

**“It’s a Double-Edged Sword”:  
Proximal Affinity in Relationships Between Rural Parole Officers  
and Parolees**

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### Abstract

Rural parole officers and people under their parole supervision indisputably face major challenges as they jointly navigate reentry. Such challenges include obtaining employment, accessing substance use and mental health treatment services, and navigating felony-related stigma. Utilizing 120 interviews conducted with parole officers and people on parole in Wyoming, we argue that proximal affinity – the degree to which individuals relate to and empathize with others based on their perceptions of one another as potential or actual neighbors in community – directly impacts the parole supervision relationship and, when exercised positively, may even help to explain why, despite rural areas' extremely limited or even nonexistent numbers of reentry services, rural people on parole recidivate less often their peers in more populous areas.

**Keywords:** parole; proximal affinity; reentry; rural criminology

## Introduction

[Despite the lack of social services in our small town], I think it almost makes it better that the community's smaller, because we get to personally know the providers. Generally, all the people on parole or probation with me all know their counselors by name. I can get ahold of them by phone, email, basically whenever. I think that makes a huge difference that we have a smaller pool, but at the same time if they [parolees] burn a bridge it's one less out of a small pool they get to work with. It's a double-edged sword (Wyoming parole officer).

The rural parole supervision relationship is directly informed by significant challenges facing people on parole, including with employment (Stone et al., 2018), substance use and mental health treatment services (Schalkoff et al., 2020) and navigating the stigma of a felony conviction (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014). The present study triangulates results from 120 interviews conducted with parole officers and people on parole in Wyoming, the lowest population density U.S. state (U.S. Bureau of Land Management, 2018), with literature on parole supervision relationships and rural reentry challenges to introduce the concept of proximal affinity. We argue that proximal affinity – the degree to which individuals relate to and empathize with others based on their perceptions of one another as potential or actual neighbors – directly impacts the parole supervision relationship and may even help to explain why, despite rural areas' extremely limited or even nonexistent numbers of reentry services, rural people on parole recidivate less often their peers in more populous areas.

## Literature Review

The present study introduces proximal affinity, which can be simultaneously regarded as a theory (by providing a lens through which to conceptualize rural parole officer-parolee relationships), an ideology (by explaining the unique nature of rural parole supervision), and, when utilized in a positive manner, an intervention (by providing a model for parole officers in all communities). Proximal affinity unites and builds on two primary bodies of literature—parole supervision relationships and rural reentry challenges— to offer a new contribution to existing literature on rural reentry.

## Parole Supervision Relationships

Studies of parole supervision relationships emphasize the significant challenges accompanying this unique dyadic relationship, in which officers' mandates involve both supporting and sanctioning offenders on their caseload. Parole officers are edgeworkers in the sense that their jobs require them to engage in risk-taking because of the inherent instability in the political and organizational structures that shape their work with individual offenders under

their supervision (Worrall & Mawby, 2013). Parole officers' discretionary authority to revoke parole is a core aspect of their work with offenders, and officer decision-making to consider an offender for revocation or direct the offender to community resources that can reduce their likelihood of recidivism significantly influences an offender's likelihood of returning to prison (Osterman & Hyatt, 2022).

The quality of the parole officer-parolee relationship directly impacts recidivism, as parolees who have a negative relationship with their parole officers are more likely to recidivate while the opposite is true for those who have a positive relationship (Chamberlain et al., 2018). Parole officers, friends, and family are all significant social supports for people recently released from prison, and higher support levels correlate with reduced odds of reincarceration, although professional support from parole officers, such as in the form of providing complete and accurate information, plays a greater role in reducing reincarceration than interpersonal support such as showing empathy (Bares & Mowen, 2020). For juvenile female offenders, the interpersonal quality of their relationships with parole officers significantly reduced instances of violent recidivism for those with limited parental support, although relationship quality had no impact on violent recidivism for those with high parental support (Vidal et al., 2015).

The stressful nature of the supervision relationship can also negatively impact people on parole. For women on parole, high rates of anxiety, reactance, and recidivism have an indirect association with an unsupportive, punitive parole officer/parolee relationship whereas parole officer relationship style, supervision intensity, and attention to criminogenic needs appear to have no direct impact on women's subsequent arrests and convictions (Morash et al., 2016). A six-site randomized clinical trial that assigned parolees to either traditional supervision or a parole officer-therapist-client collaborative intervention aimed at improving relationship quality found that parolees in the latter group perceived better relationships with their parole officers and had fewer instances of drug use and parole violations (Blasko et al., 2015). A social work study of former prisoners' anxiety levels as they prepared to meet their parole officers for the first time in Philadelphia found that individuals with higher anxiety prior to the initial meeting subsequently felt limited therapeutic alliance, less truthfulness, and limited confidence in their parole officers' intentions to work on their behalf (Cnaan & Woida, 2020). A Canadian study of additional stress that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic found this stress resulted from changes to work-life boundaries, routines, and workload, decarceration, and reduced abilities to interact with clients while attempting support and supervision (Norman et al., 2021).

The stresses associated with the supervision relationship challenges can also take a significant emotional toll on parole officers. Parole officers with higher caseloads have significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms related to their emotional exhaustion, and these levels are unmitigated by mental health training or mental health services available to individuals under supervision (Gayman et al., 2017). A study examining organizational pressures

and personal values among English parole officers supervising women found officers struggling to balance aspects of women offenders' lives related to their offending with those related to their victimization, including victimization by traumatizing aspects of the criminal justice system (Goldhill, 2019). Parole officers in Ontario, Canada experienced operational stressors in the form of secondary trauma through exposure to psychologically traumatic events and organizational stressors such as overwhelming administrative tasks, insufficient human resources, and tensions between coworkers, resulting in mental health strains that compromise their abilities to supervise their caseload (Norman & Ricciardelli, 2021). Such high stress levels can easily spill over into parole officers' family lives work due to both desensitization that can accompany the work and its community-based nature, which can result in officers envisioning both harms that could befall their own families due to offenders' presence in the community and the positive transformations that could occur in offenders' lives (Westaby et al., 2016).

The small but robust body of work on relationships between parole officers and parolees frequently explores the emotional dynamics of supervision, yet stops just short of examining how the particularities of culture and place intersect with these dynamics. This lacuna is compounded by the reality that little is known about how rural parole officers – who are highly likely to routinely encounter people under their parole supervision in social situations – experience their jobs. Proximal affinity offers insights into these dynamics, which are inherently embedded in their geographical and cultural contexts, in its focus on how parole officers' and parolees' respective perceptions of their shared social bonds impacts the nature of the supervision relationship.

### **Rural Reentry Challenges**

Finding and keeping employment (Stone et al., 2018) and housing (Bowman & Ely 2020), substance use and mental health treatment services (Schalkoff et al., 2020) and navigating the stigma of a felony conviction (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014) all present challenges for rural people on parole. These challenges are not confined exclusively to people on parole following their release from prison, as research indicates individuals released from jail into community also struggle with many similar issues, including mental health treatment access (Ward, 2017; Ward & Merlo, 2016). Limited work opportunities in rural areas result in high rates of unemployment or underemployment for all rural residents, a situation which is even worse for women because many rural mothers live in poverty and earn half of their male peers' income (Smith, 2017). The tightly interwoven social fabric which characterizes most rural communities and can serve as a support system for some, but it can also function as a form of social control by promoting expectations, such as financial independence and self-sufficiency which many people on parole find it difficult to meet due to problems with transportation and a lack of rural programming to address criminogenic needs (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Zajac et al., 2014; Wodahl, 2006).

The stigma of a felony conviction is a reality for many people following their release from prison (LeBel, 2012). This stigma may be heightened for some rural people on parole due to widespread public knowledge of their crimes in small towns and dispersed rural areas with very low crime rates (Dewey et al. 2019). Such stigma is further complicated by the reality that substance use treatment services are often lacking even in rural areas with high rates of drug use and overdose-related mortality (Schalkoff et al., 2020). Nationwide, rural substance users are much less likely to be able to access opioid treatment relative to their urban peers (Amiri et al., 2021). Rural people are also more likely to avoid mental health treatment, even when it is available, due to rural culture's general mistrust of state authority and high value associated with stoicism (Cheesmond et al., 2019). Yet these challenges, which are in some respects more significant than those facing people on parole in urban or suburban areas, do not result in comparable recidivism rates.

We argue that proximal affinity—the degree to which individuals relate to and empathize with others based on their perceptions of one another as potential or actual neighbors in community – can positively operationalize in parole supervision relationships – and likely within other relationships governed by the criminal justice system as well – by producing more supportive, empathic relationships between parole officers and people under their supervision. Parole officers and parolees who envision themselves as part of a community with shared values and goals are more likely to be jointly invested in meaningful community reintegration, defined by locating (and keeping) employment, housing, positive relationships, and other measures of reentry success. Proximal affinity can also negatively operationalize in rural community scenarios where gossip, stigma, and other forms of social control may compromise both parole officers' abilities to empathize with parolees and parolees' abilities to envision a positive future for themselves. Despite its great potential to build supportive supervision relationships, proximal affinity truly remains, as one Wyoming parole officer put it, “a double-edged sword” characteristics of rural reentry.

### Methods

Results presented here derive from 74 interviews with people on parole and 46 interviews with parole officers which the third author conducted during a summer she spent driving between the places where every parole office in Wyoming. Much of Wyoming is classified as “frontier” (BLM, 2018) due to its extremely low population density, thousands of acres of open space, and general remoteness, all of which combine to make residents of the state refer to it as “a small town with long roads.” Wyoming is so rural there are no escalators in the entire state, it is routine for people to call the Governor to ask for advice (and receive it, either in person or by phone, directly from the Governor), and the entirety of the prison population is just 2,400, a number smaller than most urban county jails.

The third author spent approximately three days in each location to interview parole officers about their jobs and speak with people on parole about their experiences prior to, during, and after their release from prison. All people on parole received a flyer from their parole officer with her contact information, including her personal cell phone number, and contacted her independently to either meet in person or speak by phone although, following cultural norms in the Mountain West, most preferred to talk face-to-face due to what they regarded as the seriousness of the subject matter.

Conducting interviews at parole offices was convenient for participants because these offices provided a private office, which otherwise would have been impossible in some of the remote areas to which the third author traveled. Wyoming's unique geographical and cultural environment leads many of its residents to describe the state as "a small town with long roads" due to its population of less than half a million people dispersed across a rugged mountain landscape. This unique environment directly informed candor during the interviews, as all 120 participants stated their discussions with the third author were an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives directly with the Wyoming Department of Corrections, where the third author held a staff badge due to her work as founder and director of a college in prison program.

The third author used a community-based participatory approach in designing the interview guide in consultation with currently and formerly incarcerated people, and Wyoming Department of Corrections staff. The guide featured three primary sections on life before, during, and after prison to maximize participants' abilities to direct the course of the interview per their own preferences and concerns, and gender infused all aspects of these discussions. The first section, which discussed life prior to incarceration, asked participants about their hometown, a typical day, how they made choices about who to interact with, who they avoided, their aspirations for the future, means of financial support, education and training, and anything they would change about the past. The second, which focused on life in prison, asked participants to describe a typical day in prison, what they had in common with their peers in prison, who they sought out (or avoided) for advice, classes and programs they completed (as well as those they wish they could have completed), and how they would change the institution if they became the warden. The third, life outside, asked participants to describe a typical day around the time of the interview, how they made choices about where to live and who to spend their time with, their job and relationships with others, any concerns about their likelihood of returning to prison, social perceptions of incarceration, and their thoughts on how the second author should share the results of the study.

The third author likewise actively involved Wyoming Department of Corrections colleagues in the creation of the interview guide for parole officers, which also featured three sections. The first, general professional practices, asked participants about their main job

responsibilities, typical workday, interactions with people under their supervision, criteria utilized in decision-making about supervision and revocation, and gender-specific supervision procedures. The second, major issues in parolees' lives, asked participants about major issues in the lives of those under their supervision, how parolees describe their previous criminal justice experiences during supervision meetings (including positive experiences), gender differences in criminal justice experiences, and how they manage coordination with other agencies. The third, professional challenges and successes, asked participants about their professional trajectory, rules and ethical responsibilities, challenges, strategies to overcome these challenges, general public perceptions of people on parole, and what they would like to change about their work.

The study was approved by the University of Wyoming's Institutional Review Board. To preserve participants' confidentiality, the third author removed all names and identifying details from the transcripts prior to sharing them with the last author. The last author, who was an undergraduate student at The University of Alabama, coded the verbatim transcripts, which numbered approximately 1,000 pages using a codebook developed by the third author who, to assure inter-rater reliability, also coded the data for the theme "benefits of rural reentry" and "challenges of rural reentry." Analysis presented here focuses on the 73 participants whose responses featured in the coding for those two themes. None of the quotes are attributable to the same individual. The first and second author wrote the findings section, the third author wrote the first draft, and the fourth author significantly edited the final version of the article.

## Findings

### Challenges Specific to Rural Re-entry

Two common challenges emerged as we examined the barriers and issues parolees face during the rural reentry process. The first challenge, lack of community programs and resources, include both limited educational and treatment-specific programs, which both parolees and parole officers identifying issues which directly result from underfunded or nonexistent programs. The second challenge, negative public perceptions and stigma, reflect the uniquely rural dynamics at work for individuals reentering communities where everyone knows one another.

#### *Lack of Community Programs & Resources*

Parolees and parole officers identified hardships with respect to case load, lack of educational programs, insufficient number of vocational training programs, and the deficit in gendered specific programs. Fifty-three participants (73%) expressed the challenges of lacking community programs and resources in small towns. Of the 73%, two-thirds (n = 36) were individuals on parole, and the remaining 32% (n = 17) parole officers. An additional 16% of the



participants (n=9) acknowledged the hardships parole agents may face when handling several cases at once. As one parolee mentioned, “they can’t sit down and have a week’s worth of sessions with you to kind of get to know you and what might be best for you.” One parole agent expressed, “There’s a lot of clients that are high need that maybe if I didn’t have as many clients, I could sit with them for two hours.” In response to the increasing demand for parole officers, a parolee suggested “... maybe we could [pair] people up with a like mentor or something, point them in the right direction towards resources or whatever.” Despite the challenges identified, however, all participants emphasized the challenges lay with external factors—funding, high caseloads, limited time—rather than limited investment in the supervision relationship.

Although 92% (n = 50) of respondents acknowledged the challenges from limited resources, 40% (n = 20) of these individuals suggest including problem-specific programs that they believe could assist them post-release. Suggested programs included gender-focused programs, mental health treatment, drug treatment programs, education specific, and work programs. One parole officer explained the hardship marvelously by stating, “If they go back into the same environment they came out of, I think that’s a disaster.... they go from all that structure to nothing, it’s too much to handle without the added support.” Consistent references to support, need, and potential solutions to problems facing parolees emphasized how proximal affinity positively operationalizes to promote empathy even in resource-scarce scenarios.

Continuing the idea that some hardships faced post-release may be alleviated if individuals had more access to specific programs to gain applicable skills, 18% (n = 10) of individuals mentioned programs that would be gender specific. As a woman on parole mentioned, “They have more programs for men, and they have the honor farm, for men they have forestry, boot camp and a lot of times those things would be helpful for women.” Another parolee explained what was mentioned to her when discussing the differences between men and women within the incarcerated setting: “There’s huge inequalities between men and women in this state...women are easier to fix.”

Programs tailored specifically to women aimed at providing support for childcare and social relationships post-release to aid in successful re-entry into society. For example, a parole officer expressed the need for parenting-based programs: “Life skills, big time, how to be a parent, how to feed a child, sensible nutrition, like I said some parenting.” Going on to say,

*Give women classes that will give them a degree or something there so when they leave, they can get decent paying job. Where do most women leave if they don’t have family? They go to a shelter. Chances of being raped or harmed in the shelters are high. You can’t have your children there.*

Previously, we saw similar ideas and improvements from both parolees and parole officers within tailored programs, and in terms of resources we see a similar pattern, hinting at our proximal affinity theory. Around 12% (n = 7) of respondents expressed concern with not having enough programs to treat substance abuse. One parolee mentioned, “they need to build more drug treatments outside of the prison,” with another parolee more cynically observing, “they don’t treat for because they don’t want to spare the expense.” Yet even this negative characterization focuses on resource allocation, rather than lack of community cohesion.

Around 25% (n = 14) of respondents expressed the need for educational programs within the prison system. Again, both parolees and parole officer's mention the consequences of not having enough resources for educational programs. Sharing the same ideology, all respondents understand the value these programs have for their community, displaying the main idea of proximal affinity. For example, one parolee stated, “Give classes that will give them a degree or something there so when they leave, they can get a decent paying job.” Another parolee stated, “There’s really nothing up there, no classes available, really nothing. It’s frustrating.” One parole officer mentioned the harm that is a direct result from a lack of educational resources:

*They’re just being confined without any resources or tools on how to not re-offend or to fix their issues while they’re in house and when they come out, we’re dealing with someone who can’t deal with people and noise.... I just feel like we need resources in these facilities, so when they come out, they aren’t just thrown to the wolves basically.*

As is the case with the call for more educational programs in prison, our participants also saw the need for more vocational training. The goal of specialized work programs is to allow individuals to obtain technical certifications applicable outside of prison walls. One parolee explained that these programs could help secure a job before release. They continued by stating:

*I think it’d be helpful if we [parolees] could have a job waiting for us before we get here.... That’s scary when you’re more comfortable behind bars then you are out here. I feel like there should be something to help those kinds of people out.*

Employment is also a proven component of reentry success and so a concern for parolees and parole officer alike, especially since employment is a parole requirement. One parolee compared their current prison to out-of-state prisons, which provide individuals with lifestyle skills: “Prisons out of state got like tag deals, making license plates and stuff. We just have the sewing shop.” In a similar light, parole officers expressed the lack of programs within a correctional setting will not work in a rehabilitative manner, “If there’s no resources in there, locking them up doesn’t do anything. It just makes more problems when they come back out.” Taken together, even the characterizations of rural reentry challenges made by parole officers

and parolees focus their critiques exclusively on limited resources rather than lack of mutual investment in reentry success.

### *Negative Public Perceptions & Small-Town Stigma*

Both parolees and parole officers emphasized hardships such as the lingering stigmas resulting from a criminal record, obtaining employment, and the overall lack of housing available to them. Forty-six participants (63%) expressed the challenges of the negative public perceptions and stigma in small towns. Of this 63%, 60% (n = 28) were individuals on parole, and the remaining 39% (n = 18) were parole officers. Respondents acknowledged the lack of community resources and programs available to them while incarcerated and how this may have affected their parole experience. They shared their thoughts and suggestions on improving the prison facility within this area.

Individuals released on parole face physical barriers to improving their lives and can experience hardships due to the small-town stigma because of their previous imprisonment. Roughly 32% of parolees and 19% of parole officers expressed difficulty in living a normal life when the dark cloud of imprisonment follows them around in a small town. Due to the lingering stigma, ordinary tasks such as obtaining employment or receiving adequate housing seem to be impaired.

Obtaining employment status has been seen as a hardship for countless individuals; specifically, background checks seemed to hinder employment status for people. As one parolee expressed, "I would get a job for a while. And then once my background check would come, they let me go." Similarly, a parole officer stated that individuals with felony charges in their small town have very few routes of employment:

*...[our community] is pretty uptight about hiring felons, even for people with arrest records and it's hindering clients in so many ways. I understand businesses' caution about hiring a felon, they have that negative perception and then finances go down and they give up and return to the drug community.*

Employment appears to be a struggle for anyone with a felony charge. However, depending on the type of charge may increase the difficulty of securing employment. Specifically, 42% (n=6) of individuals who expressed post-release employment are registered sex offenders and face more discrimination because of their crime. A parole officer stated that:

*In a small town, I think it's worse, it's almost impossible for a sex offender just to return to a community and not be at the center of attention. Obviously, the police are watching, the registration issues, it's just tough.*

Sex offenders are not the only ones who feel that obtaining employment is difficult; 14% (n=2) of individuals stated they had employment difficulties from nonviolent felony charges. For example, one parolee voiced, "I think jobs should have an equal opportunity for people. I understand if they have certain charges, but me, I'm a nonviolent offender, it's a drug charge. I was not selling it was just a simple possession." It appears that regardless of their felony charge, individuals with a criminal past in smaller towns have difficulty securing employment, even if they are nonviolent offenders.

Another avenue of small-town stigma on previously incarcerated individuals is the lack of housing opportunities. Acknowledging this concern, 8% of participants state that housing opportunities are a taxing issue. Although housing was a concern among some individuals, there may be some influence within a socially tight-knit community. One parolee noted their own experience:

*I had such a hard time getting a place even though I had the funding to get a place they would pay up to three months' rent. And people would look at me like how you are going to take care of your kids after three months.*

Another individual on parole expressed the unequal housing opportunity for individuals convicted of a felony charge:

*When I asked my landlord, why am I paying this much more? She said, "Well, you're a felon. So, I moved. She told me, your crime is robbery and kidnapping. I got my papers out and I said, if you read this it will say extenuating circumstances... I'm paying \$200 extra a month because I'm a felon.*

When examining the housing opportunities for individuals, there seemed to be slight concern regarding housing due to past criminal records. However, there is a difference in concern between men and women regarding housing opportunity. Unsurprisingly, parolees on the sex offender registry had greater difficulties finding housing. Despite the stigma surrounding this crime, housing opportunities shrink because of schools, parks, and financial restrictions. One parole officer expressed this concern: "There are some communities that are small, and if you put a school right in the middle of it, these people can't live in town. So, the restrictions on their living arrangement is really big."

Although housing opportunities may affect individuals with criminal past, those who are also mothers face additional housing hurdles. One woman expressed the hardship of housing with children: "me and my kids were at the shelter for 6 months because I couldn't get nobody to

rent to me." Not only are the women facing the lasting consequences of incarceration, but their children are reaping secondhand consequences of actions where they lack any conscious choice.

A potential explanation for hardships concerning employment and housing opportunities could be a direct result of negative labels which are placed upon individuals on parole. In total, 36% (n=17) of individuals in these interviews showed concern about social situations and post-release. One parolee expressed their discomfort in social situations, noting, "A lotta times guys will say I'm uncomfortable, I think that everyone knows I'm [previously released] from prison, they struggle thinking no one's going to hire them because they're a felon that's been in prison." Unfortunately, it appears that individuals who were previously incarcerated feel as if their past record defines them as an individual, therefore internalizing the stigma themselves.

Negative labeling is not only seen by those with felony charges: 52.94% (n=9) of parole officers have also seen the impact of labeling on these individuals. As one female parole officer mentioned:

*Our clients get labelled... The labeling I don't think will every stop. But I tell the community these people who come to our office have made a mistake and are taking accountability. And hopefully they don't re-offend and yes, the recidivism rates are pretty high but you look at the big picture whether it be substance abuse or mental health problem. And you know, I think that society will never stop labelling people.*

Another aspect of proximal affinity which is highlighted here would be the empathy for others who reside within the same community and the wanting of a better environment for everyone, even those who have made mistakes. An increased number of labels for individuals with felony charges makes social situations less desirable, especially if they feel like their community is assuming the worst. A considerable proportion, 54% (n=25), of individuals here expressed awkward or uncomfortable feelings while attempting to restore a social life. A parole officer noted things they have heard: "people said, we don't have anything around here for people like you [previously incarcerated individuals]... his case was made very public... he was very shunned during the whole-time frame." Another respondent expressed how they felt about the judgment: "They're so judgmental on some people, not on me. But you mess up and I've seen a lot of them look down on them like they're the worst piece of shit there is." Concisely, one respondent perfectly summarizes the feeling, "Everybody looks down on us in society." In these instances, we see proximal affinity negatively operationalized in tightly-knit communities which, in their own estimation, regard them as unwelcome outsiders.

### **Benefits Specific to Rural Re-Entry**

There are positive experiences to be noted when examining re-entry among individuals in rural areas, and two specific, reoccurring themes were found for benefits specific to rural re-entry when analyzing these interviews. The first, small-town trust and close-knit social networks, reflect the foundational components of proximal affinity through the strong neighborly relations in the community. The second, personal relationships with programs, is a consequential factor of the first theme. These tighter-knit social networks provide an environment for proximal affinity to foster these types of personal relationships with rehabilitation programs for not only local law enforcement agencies but parolees and community members as well. Of the 72 participants, 47% (n = 34) expressed benefits of rural re-entry within the two aforementioned themes.

#### ***Small-Town Trust & Close-Knit Social Networks***

Twenty-two participants (30%) expressed the benefits of the trust and close-knit social networks that small towns can provide. Of this, 30%, 54% (n = 12) were individuals on parole, and the remaining 45% (n = 10) were parole officers. Collectively, these individuals spoke of the opportunities for second chances and the aid available in their small town. They shared the benefits of long-term relationships with community members and the overarching support of their community. These collective ideas across parolees and officers further reflect proximal affinity, in their mutual desire to better their community.

Among the 30% (n = 22) participants who identified the benefits of small-town trust and close-knit social networks, 50% (n = 11) referred to the kinds of second chances and help available in these small towns. One parole officer stated, "I do think here maybe more than other places there is people may be willing to give people who've gone to prison a chance." They go on to share that they recognize that this willingness is unlikely to be the norm in most other areas. An individual on parole further supports this idea, noting that "... it seems to me that they're very open-minded but even though you're a felon they still want to give you a chance."

Another officer compared the attitude of the small town to a larger city in which they previously resided, "In Denver there's very little forgiveness or empathy for people who that've served time... but I think in this small town there's a lot more empathy for it." Notably, this participant finds that parolees are more accepted in rural Wyoming than in Denver, which is considered the Mountain West's major metropolitan area, emphasizing how population size and rurality potentially correlates with greater support for people reentering society post-release from prison.

The participants shared specific instances of community members going out of their way to help people rehabilitate themselves post-release. One parolee described their experiences with their parole officers: "Every one of my POs [parole officers] has tried to help me... That's what DOC [Department of Corrections] is there for, to honestly rehabilitate." A parole officer shared about the local job opportunities, "For the most part here they try. Certain businesses keep hiring

them over and over, knowing that it might not work.” These instances reflect the potential strength of proximal affinity, a collective goal created by the community spurring positive attitudes toward rehabilitation.

Of the original twenty-two participants in this theme, 54% (n = 12) discussed this small community's long-standing and strong relationship, further generating empathetic attitudes through proximal affinity. Respondents shared sentiments such as, "...they welcome them back because they've known them since second grade" and "I moved here 35 years ago, and I had never come to such an open arms community." Participants shared various positive experiences that they attribute to the close-knit nature of the community and the long-standing, trusting relationships of the people who live there. A few of the outcomes in these situations were individuals receiving housing, jobs with stable income, and additional support from people they knew directly or indirectly.

Within the original 30% of participants who identified the benefits of small-town trust and close-knit social networks, 63% (n = 14) of these shared opinions on the supportive nature of the community. One individual on parole described, "... they're very open-minded but even though you are a felon they still want to give you a chance." Others expressed how their lives are better in this small town; one shared, "Life is a lot healthier, a lot more open." Another went on to say, "It's healthy, I'm relieved. I have great friends... I have great therapists, I have a great job, great boss... I have a great church. I have groups to go to."

Some participants shared their overarching opinions of the community, such as "our community is a big help," "there's a lot of forgiveness and empathy," and "we show them that this whole town works as a team." Several participants indicated developing strong relationships within the community, "I have family here. They're not really family but I consider them family... really good support system." Another shared, "...this place, this town, has been a remarkable experience... I call them my supplemental family because that's what they've come to be."

The testimonies of parolees and officers alike reflect the proposed theoretical concept of proximal affinity. The empathy officers and the community have for parolees provide the community with a positive outlook on rehabilitation. These outlooks impact parolees' perceptions of themselves, and their ability to reintegrate into society. Proximal affinity in a small town creates opportunity for the overall enrichment of the community, encouraging the development and enrichment of programs to reduce recidivism.

### ***Personal Relationships with Programs***

Twenty-three participants (31%) expressed ideas of benefits that fell thematically into personal relationships with programs. Of this, 31%, 21% (n = 5) were individuals on parole, and the remaining 78% (n = 18) were parole officers. This group of participants noted the benefits of the multitude of post-release programs available in the town, the ease of access to legal aid, the

caring nature of the community, and religious/church involvement in program availability and production.

There were 25 programs mentioned while discussing the availability of post-release assistance in small towns, and the individuals' ability to maintain relationships with those who facilitate the programs were also discussed. A few examples of the assorted programs are food security, vocational rehabilitation, substance treatment, family services, housing acquisition assistance, and mental health counseling. An officer stated, "The smallness of the state and the agency and everything makes it easier compared to where you have one city bigger than the whole state" and "it almost makes it better that the community's smaller, because we get to personally know the providers." These factors noted by parole officers are the core of proximal affinity, the physical closeness of the community creates a more personable rehabilitation process.

Participants shared the extensiveness of the community's cohesiveness when communicating with other agencies, organizations, and programs. Of the original 31%, 56% (n = 13) discussed how their town benefits in these areas due to their smaller population. Many parole officers shared that they meet regularly with the treatment providers of those on parole: "We talk about everybody under supervision that's under treatment." Other sentiments were "I get along really well with DFS [Department of Family Services], we go out on home visits together when we have shared visits," and "We meet pretty regularly. We know the lines of communication are open."

In concurrence with this, individuals on parole shared their experiences with the accessibility of the town's treatment providers and program personnel: "...the service coordinator..., she does one-on-one's and she's amazing and very inspirational. I visited with her once a week." Another person on parole shared about their relationship with a sponsor, "My sponsor is the lady who manages it [sober living house], she's still my sponsor and I still go see her every week, and I still go to meetings" Some participants shared of the support they found through faith-based organizations, "...my church family has been very supportive. They accepted me regardless of my past... making sure that I'm doing the right things."

Proximal affinity is seen clearly through the similar summations across parolees and officers. Many individuals on parole found support post-release, along with programs and resources directly targeting their needs. The potential benefits of a small town for parole agents, service providers, program coordinators, and other government agencies are displayed throughout this theme.

### **Discussion**

Exploring the ways in which rural parole officers and parolees conceptualize both benefits and challenges of rural reentry allows for a meticulous understanding of ways geography influences their relationship. Our analysis has found that challenges in which parolees



face within a rural location include lack of community resources (e.g. educational programs, vocational training, and tailored programs) and navigating small town stigma. Unfortunately, small town stigma impacts a considerable portion of their life post release whether that's within employment opportunities or obtaining adequate housing once released on parole.

Despite these hardships, rural areas provide benefits as well to include close ties within the community and personal relationships with the post release programs (e.g., legal access, caring nature of the community, and religious/church support). Thus, our findings lead us to develop the theory of proximal affinity - the degree to which individuals relate to and empathize with others based on their perceptions of one another as potential or actual neighbors in a community- to help explain the interaction between these two groups of individuals.

The developed theory of proximal affinity may offer insights into improving the role of parole officers nationwide. Viewing individuals on parole as neighbors, rather than parolees, may open the door to decrease stigmatization within their communities. Similar to previous work (e.g. Schalkoff et al., 2020), our study found that the lack of community resources and increased stigmatization increases the difficulties of post release, which appears common among rural areas. Similar work conducted by Bares & Mowen (2020) has emphasized the impact of empathetic parole officers and the decreased recidivism rates among parolees, and additional work by Statz (2021) emphasizes how perceptions of shared identity can generate empathy between criminal justice decisionmakers and offenders.

Therefore, if parole officers approached each case with an empathetic lens, recidivism rates should decrease, allowing for others within the community to view parolees as a part of their community. Again, previous work (e.g. Dewey et al., 2019) linked heightened stigma for rural environments as a result of the close relationships within these rural communities. Our research here showed that parolees face the repercussions of close-knit communities due to the public knowledge of their crimes. Thus, having parole officers practice the theoretical concept of proximal affinity may be the first steps into breaking down the barriers between individuals on parole and those within the community.

Our analysis uncovered the shared interest of parolees and parole officers when discussing ways to improve the parole process. Although these individuals with shared ideas reside within rural communities, implementing this forward way of thinking (e.g., proximal affinity) may improve relations among parolees and parole officers in urban areas. Previously mentioned, parole officers that integrate an empathetic approach to parolees decrease recidivism rates (Bares & Mowen, 2020), thus parole officers should have training that is focused on increasing empathy and support to strengthen parolee relations with the added benefits of decreased recidivism rates.

There is great potential for proximal affinity to provide foundation and explanation for the proposed agentic properties of an individual's environment (Fraser & Matthews, 2021), particularly since our study's findings align so closely with findings by Wodahl (2006), Ward (2017), and Zajac et al. (2014) regarding the challenges associated with rural reentry. Additionally, the present study provides support for future research of proximal affinity within other criminal justice agencies. The empathetic nature of the proposed theoretical concept is formulated through the close-knit relationships in a rural community. However, these concepts could be extended into criminal justice practice by reconceptualizing the relationships between practitioners and those who offend. By viewing criminal justice practices as their own small communities and those in them as community members, there is an avenue for proximal affinity to curate more empathy within these practices.

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