the terms and/or conditions of their supervision. The nature of their non-compliance varied greatly. Some clients had simply failed to maintain contact and some had serious pending charges that the court had ordered no action on, pending resolution.

On 10 occasions, from March – May, 2019, researchers recruited individuals assigned to report to the Ramsey County, MN, PSC for survey participation. Respondents were recruited for participation with an announcement which was made prior to the clients' meeting with their officer. This took place in a lobby setting of the probation department approximately 10 minutes before they met with their officer. This process applied to both groups of individuals, those appearing for orientation as well as those reporting due to noncompliance. The researchers came to the PSC on specific days/times when both the orientation was being offered and noncompliant clients were reporting. In the lobby setting, a researcher would state before the participation announcement was made that those reporting for either orientation or noncompliance were eligible to participate. In this way, clients did not have to indicate out loud their reason for reporting. Additionally, this sampling methodology was very much one of convenience. Finally, the announcement included a disclaimer that participation was voluntary and participants were free to stop at any point. Those who expressed interest in participating by raising their hands were then provided with a copy of the informed consent document. Individuals were required to sign the informed consent before participating in the survey. Researchers were available during the entire time of survey collection to answer any questions about either the informed consent document or the survey itself. It should be noted that participants were not compensated for participation in the survey, and this was made explicit in the informed consent document. Respondents filled out the pencil and paper surveys in the lobby before proceeding

with their appointment. Participants were told this survey would not interfere with their meeting and they could stop if it was their turn to meet with an officer. Participants were also told that this survey, and their subsequent willingness to participate, would in no way (either positively or negatively) affect their period of supervision. Researchers entered surveys into the statistical package SPSS for analysis. Project approval was obtained from both the sponsoring university institutional review board and the data collection site.

Instrument

The Family Social Support Scale was developed by the researchers and is grounded in social support theory. The survey asked respondents to think back 30 days prior to the offense for which they are currently justice-involved and respond by either disagreeing or agreeing to each of 28 items (0=disagree, 1=agree). It was very important to consider social support pre-offense so the effect of committing a crime did not influence how support was captured. The survey asks respondents to consider social support from "family." There is a supporting paragraph at the beginning of the survey that describes family as, "those who are immediate members such as parents, siblings, grandparents, significant others, and children. If desirable, you may also consider secondary members such as aunts/uncles, cousins, in-laws, and nieces/nephews." While this may be somewhat limiting, the researchers felt it was important to make a decision as to what constitutes family and also be as inclusive as possible. Again, it was important to capture social support prior to offending, because it may allow for a more complete picture of what led someone to come into contact with the criminal justice system in this instance. As a criminogenic factor, better understanding social support during this pre-offense period may help to create a baseline prior to offending and develop a case plan for community corrections practitioners regarding how to increase areas of support that may be lacking.

Scale items seek to measure social support across the four different domains (instrumental, expressive, received, and perceived). Each domain, or subscale as they are referred to in the study, includes seven items, except the Received Subscale, which has six items. There is one item in the Received Subscale which asked respondents to provide a number of individuals in their social network they can count on for support. A sample item from each subscale can be found in Figure 2.

Each subscale mean was created by summing the items in that subscale and dividing by the numbers of respondents. The values in these subscales range from 0-7, where higher scores represent more support and lower scores less support. The Received Support Subscale only has 6 items and ranges from 0-6 as one of the questions asked for the number of persons who may offer support and was not a yes/no response. The scores presented in the descriptive statistics represent means on each subscale for the 80 respondents. Nine of the items in the instrument were reverse coded during analysis to represent the presence of

positive support, similar to the other items.¹

Results

Demographics

In total, 80 individuals completed the Family Social Support Scale. A response rate is not available, as recruitment involved a convenience sample of those individuals in the probation department lobby during data collection. The results present information about the sample and the mean responses to the

¹ For a copy of the full Family Social Support Scale, and the items which were reverse coded, please contact the researchers.

Family Support Scale. First, Table 1 displays a comparison of selected demographic variables between the study sample and that of the Ramsey County, MN, Adult Probation population. Overall, our study sample demographic variables generally reflects the population of Ramsey Co. Adult Probation along age and gender lines. One noteworthy difference emerges regarding the racial makeup of the sample. There is an underrepresentation of African Americans in our study (21 percent) in comparison with the overall population of the clients in the probation department (32 percent). The majority (55 percent) of the respondents in our study identify as Caucasian, whereas only 34 percent of those in the entire county probation population identify as such. Regarding age, 47 percent of the study sample falls within the range 25-34 (majority) and the Ramsey Co. Adult Probation population also sees this as the majority age category at 35 percent. Finally, the majority of respondents in the study sample identify as male at 64 percent and 79 percent of the overall clients in the probation population identifies as this gender. (See Table 1.)

Social Support Subscales

The sections below present our findings based on each of the four subscales.

Instrumental Support

Overall, respondents rate instrumental support at 4.36 (out of 7). Males rate instrumental support greater than females at 5.26 to 4.87. It is possible these results are a product of sampling from a justice-involved population, where tangible support is lacking for any number of reasons (lack of resources, strained relationships, etc.).

Expressive Support

Results overall indicate that respondents self-report expressive support as 6.44 (out of 7). This is important as expressive support may have as great an impact as providing tangible support, and may even have a greater impact. Females rate expressive support greater than males at 5.8 to 5.73. This may be a reflection of females perceiving relationships as more important than any instrumental/tangible support they may receive.

Perceived Support

The Perceived Support Subscale falls in the middle of the four dimension ratings with an overall mean self-report value of 4.58 (out of 7), indicating that justice-involved individuals

FIGURE 2.
The Family Support Scale Sample Item

Subscales from The Family Support Scale with sample items

Subscale	Sample Item
Instrumental Support	I believed family members would provide whatever they could tangibly (i.e., money) to support me.
Expressive Support	A family member acknowledged my problems.
Received Support	I don't believe that my family gave me enough support.*
Perceived Support	I wish family members would be more engaged while offering me support.*

*Note: These items were reverse coded in the dataset to reflect an accurate report of social support.

TABLE 1.
Select Study Demographic Statistics

Selected Study & Demographic Variables, Ramsey Co. (MN) Adult Probation

Variable	Social Support Study*	Ramsey Co. Adult Prob.**
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
African American	21%	32%
Caucasian	55%	34%
Asian	14%	7%
Hispanic	6%	8%
Other	4%	18%
Age (%)		
18-24	18%	16%
25-34	47%	35%
35-44	16%	23%
45-54	11%	16%
55+	8%	10%
Gender (%)		
Male	64%	79%
Female	36%	21%

Notes: *The Social Support Study reflects data collected between March – May, 2019 with a sample size of 80 (n=80).

**The Ramsey Co. data comes from 2018 and reflects a population of 18,460 (N=18,460).

have moderate feelings towards this type of family social support. Caucasian respondents report greater amounts of perceived support than African Americans, at 5.91 to 4.94, respectively. This is nearly a full point difference and may be a reflection of social networks from which respondents are able to draw. That is, if someone reports fewer supports in their network, their perception of those numbers may be lower as well. Males also perceive, over females, greater amounts of social support at 5.61 to 5.16, again, respectively. These results are close in comparison and may reflect only slight differences in how support is perceived.

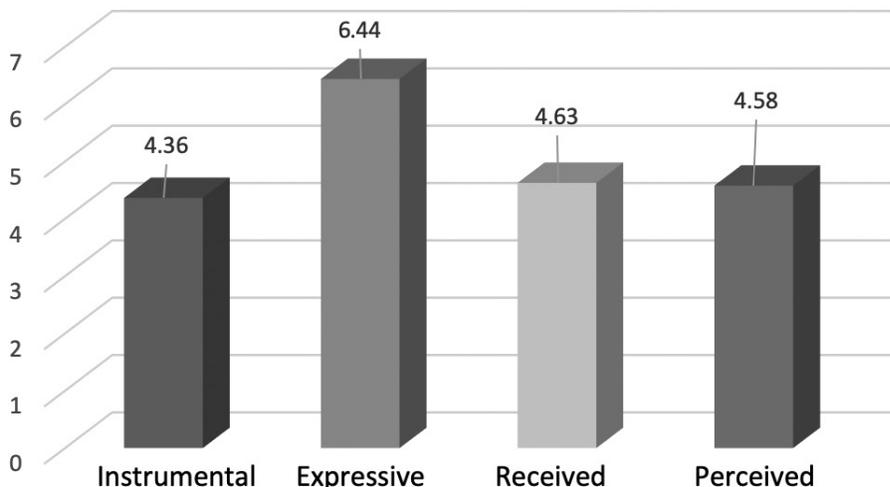
Received Support

Respondents rate overall received support at a mean of 4.63 (out of 6). Again, these results represent moderate feelings towards the amount of support respondents receive. The following results also are found in this subscale: Caucasian respondents report greater amounts of support over African Americans, at 5.09 to 4.61 (respectively), and females report greater amounts of support over males, at 5.0 to 4.8 (respectively). The mean number of social supports in respondents' lives is approximately 4 ($M = 4.15$). As a point of comparison, individuals in a prison setting report a similar number of supports, characterized as visitors, at 4.28 (Bales & Mears, 2008). Figures 3, 4, and 5 below display the average response scores for each social support subscale and comparisons between the different subscales.

Discussion

Our working hypothesis posited that instrumental or tangible/material support would be rated by participants as the greatest type of social support in their lives. This stems from the idea that such support as receiving money from family, a ride to school/work, and someone to watch their children is necessary to function on a daily basis, and thus would be perceived as most important. However, while this type of support may be desired, respondents actually report receiving greater amounts of expressive or emotional support. Expressive support such as having someone to listen to problems and receiving advice is important in and of itself, but also may lead to instrumental support in the future. It may be through building relationships (expressive support) that tangible support emanates. Results from the study overall may point to social support systems as a possible

FIGURE 3.
Social Support Subscales



Notes: These figures represent averages in each subscale for the 80 participants. For the Received Subscale, there were only 6 items whereas all others had 7.

FIGURE 4.
Received vs. Perceived Support

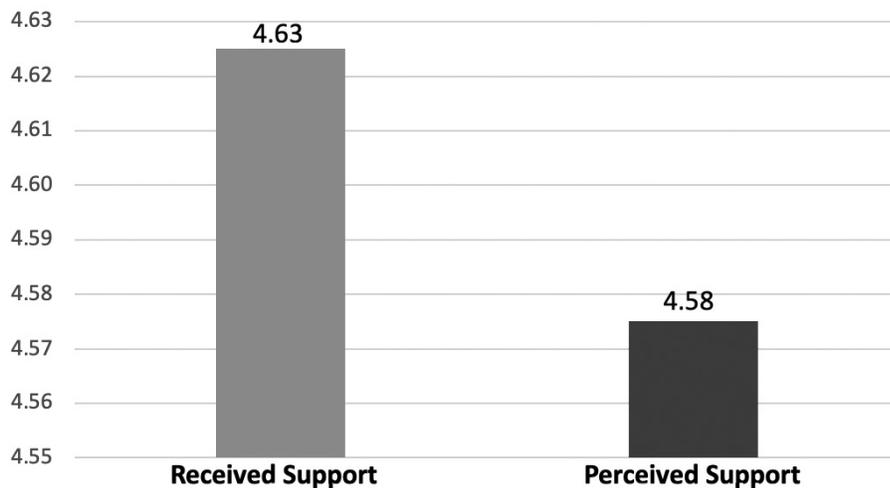
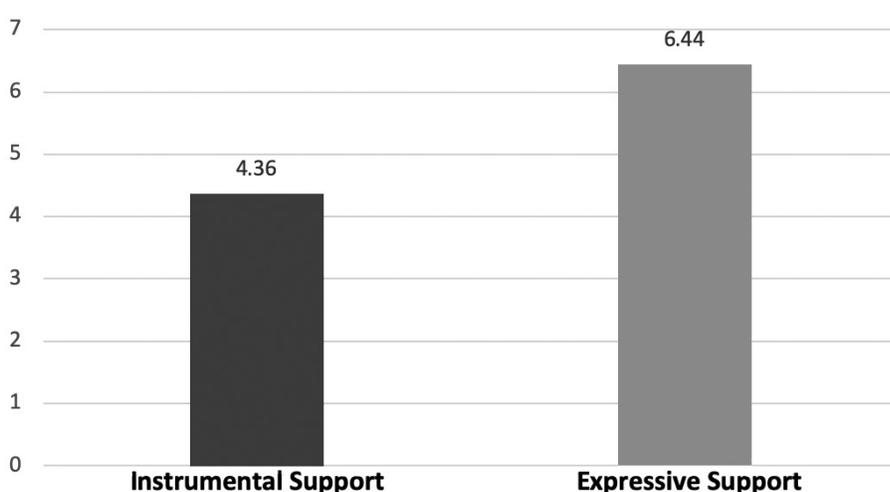


FIGURE 5.
Instrumental vs. Expressive Support



criminogenic protective factor that needs to be further explored. One important finding here is capturing social support pre-crime, which may allow community corrections officers (CCOs) and clients the ability to build a case management plan for both improving and enhancing social support for the future.

CCOs and clients can work towards improving and enhancing expressive support, as this may help build networks for the future. These discussions, which can occur during regularly scheduled contacts such as office visits, could be a focus of the ongoing case management plan and even a way for CCOs to empower clients from the beginning of supervision. Most risk/need tools in community corrections touch on social support in some way. However, social support should be viewed as a dynamic variable, as it is fluid, and CCOs should spend more time addressing this area with clients. It may be helpful to ask clients how they feel expressive support can be improved. This approach would assist clients in thinking about support systems in their lives and how they may be enhanced.

Regarding instrumental support specifically, it may be that some of the respondents are newly introduced to the criminal justice system and have remained fairly independent in life. That is, they have not relied on as much support as those who possibly have been justice-involved previously. This may indicate that those who have been justice-involved for some time have larger social pools to draw from than those just placed on a period of community supervision. It may also be that individuals who are previously justice-involved are "rallied behind" by family.

Regarding perceived support, it is possible this group places an emphasis on relationship value through expressive support instead of an available pool. This could be part of a larger discussion surrounding quality versus quantity of support. For example, what is the perception of spending five minutes in a conversation with a family member versus one hour, if that hour is not productive? That is, there is importance in discussing quality of social support. Quality support may be characterized by active listening, making eye contact during conversation, and being able to recount a conversation. There is also importance in having a social network, no matter the size, that provides rich and substantive support.

Community corrections officers may wish to use some of this as a building block in their work with clients and help them to enhance

support in their lives. It may be worthwhile for officers to focus on these supports as potential protective factors which may insulate clients from future crime involvement. In case management, CCOs could emphasize the importance of clients leaning on these support systems as they navigate their supervision and other life challenges.

Limitations/Future Research

As with all social science research, this study is not without its limitations. First, future research should consider sampling from a medium- to high-risk justice-involved population to compare social support across different risk categories. Because this study comes from a non-probability convenience sample, the results are not generalizable. Future research would benefit from a random design such as stratified random sampling. It would also be worthwhile to conduct a longitudinal study in future research. Collecting data over multiple time points, as opposed to once or cross sectional in nature, is beneficial for several reasons. In this case, it would allow for a better understanding of if/how social support changes over time in a justice-involved individual. Researchers may wish to collect data at "baseline," or prior to offending, and then follow a group that become justice-involved over several points in time. One possibility would be to collect data at baseline and then again after reaching a milestone such as completing a condition of probation. It would also be interesting to conduct a comparison between two groups that are matched along similar demographic variables, with one group being justice-involved and the other not involved with the criminal justice system.

In the race/ethnicity demographic category, one limitation is the option of selecting only one race/ethnicity. Respondents were asked to select the racial/ethnic group they most identify with. While this allows for only one selection, and is certainly a limitation of the study, it is a flaw that the researchers are working to correct in future research opportunities. Understandably, many individuals identify with more than one race/ethnicity, and we seek to accurately represent our samples.

Conclusions/Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications for community corrections. CCOs recognize the importance of social support in the evidence-based world we occupy. To that

end, community corrections agencies should consider employing programs that emphasize building support between justice-involved individuals and their family members. This is a challenging task, as CCOs wear many "hats" and are already spread quite thin. Spending additional time contacting families of clients may prove to be just another one of those hats to wear. Community corrections agencies may wish to designate certain officers for additional training on enhancing family support. This could work similar to other programs such as "Thinking for a Change," where there are designated "trainers." This approach may also signal a culture change in some organizations, which may currently be mostly concerned with enforcement, and instead require a shift toward a more client-centered approach to supervision for the future, particularly for those clients struggling to acquire adequate support.

It would also be advantageous to tailor any programs to the four specific domains of social support to maximize the effectiveness of change: that is, to enhance the support which is already present to best serve these individuals. It may be necessary to educate clients about the importance of support, or having a network to lean on. This may take the form of support groups for clients and their families which are peer lead. Additionally, CCOs can tailor a specific case management plan to enhance the areas of social support that are important to their success. Similar to other criminogenic protective variables, social support is dynamic and does not mean the same for everyone. There is not a "one-size fits all" approach to improving the social support in a person's life. To increase instrumental support, community corrections may wish to partner with social service agencies that can provide such assistance to families as transportation, food, clothing, and childcare. Improving expressive support may best be accomplished by providing programs such as family counseling where communication skills such as active listening and providing constructive feedback are taught. Other topics of importance may include teaching empathy, the effects of enabling, and mitigating the use of co-dependency.

Enhancing received and perceived social support may prove more of a challenge. To increase received support, CCOs may wish to continue encouraging justice-involved individuals to join and participate in such prosocial groups as clubs, athletic teams, faith-based organizations, etc. Many of these

recommendations are already being made based on results of risk-needs assessments, and community corrections officers can continue to emphasize their importance. This would certainly help to increase the numbers in an individual's support system. Finally, perceived social support may be increased by teaching individuals positive coping skills so they may interact constructively with family members when asking for help.

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