Conceptualizing Peer Support to Mitigate the Urban-Rural Divide

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Abstract

The 'urban-rural' divide is often used in research to analyze political, social, cultural, economic, and other differences between urban and rural areas in the United States. There is also an urban-rural divide within criminological research. Most existing research on reentry experiences centers on individuals and programs located in urban areas. Thus, there is a knowledge gap regarding how reentry experiences are impacted by an individual residing in a rural community. Rural inhabitants may have less access to resources, social support, and trauma-informed care than their urban counterparts. They are also more susceptible to trauma and incarceration. There is limited research on the urban-rural divide, trauma, and co-occurring disorders among individuals with criminal justice involvement. However, the available research indicates that rural residents encounter unique barriers to care access and that creative responses are required. Utilizing data from a larger study of reentry in Indiana and Kentucky, we explore the reentry experiences of individuals released to rural counties and those geographically relocated to urban areas by the criminal legal system. Moreover, we explore how peer support can address the gaps in traditional reentry programming. Peer Support is an empirical evidence-based practice that can aid in the recovery from trauma and the surmounting obstacles posed by intersectional identities and the criminal legal system. The article examines the conceptualization of peer support as a means of mitigating the urban-rural divide's effects on individuals battling intersectionality disparities, co-occurring disorders, trauma, and criminal justice system impacts.

Keywords: urban-rural divide, social support, prisoner reentry, co-occurring disorders, criminal justice system, peer support.

Introduction

Rural and urban areas in the United States can be geographically separated by infrastructure and transportation barriers. Physical separation results in differences in rural and urban economics (Accordino, 2019), political ideologies (Lichter & Zaliak, 2017; Brown & Mettler, 2023), access to resources, and cultural views. These differences comprise what scholars refer to as the urban-rural divide. Although scholars debate the extent to which an urban-rural divide exists in political, economic, and cultural contexts (Thomas et al., 2011), within academic research on the criminal legal system there is a clear divide. Although a small group of criminologists have studied rural criminology for decades, historically criminology has treated crime as an urban issue. Thus, "the majority of American criminology (focused on American urban areas and institutions) ignores 97% of the country's land area and 19.3% of the population" (Hollis & Hankhouse, 2019, p. 178). Academic research on reentry post-incarceration follows similar patterns. The most well-cited academic reentry studies utilize predominately urban samples of formerly incarcerated individuals. The present paper seeks to partially address the rural knowledge gap in criminology research. Utilizing data from a larger study of reentry in Indiana and Kentucky, we explore the reentry experiences of individuals released to rural counties and those who were geographically relocated to urban counties by the criminal legal system. Moreover, we explore how peer support can be utilized to address the barriers faced in rural reentry.

Literature Review

Reentry Barriers

A large volume of research examining reentry post-incarceration has emerged in the last twenty years. Studies reveal that released individuals face significant barriers to successful reentry including housing insecurity (Augustine & Kushel, 2022), limited employment opportunities (Pager, 2003), exclusion from educational institutions (Stewart & Uggen, 2020), legal debt (Haney, 2022), and health issues (Fahmy & Wallace, 2018). Despite our growing understanding of reentry barriers, few studies have explored how these barriers are experienced in rural communities. The lack of comparative studies of urban and rural reentry experiences is problematic given the documented cultural, political, and economic differences within the urban-rural divide.

Zajac et al.'s (2013) article "An Examination of Rural Prisoner Reentry Challenges" explored issues and limitations within rural reentry and grapples with why reentry studies have concentrated on metropolitan regions while overlooking the distinctive difficulties encountered by individuals returning to rural communities. Zajac and colleagues assert that successful reentry requires careful pre-release planning, consistent provision of treatment and services, and adherence to principles of successful intervention. These principles include addressing antisocial attitudes and implementing evidence-based programs and community-based aftercare services for behavioral health therapies. Although reentry is a well-discussed subject within corrections, most studies have concentrated on urban environments, resulting in a need for more comprehension of rural reintegration. Given the urban-rural divide, reentry

research and policy would benefit from an examination of reintegrating individuals' experiences in rural areas (Zajac et al., 2013).

Rural communities provide distinct obstacles to reintegration for multiple reasons. Rural locations often lack the extensive range of public and commercial services readily accessible in metropolitan areas, including healthcare, government programs, and other support services (George et al., 2021). Consequently, persons who return to rural areas may require guidance in accessing the critical assistance necessary for reintegration post-incarceration. Due to their economic variety and dependence on specific industries such as farming or tourism, rural towns have limited job prospects and lower salaries (Ward, 2017). The tight-knit structure of rural communities fosters a prominent level of familiarity among people, posing a challenge for returning citizens to preserve anonymity about their criminal history. The absence of anonymity might result in social disapproval and impede reintegration. The absence of anonymity might result in social disapproval and impede reintegration. Rural returnees may encounter difficulties securing steady, high-paying employment, heightening the likelihood of reoffending (Ward & Merlo, 2015). Moreover, rural cultural beliefs, which prioritize family-centered care rather than seeking assistance from other sources, may deter reentering individuals from utilizing the therapy or available programs (Ward, 2017). Individuals who are willing to utilize services often face structural issues that limit their ability to access programming.

The lack of adequate transportation choices in rural locations poses significant challenges for returning individuals seeking employment, participating in treatment programs, and meeting with parole officers, thus impeding their effective reintegration into society (Zajac et al., 2013). Rural returning individuals also encounter difficulties in obtaining housing accommodations because of a scarcity of inexpensive choices and limitations imposed on them based on their criminal record (Leasure et al., 2022). Moreover, high rates of homeownership in rural communities reduce rental unit availability (Wodahl & Feng, 2016). Individuals returning from prisons are often saddled with legal debt (Haney, 2022) including legal judgements rendered while they were incarcerated and thus unable to attend civil court hearings. The resulting low credit score coupled with limited employment options, and an already low inventory of available housing options exacerbates the housing barrier in reentry. Rural counties are less likely to have homeless shelters and transitional housing facilities compared to urban areas (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2006). Thus, a formerly incarcerated individual has fewer housing options in a rural community compared to an urban area. Research indicates that stable housing is essential to reducing recidivism and promoting successful reentry (Metraux & Culhane, 2004).

Existing rural reentry research, although limited, paints a troubling portrait of reentry in a rural context. Rural returnees face all the traditional reentry barriers however, the prevalence or severity of each barrier is amplified with characteristics of rural settings. Individuals struggle to locate employment due to limited vacant positions and lack of access to transportation. The housing barrier in reentry is exacerbated by low inventory, criminal legal debt, and transportation issues. Moreover, the conservative, tough-on-crime views

within rural areas may further hinder individual success by serving to exclude the individual from social institutions. Given these barriers' impact on reentry, there is a need to develop services within rural areas that can assist individuals in overcoming both the social and legal barriers that inhibit successful reentry. A potential policy solution to these barriers is the implementation of peer support through formal mentoring programs.

Peer Support

Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on fundamental principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement on what is helpful. It is characterized by peers—people who have similar life experiences—providing mutuality, knowledge, experience, emotional, social, or practical help to each other. Peer support is an evidence-based approach that has been widely used in various behavioral health fields. It originally evolved from a mutual self-help lens (Beales & Wilson, 2015; Cronise et al., 2022).

Essential to peer support is the interaction of the support provider and support recipient. A typical foundation enables forging unique relations, which are challenging to build in traditional supporting partnerships (Mead & MacNeil, 2006). Peer support aims to foster a sense of empowerment to aid individuals in developing a stronger feeling of self-efficacy and resilience (Cronise et al., 2022). Instead of concentrating on deficiencies, the focus is on positive attributes and competencies. The foundation of peer support relationships is built on the concept of mutuality viewed through reciprocity. Unlike traditional support models where one party assumes the 'superior' helper position while the "helpee" is relegated to a subordinate position (Beales & Wilson, 2015), in Peer Support the hierarchical relationship is removed to allow for mutually beneficial experiences where both parties learn information and valuable strategies for navigating issues and concerns from each other. No power asymmetry exists between peers who do not function within the hierarchy. Moreover, peers appreciate the same courtesy implemented under this egalitarian style of shared experience (Daniels et al., 2012).

The origins of Peer Support can be traced back to the 1930s with the founding of mutual aid groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). These groups emphasize shared experiences and recovery principles, creating a foundation for peer-based support in substance abuse recovery (Laudet, 2008). A.A.'s success underscored the power of mutual support and catalyzed the formation of similar groups (Borkman et al., 2021).

The term peer support originated in the mental health field in the 1970s, evolving from mutual support groups and the consumer movement, which advocated for more patient-driven mental health care (Felner et.al., 2011). Peer Support Services (PSS) have undergone significant transformation since their inception, evolving from informal mutual aid groups to formalized components of mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) treatment. By the late 20th century, there was growing recognition that SUDs were treatable conditions and that traditional treatment models had limitations. This period marked the beginning of integrating PSS into mental health and SUD settings, driven by the understanding that individuals with

lived experiences could provide unique and practical support (Repper & Carter, 2011). The inclusion of PSS began to address treatment gaps left by traditional healthcare models, offering a complementary approach to treatment (Davidson et al., 2006).

The early 21st century saw the formalization of PSS roles and the development of training programs for peer support workers. Formalization was boosted by advocacy efforts to secure funding sources, including Medicaid, to cover PSS (Daniels et al., 2012). Furthermore, PSS was incorporated into diverse settings, including correctional facilities and crisis centers, highlighting PSS's versatility and broad applicability (Chinman et al., 2014). Research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of PSS in improving recovery outcomes, providing reassurance and confidence in this approach (Bagnall et al., 2015; Gidugu et al., 2014; Lennox et al., 2021; Smit et al., 2022). Current PSS efforts focus on expanding access to underserved populations and integrating technology-based delivery methods (Marsch, 2010). Despite these advancements, challenges remain, such as workforce development, supervisor training, and securing sustainable funding (Alberta et al., 2012; Kemp & Henderson, 2012).

Professional/research organizations and government agencies play a crucial role in shaping and supporting the growth of PSS. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) influences healthcare reimbursement policies related to PSS. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) promotes, funds, and establishes national standards for Peers through its recently established Office of Recovery. The Department of Justice (DOJ) collects and analyzes data relevant to PSS, particularly concerning the intersection of behavioral health (Substance Abuse & Mental Health) and the criminal legal system. Over time PSS concepts were adapted to meet the specific needs of individuals in the criminal legal system, recognizing their unique challenges. This adaptation was partly driven by the increasing awareness of the high prevalence of mental health and substance use disorders among incarcerated individuals and the need for more effective reintegration strategies (Desai, 2022).

Justice/Forensic Peer Support

Peer support in the criminal legal system, particularly for behavioral health issues like mental illness and substance use disorders, is a unique form of peer support known as 'Justice or Forensic' peer support. Justice peers, drawing on their firsthand experiences and professional education, help individuals facing similar challenges (Buck, 2020). Combining their lived expertise encompassing the intersection of the behavioral health and criminal legal systems enables justice peers to offer distinct and efficient assistance to those experiencing similar situations (Barrenger et al., 2019). Firsthand knowledge of these two systems allows for wraparound support in navigating the intricacies of rehabilitation and reintegration into society combined with recovery and wellness (Baron, 2011). Moreover, justice peers receive training that provides them with the essential skills to deliver assistance that is empathetic and guided by the elements of trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and targeted approaches for assisting persons during reintegration (Adams & Lincoln, 2020). Justice

peers' diverse functions including emotional support, navigation, practical aid, resources, and advocacy help balance the challenges of reintegration and recovery (Reingle et al., 2019).

Peer Support to Mitigate the Urban-Rural Divide in Reentry Post-Incarceration

Reintegration in rural regions is particularly challenging due to low resource availability, economic constraints, cultural obstacles, transportation deficiencies, and housing difficulties. We posit that peer support, via the inclusion of specially trained "justice" peers who have personal experience with behavioral health disorders and the criminal justice system and who are also members of the community and culture, can be crucial in addressing these difficulties and promoting effective reintegration and lower rates of repeat offenses in rural regions. Moreover, justice peers can alleviate the issues discussed by individuals in our study.

In rural communities, cultural values mirror mainstream ones by placing value on independence and self-help over seeking aid externally. Justice peers can work around these obstacles because of their understanding and training—offering informal and non-clinical support while encouraging access to professional services when necessary (Stacer & Roberts, 2018). For instance, studies have suggested that interventions carried out by culturally competent peers can increase involvement with services and the outcomes achieved through them (Chinman et al., 2014).

Justice Peers can also help address economic hardships during the reentry process by establishing connections and collaborations with employment resources and other supportive entities. Research has shown that peer-led employment initiatives have an impact on improving readiness for work among participants previously deemed unemployable due to several reasons, including incarceration, and having little or no skills required by employers (Pogrebin et al., 2017). Justice peers can further assist by helping individuals locate transportation solutions, such as carpooling arrangements, access to public transportation options, or connecting them with community resources that provide transportation assistance and even providing transportation themselves. This support ensures that returning individuals can attend integral appointments, which is critical for successful reintegration (Berg & Huebner, 2011). Transportation assistance is a critical component of successful reentry programs (Nordberg et al., 2021a). Peers can also advocate for returning individuals, helping them navigate housing issues and concerns while establishing collaborative mechanisms with potential landlords. They can also assist in finding temporary housing solutions and accessing housing assistance programs and other resources (Wodahl, 2006).

Studies indicate that peer support is associated with lower recidivism rates and improved long-term outcomes for reentering individuals (Sells et al., 2020). By providing ongoing support of this kind with lived experience guidance (i.e., I have walked this walk in your shoes – this is what I learned), peers band together with hope for a better future. Peers establish firm bases using their lived experience to model successful reentry that leads to desistance. Recent studies have also highlighted the role of peer support in promoting resilience and reducing criminal behavior (Skeem et al., 2017).

Peer Support is particularly beneficial because justice-involved individuals are often distrustful of individuals within the criminal legal system (Muller & Schrage, 2013) and of traditional care systems (The National Research Council et al., 2014). Peer support uses relatable experiences and the concepts of mutuality to establish trust and connection with those reentering society. Peers can create an understanding atmosphere in which returning citizens feel supported and accepted, which is especially crucial in rural communities where people may attach negative labels more easily. Peer relationships are vital in enhancing confidence and participation rates within reentry programs (Heidemann et al., 2015) and can increase overall life satisfaction (Heidemann et al., 2014).

The present paper seeks to address the literature gaps discussed by Zajac et al. (2013) by exploring the lived experience of individuals reentering society in rural counties in Kentucky and Indiana. Utilizing qualitative interview data and ethnographic data from a larger reentry study, we identify barriers to reentry that are either unique to rural areas or are exacerbated due to unique constraints within rural communities. The paper concludes with our argument for utilizing Peer Support Services to address the issues that arise within traditional approaches to reentry.

Methodology

Data for this paper is derived from a larger multi-year, mixed-methods study of reentry experiences in Kentucky and Southern Indiana (Ortiz & Wrigley, 2022). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals actively engaged with the criminal legal system. Two years of data collection involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals and reentry service providers. A total of forty formal interviews were conducted, thirty with individuals actively in the reentry process and ten with reentry service providers including non-profit organizations, parole officers, and religious groups.

Data Collection

Formerly incarcerated individuals were recruited through multiple means including flyers posted in parole offices, visiting halfway homes, and snowball sampling whereby existing participants recommend subsequent participants. Interviews were scheduled at the individual's convenience and occurred in locations selected by the interviewee. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity. Individuals were compensated for their participation with a $20USD VISA gift card. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged in length with an average length of 68 minutes. Interview questions explored the individual experiences with the criminal legal system, experiences acquiring resources and services, exposure to reentry programming, barriers to successful reentry, and individual opinions of issues within the reentry process. The formerly incarcerated sample included four women and fourteen men with an average age of 38 years. Over two-thirds (78%) of the sample were on community supervision.

Table 1: Formerly Incarcerated Sample

Age	Gender	Race	Months Incarcerated	Form of Supervision
42	Male	White	144	None
31	Male	Black	120	Parole
33	Male	Black	108	Parole
57	Male	White	120	Parole
24	Male	White	36	Parole
26	Female	White	12	None
35	Male	White	36	Parole
50	Male	White	192	Post-Release
53	Male	Black	144	Parole
37	Female	White	13	None
39	Female	White	36	Parole
37	Male	Black	84	None
29	Female	White	24	Parole
41	Male	White	108	Parole
32	Male	White	36	Post-Release
22	Male	Black	19	Post-Release
42	Male	Black	42	Parole
57	Male	White	120	Parole

Service Provider Data Collection

This study utilized a convenience sampling strategy to recruit service providers. Researchers developed a database of 111 organizations and agencies that worked with the formerly incarcerated population. Although we initially sought to interview only reentry organizations, there were so few available organizations that we expanded the inclusion criteria for the database to include all organizations that provided services formerly incarcerated individuals would access (e.g., food pantry, drug treatment centers). We emailed all 111 database entrants and interviewed those who responded. The service provider sample included two defense attorneys, two faith-based organizations, a former parole officer, two drug treatment counselors, and three nonprofit reentry organizations. Service providers were not compensated for their time.

These interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis and line-by-line coding (Saldana, 2012; Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Coding involves the development of words or phrases "that symbolically assign a summative… attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana 2012, p. 2). Thematic analysis involved identifying patterns or groupings of codes to generate broader themes or findings. Throughout the interview analysis phase, we developed an audit trail of our analyses by writing memos explaining how we arrived at each theme. The researchers managed the data within the Atlas Ti qualitative software program, which allowed researchers to search for patterns across interviews.

Interview data was supplemented with over three hundred hours of participant observation data collected in two reentry non-profit organizations (one in Indiana and one in Kentucky) and two local jails (one rural and one urban). Participant observation occurred over a three-year period and including observations made while volunteering with non-profit organizations, providing reentry preparation classes in two jails, participating in faith-based reentry programming, attending regional reentry conferences, and piloting a reentry workbook in a correctional setting. The ethnographic data allows for an in-depth view of reentry processes and experiences within various legal and social contexts. Ethnographic data collection occurred via note-taking during site visits, informal interviews with incarcerated individuals and correctional service providers, and detailed memoing after each site.

Collectively these methods resulted in over five hundred written pages of data. Ethnographic data was triangulated using member checking, which allowed for "reflection, scrutiny, and insights into how results might be best communicated, translated, or implemented" (Urry et al., 2024, p. 357). Member checking entails sharing your research findings with the study participants to check for accuracy in interpretation (Birt et al., 2016). Research memos were shared with participants and reentry service providers to enhance the trustworthiness of the researcher's observations. Memoing and member checking allowed for reflexivity to limit potential bias in interpretation (Erikkson et al., 2012; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The observation data also allowed for triangulation of interview data to ensure the reliability of our findings (Carter et al., 2014).

Given the breadth of data collected during the study, we limit the findings in this paper to issues relevant in reentering society in rural areas. Prior to interviews, researchers completed a demographic data collection form that included home county prior to incarceration and county of incarceration. Utilizing this data, we identified the interviewees who were either (1) released into a rural county or (2) whose home county at the time of arrest was rural based on the Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCCs) for each county. RUCCs is a measure developed by the US Office of Management and Budget to "distinguish U.S. metropolitan (metro) counties by the population size of their metro area, and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties by their degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024). Interviews were excluded if the RUCC was lower than five because a score between one and four indicates a large population and prominent level of urbanization (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024). Eighteen of the thirty formerly incarcerated interviewees met the criteria for inclusion. We included all ten interviews with reentry service providers to assess their perspectives on structural issues within reentry. Inclusion of the service provider interviews allowed us to triangulate the formerly incarcerated interview data. Lastly, we included data from observation memos developed in both jails and both reentry organizations to allow for identification of differences in availability of services, knowledge of services available, and reentry barriers in rural versus urban areas.

Findings

Although the initial focus of this research project was not specifically on rural versus urban differences, these differences emerged in the data organically and inspired the present article. Specifically, our data reveal that individuals from rural communities experience social and economic difficulties that are associated with (1) structural barriers within the criminal legal system, (2) limited reentry services in rural counties, and (3) lack of knowledge regarding reentry services.

Structural Barriers within the Criminal Legal System

A primary theme emerging from the data was the existence of structural barriers within the criminal legal system that hinder individual success post-incarceration. These barriers include being mandated to urban counties, difficulty transferring supervision, and the impact of mandatory programming. Interviewee narratives revealed how these barriers can hinder successful reentry.

A unique issue affecting rural interviewees was their court-mandated release to an urban county. Most of the counties in Kentucky (86 out of 120) have a RUCC score above 5 indicating that Kentucky is a predominately rural state however, most reentry programming is located in Fayette, Jefferson, and Kenton counties, which are home to three major cities in Kentucky. As one reentry provider explained:

> Louisville [Jefferson County] has more halfway houses than any other city [in Kentucky] and that's why they place a lot of people in Louisville. They have some [halfway homes] spread out but there's [nowhere] that compares to Louisville. Lexington [Fayette County] has a few but not as many as Louisville.

Given the concentration of reentry programming in urban areas, individuals who are subject to mandatory programming must reside where that programming is available. Thus, these individuals are removed from any pro-social relationships and bonds they had pre-incarceration. Moreover, three individuals experienced structural limitations and difficulties in transferring their supervision to a home county or state. These geographic limitations of supervision and programming negatively impacted interviewees' reentry experiences and success.

John, a 24-year White male, was originally from Ohio but resided in Lexington, Kentucky at time of arrest. When we interviewed John, he was mandated to a halfway home in Louisville. He was statutorily banned from transferring his parole to his home state of Ohio and he was banned by the courts from returning to Lexington.

> I wanted to go back to Lexington because that's where I was living and that's where I caught my case but at the last minute, I was told I wasn't allowed to go to Lexington because I'm kind of banned for a year and a half until I finish my parole.

When John spoke to his parole officer about transferring his parole to Ohio so that his family could support his reentry process, he was informed by his officer that there was a mandatory waiting period before a transfer could be requested.

> I have to do an interstate compact which takes 30-60 days. I don't think it's something the P.O.s really like to do because it involves multiple states. [The request] would go to the state capital of Ohio, then they would contact the city that my dad lives in. Then the local [parole] office would determine if that is the right fit for me. It's a long process and even so I have to stay [at this halfway home] for 4 months before I can submit the paperwork.

The geographical displacement described by John may have implications for successful reentry. Individuals may be unable to achieve the conditions of their post-release supervision because they struggle navigating their new geographic location. Tyler, a 26-year-old White male, explained his struggle with transportation following his release to Louisville.

> [During] the first 10 days I was out I went to Walmart. Again, you're taking a bus, [I]
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> never been on a bus till I was released from prison, that was two days before Christmas. You know how many people travel on bus two days before Christmas? And I'm like "oh my gosh." But they [halfway home] don't really help you out with the routes. I kind of got lucky. I met some people on the bus. I said, "hey I'm going to Walmart." They said, "Just tell the bus driver she will wave you when you get up there." She [the bus driver] could've drove 22 hours and I could've seen 10 Walmart's and never got off you, know?

Tyler's account of his difficulties navigating public transportation may be representative of other recently released individuals' experiences. Individuals reentering society often do not have access to a car and are dependent on public transportation (Nordberg, et. al., 2021b). However, rural individuals may have little to no experience with public transportation because 96% of rural residents own an automobile (Wang et al., 2023), which placed rural returnees at a disadvantage when navigating reentry in the urban context. Nathan, a 22-year Black male, offers an example of how difficulties utilizing the urban public transportation system hinders an individuals' ability to meet requirements of their release, including remaining within strict time limits mandated by the criminal legal system and acquiring the resources necessary to meet parole obligations (e.g., maintaining employment).

> When I got my job, I was wearing prison shoes, which are terrible on your feet. I finally couldn't take it, and I told the guy [halfway home director] I needed to go to Cabela's because they have boots. I said, "I need a 5-hour pass to get to Cabela's". I put in for it, typed out the address, put in 5 hours—he [halfway house director] emailed me back and gave me 3 hours. So, Cabela's is further out [of the area]. I took a bus and I was able to be in Cabela's for 17 minutes before I had to turn around and get back on the bus to make it home. Needless to say, I did not get boots that day.

Issues with transportation are further complicated when the individual has no income and is unable to afford public transportation necessary to attend mandatory programming.

Mandatory reentry programming, whether ordered by the courts or a supervision officer, exacerbates geographical displacement. Individuals are often mandated to attend programming (e.g., anger management) that is also concentrated in predominantly urban areas. Interviewees discussed being mandated to for-profit reentry programs that existed outside of their home counties due to limited availability of services in rural counties. Thus, in states like Kentucky and Indiana, recently released individuals may be mandated to urban areas far from their social support systems, which may increase likelihood of recidivism or other negative reentry outcomes. Research suggests that individuals who have strong positive social support systems are more likely to experience positive outcomes post-release (Abling-Judge, 2021; Chouhy et al., 2020; Fahmy & Wallace, 2019). Moreover, strong positive social bonds can lead to desistance from criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Reentry Services in Rural Counties

Two significant issues emerged regarding reentry services in rural counties, minimal available programming, and lack of access to information about reentry services. As previously mentioned, reentry services are scarce in rural counties, which leads the Department of Corrections to release individuals to large urban counties. However, in rural areas there are often faith-based treatment programs. Angel, a 50-year-old White male, experienced reentry in a large urban city and most recently was released to a transitional housing facility in a rural county. In his narrative, Angel explains the differences in his experience trying to locate employment in urban versus rural areas.

> In a city the size of Indianapolis they have places like warehouses, landscaping places, construction where you could go, and they would fit you in [give you a job with a record]. You know here [the rural county] there's nothing. I don't know where to go but I gotta have a job soon. I walked to Taco Bell, gas station, McDonalds, and nothing [no job offer]. There should be lists that [the program] should give you, there's nothing like that so it's frustrating.

The lack of assistance provided to Angel coupled with a lack of transportation and minimal vacant positions within walking distance, make it nearly impossible for him to locate employment on his own. Angel would benefit from assistance locating employment and reliable transportation, a service not offered by the transitional housing facility, despite charging Angel a monthly fee to remain in the program.

The lack of programming and information in rural counties is exacerbated by rural jails that provide little to no preparation for reentry.

> They need AA in [rural jail] desperately, they need program dorms in [rural jail]. They need a detox unit and a detox protocol for the people coming off of heroin

because it's such an epidemic, people have died off it… no parenting classes in [rural] County, no education. There's no opportunity there. (Donald, 41-year-old White man)

Participant observation notes further reveal the disparity in availability of services in rural versus urban jails. The urban jail in this study contained two treatment units consisting of over a dozen jail pods that provided daily programming ranging from life skills classes to cognitive behavioral therapy. Conversely, rural jail programming consisted of a faith-based group providing bible services and a General Equivalency Diploma program offered by volunteers. Services within rural jails were dependent on religious groups and volunteers who were often ill-equipped to provide services. Joshua, a 37-year-old Black man, discussed his struggles preparing for release reentering society from the rural jail.

> There's people in prison ministry, in churches that I was able to get contact information while I was there [in jail] that I could contact him when I was out, but it was never anything that was facilitated by a class. That was on me to know that I needed some people in my corner when I get out to support me and use those steps to form relationships, that is what helped me.

Here we see that the religious services, while well-intentioned, did not provide the information, training, or resources necessary to manage the reentry process. Jeremy, a 32-year-old White male, explained how the GED class was beneficial in prison, but he lacked the information necessary to complete his GED post-release.

> No, in jail you can sign up for GED classes and that lady helped me a lot but since I
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> got out, no. I really don't even know where to start. I started there [in jail] and I passed the social studies and math part but now I don't know there's not a lot of help in education.

> Moreover, the court systems designed to assist specialized populations fail to provide information for individuals to succeed post-release. Regina, a 29-year-old White woman residing in a sober living facility, explained her experience with a drug court in rural Indiana.

> The drug court gives you some kind of hints on places you can look [for work], but not really full out help with a job. When I first got out, I didn't know if I wanted to come stay here [sober living facility]. I felt like I needed longer term treatment, so I was going to go to a halfway house. I went to the halfway house and the girls there are the ones who helped me get my job through a temporary service.

Regina's narrative illustrates the value of peer support. Were it not for the women in the halfway house, Regina would have struggled to find employment because she was not provided with adequate information from the criminal legal system. Although theoretically community supervision should assist with reentry by providing information and access to resources, in practice parole and probation are merely supervisory in nature. As one service provider explained:

> I was one of those [parole officers] that took that time and listened to them [parolees] and talked to them like a human being. I mean so many [officers] don't. So many of them are "get in, check the list, do the drug test." You can't do fifteen-minute appointments. They're [the parolee] not heard and you're not helping. If the first thing you experience [when you are released from prison] is an officer not taking the time to talk to you, how would you feel?

This narrative suggests that existing criminal legal mechanisms within rural areas may be inadequate to assist in successful reentry.

Lack of Available Information

The lack of available information regarding reentry services in the rural regions included in our study became evident when attempting to interview reentry service providers. To recruit providers for our interviews, we developed a reentry service-provider database using publicly available information on existing government websites and resources packets provided to the formerly incarcerated. Unlike larger cities where there exists large reentry organizations and a range of available services, our search revealed few, if any, reentry-specific organizations or offices in most Kentucky and Indiana counties. Thus, we were forced to expand the scope of our database to include all organizations that allow the formerly incarcerated access to services (Ortiz & Wrigley, 2022), which resulted in a database that consisted primarily of faith-based organizations (65% of all providers) including churches with food pantries and closets that were regularly utilized by formerly incarcerated individuals. While it is possible that we missed some available services, if we struggled to locate them despite our academic research training, we could extrapolate that formerly incarcerated individuals would also be unable to locate those services given the lack of available information.

All eighteen interviewees indicated they had limited knowledge regarding reentry processes and available services. Individuals released to rural communities received little to no instruction on how to proceed in the first several days post-release. The rural jail provided released individuals with a tri fold handout that explained potential psychological concerns including anxiety and fear when reentering society from jail. The handout contained the phone number for the National Suicide Hotline and the Veterans' Crisis Line but no information for local resources. Beyond this handout, released individuals did not receive any information regarding preparing for release, supervision, or obtaining essentials (e.g., clothing, food). Even at the state prisons where reentry services and information are more readily available, individuals from rural counties were at a disadvantage. Charles, a 41-year-old White man, explained how reentry information remained limited for individuals releasing to rural areas.

> I knew I was coming to Western Kentucky so I'd look up West Kentucky area [on the prison kiosk] and jobs would be maybe 3 or 4 truck driving schools and a carpentry school, and a few [crappy] jobs. My ex-wife lives in Springfield still and I had talked to her a couple of times asking, "see if you can get me an application sent in here."

> She called one job and it was gone. She called another and the guy said "they're probably just not taking them down" [off the kiosk].

Seven of the eighteen interviewees mentioned receiving outdated information including via the Department of Correction's website. Despite their frustrations with missing or incorrect information, nearly all (15 out of 18) interviewees expressed a desire for more information regarding successful reentry.

> I'd probably have like a laundry list of numbers you could call to either could be like clinics or social security office or the department of transportation, just a laundry list of things you could give someone to provide that information because everyone when they get out they are going to need some sort of ID or maybe get a social security card. If they don't get it while they are in prison before they make parole or health insurance or something like that, that's what I would mostly aim at. (Janet, 26-year-olds, White)

Comparatively, individuals in the urban jail met with a case manager 7-14 days prior to release to discuss their reentry and were provided with a handout containing information regarding obtaining a state ID, accessing food banks, and directions from the jail to two non-profit organizations that can assist with access to basic needs. However, it is important to note that the services at the urban jail were woefully inadequate. As one interviewee explained, "This paper is good but where do I go the minute I get out here? What am I supposed to do first?" This quote suggests that merely providing information is inadequate, especially when you consider how transportation and other barriers are exacerbated for rural returnees when public transportation is limited or non-existent. Additionally, information must be provided to individuals well before their pending release date. A seven-to-fourteen-day window is insufficient to properly prepare for reentry and ensure continuity of care. One community service provider explained the importance of providing prosocial support and continuity of care.

> I visit them [program applicants] while they're inside [jail]... If accepted into the program, I pick them up the day they're released, with clean clothes. I drive them straight here [program site] so there's no chance for temptation or stupidity. They meet the guys [other participants] and realize that people care about them, that we're here to help.

This service provider works directly with the local jail to recruit substance addicted individuals for his program. In addition to certifications and academic credentials, this service provider has 10 years of sobriety, which lends credibility to the program because he is a peer (Matthews, 2021) who provides social support that is crucial in the reentry and desistance processes (Choucky et al., 2020; Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014). However, individuals who were not participants in the program and released from the rural jail faced significant barriers immediately upon release. Jail staff released these individuals in the early morning hours without means of transportation, food, or appropriate clothing. One respondent "walked miles to [his] mom's house" in the winter leaving him exposed to the elements. Research

indicated that individuals struggle to remain sober during the first 24-48 hours of post-release (Hoffman et al., 2023; Jamin et al., 2021). Thus, releasing an individual without guidance or assistance may contribute to relapse during the critical initial days post-release.

Social and political views further limit the availability of reentry services in rural areas. Rural communities tend to hold more conservative political views (Gimpel et al., 2020) that lead them to adopt tough-on-crime stances. One service provider explained his frustration with the rural community's views of the formerly incarcerated:

> If I purchase a piece of property and I choose to rent it out by the week to individuals, do I need to have a special permit to do that? I mean I don't think you do. But if I label it a transitional living home woah oh oh oh hold on. (laughter) So maybe we just need to have people buy houses in locations and set 'em up and not call 'em transitional living homes. Call 'em boarding houses. Basically, a transitional living home is a boarding house or hostel.

This narrative reveals how social stigma is attached to facilities or programs that cater specifically to the formerly incarcerated. Consequently, elected sheriffs are reluctant or unwilling to implement programming in jails that may appear "soft-on-crime." When sheriffs do attempt to implement reentry programming, they are often met with public anger regarding how tax dollars are allocated and/or where reentry programming is located. This process was evident when the rural jail commander in this study developed a partnership with a local business to convert a donated property into a formal work-release training program for men in the jail with less than 30 days on their sentence. The four-week program proposed to provide formal training on machine operations that would allow the men to transition to a full-time position at the company upon program completion. Despite the research to support their idea, a formal proposal, and no cost to the county, residents of the county attended the public hearing regarding rezoning the donated property and expressed Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) politics to argue against the rezoning (McAvoy, 1998). The Zoning Board denied the rezoning petition thus, canceling the proposed program. Despite public sentiments in the rural community, one service provider interviewee operated a transitional housing facility in a rural county.

> We have a pretty good place in [rural county], but the only reason they [the program founders] were able to open that is because it used to be a crack house. So, the community felt well it's a crack house or transitional housing. They would rather have transitional housing.

Despite strong conservative beliefs in this rural county, the community supported this facility because it replaced a blight in the community. If the community views the reentry organization or service as addressing an ongoing problem that impacts everyone in the community, they may be more receptive to innovative programs.

The Potential for Peer Support in Rural Kentucky

Although the NIMBY mindset exists in some rural areas, participant observation also revealed the potential for peer support services in rural areas. Over one hundred hours of participant observation occurred within the non-profit organization *Mission Behind Bars and Beyond* (MB3), which utilizes the Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) model of reentry (The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2017) to provide mentoring to formerly incarcerated individuals reentering society in Kentucky. The program coordinator, a retired Reentry Coordinator for the Bureau of Prisons,' matched each participant ("core member") with 3 to 5 volunteer mentors who met with the core member weekly to develop goals, locate resources, and provide other assistance (e.g., a car ride to parole meeting). Moreover, mentors connected core members with existing professional service providers that can assist with achieving their stated goals. For example, if an individual needed a cell phone as a condition of their parole the volunteers would help them locate free cell phone programs or assist them in understanding how to purchase a cell phone and utilize it.

MB3 volunteers were required to complete an 8-hour in-person training where they were taught the basics of restorative justice, the qualities of a good mentor, the rules regarding mentor-mentee relationships and boundaries, and information regarding the immediate needs of individuals released from incarceration. Observations of six training sessions and a review of the training manual developed by program coordinators indicated that the non-profit organization is utilizing an evidence-based humanizing model of reentry. Moreover, some MB3 volunteers had lived experience with the criminal legal system, which often motivated their desire to volunteer. Researcher participation in CoSA meetings revealed the power of this peer-support. Program volunteers were often viewed favorably by criminal justice officials because of their lived experience and positive transformation, which helped ease the core member's experiences during parole meetings and court hearings. During a parole visit observation, researchers observed the power of peer support. A formerly incarcerated program volunteer who now worked in the mental health field accompanied a core-member to their parole meeting. The volunteer introduced herself to the core member's parole officer and explained her role with the organization. The parole officer thanked the volunteer for their work and offered their cell phone number in case the volunteer wanted to communicate the core member's progress in the program. After the parole meeting, the core member thanked the volunteer and stated "that's the nicest parole meeting I've ever had" indicating that the volunteer's presence and/or conversation may have altered how the parole officer treated the core member.

While MB3 offers a glimpse at the potential benefits of Peer Support, this organization was also limited by the urban-rural divide because most volunteers resided in the three largest Kentucky counties. A Strengthens, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of MB3 conducted by its Executive Board revealed a need to expand services to more rural communities. The organization developed an online mentor training with built-in assessments, which allowed them to offer training in any of the 120 Kentucky counties. Although the training had the potential to expand services to rural counties, MB3's

expansion was hindered by the 2020 global pandemic, which caused volunteer numbers and donations to plummet. However, MB3 continues to operate and provides us with a model of how peer support could be implemented in rural counties if given proper financial resources and a formalized training program.

Discussion

Although reentry post-incarceration is an arduous process for all released individuals, the data presented in this paper suggests that reentry issues may be exacerbated in the rural context. Interviews and participant observation in reentry organizations reveal structural barriers within the criminal legal system, a lack of reentry services in rural areas, a lack of available information, and transportation barriers to reentry. Collectively, these issues contribute to individual's inability to be successful post-incarceration.

Given the identified barriers in rural areas and ongoing fiscal concerns in the criminal legal system, we posit that some of the issues identified in our study can be addressed through the implementation of peer mentorship programs. Individuals released from incarceration would benefit from a person(s) to guide them during their initial reentry stage (3-6 months) and provide vital information about services as well as assisting with sobriety.

Justice Peers may offer an opportunity for the criminal legal system to address the urban-rural divide in reentry by connecting formerly incarcerated individuals with trained individuals who have experience navigating the reentry process. Justice Peers function as role models and mentors, demonstrating that coupling recovery and successful reintegration is possible, which is particularly impactful in rural areas where support systems may be limited. Peer mentorship can enhance reentry outcomes, promote positive behavioral changes, and provide emotional support (Stacer & Roberts, 2018). Research indicates that mentorship can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and improve mental health outcomes (Berg & Huebner, 2011). Interviewees in this study also spoke about how peer support, although informal, benefits them during their reentry process.

> Being around other people who have been in jail has helped and being around other addicts that are trying to do something different means a lot. I think if I don't go to my NA and AA, it would have been a lot worse, I think I would have fell right back into the same old thing (Janet, 26-year-old, White female)

By offering guidance and sharing their recovery stories, peers inspire hope and motivation among returning individuals.

Peer Support can assist both individuals from rural areas who are released to urban communities and those who return to their home counties. PSS can help to address the social stigma experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals in rural communities. The relative closeness and familiarity of rural communities coupled with conservative views of criminality can lead to stigmatization of returning individuals and prevent them from inclusion in the community. Advocacy-minded peers, through their lived experiences, can

advocate for a broader, more welcoming culture within communities. They can also expose reentry difficulties and model for members of these societies the need for support and navigational aids to overcome them (Stacer & Roberts, 2018). Peer-led initiatives are helpful in increasing community awareness and reducing discrimination (Rowe et al., 2007). Although peer programs have not been utilized in rural areas, existing research suggest that peers impact reentry outcomes in rural areas. Stanton et al. (2019) found the engagement with pro-social peers significantly reduced likelihood of rearrest among women in the Appalachian region of the United States.

Issues surrounding lack of information about programming, difficulties with transportation, and locating employment can also be alleviated using peer support. Reentry involves navigating complex systems such as healthcare, housing, employment, and legal services. Justice peers, equipped with specialized training, can assist individuals in understanding and successfully accessing these resources (Kjellstrand et al., 2021). Peers effectively bridge the gap between returning individuals and the needed vital support systems, ensuring continuity of care and services post-release. Evidence shows that peer navigators can significantly improve access to care and resource utilization (Bassuk et al., 2016). This guidance is crucial in rural areas where services are often dispersed widely or not completely available - making them harder to access.

Peers can play a pivotal role in addressing the unique challenges of rural reentry. Their shared experiences, mentorship, and specialized knowledge enable them to provide crucial support, navigate complex systems, reduce stigma, and advocate for returning individuals. Implementing justice peer support programs tailored to rural communities can significantly enhance reentry outcomes and reduce recidivism, ultimately bridging the urban-rural divide in reentry success.

Suggestions for Future Research

The present study provides a qualitative analysis of one region of the country. Future research should explore other rural regions of the country to determine the transferability of our findings. Our understanding of rural reentry would benefit from the development of an inventory of rural reentry services to assess their overall availability. Moreover, future research should examine the role of peer support in rural areas utilizing longitudinal mixed methodologies to thoroughly assess the impact of peer support on different measures of reentry success (e.g., housing, sobriety). Most beneficial to our understanding of the potential for peer support to mitigate rural reentry issues would be to pilot an existing Justice Peer Support model in a rural community to determine its applicability and feasibility in a rural context.

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