

The Dual Influence of Social Networks: Balancing Support and Risk

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Abstract: *Fosters accountability and desistance, not all relationships are beneficial. Some network members, particularly those linked to prior criminal behaviors, may perpetuate recidivism. Offenders often actively distance themselves from harmful influences while valuing prosocial connections. This study emphasizes the importance of evaluating both positive and negative network dynamics and highlights the need for targeted interventions that enhance constructive ties. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to leverage social networks to improve rehabilitation outcomes.*

Keywords: Community corrections; Social networks; Social adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community corrections, as a significant approach to criminal justice, aims to supervise, educate, and rehabilitate offenders in non-incarceration settings, facilitating their reintegration into society. Within this process, social networks play a critical role as a key social resource influencing the social adaptation of offenders. Social adaptation, the cornerstone of successful reintegration, involves adjustments in behavior, psychology, and social roles. However, the role of social networks is not uniform or fixed; they can either serve as a positive force by fostering stable social ties and encouraging lawful behavior or act as a negative influence, hindering the offender's adaptation through detrimental relationships.

Examining the impact of social networks on the social adaptation of offenders in community corrections is essential for deepening our understanding of the complexities of social support. It also provides valuable theoretical and practical insights for policy-making in community corrections. Unlike perceived social support, which often exhibits a unidirectional positive influence, social networks display a dual nature. Some studies have identified social networks as protective factors that support offenders in desisting from crime. Conversely, other research highlights the potential risks of negative social networks, which may inadvertently reinforce deviant behaviors and increase the likelihood of reoffending (Schaefer et al., 2021). These contradictory findings suggest that the impact of social networks on offenders' social trajectories depends on contextual factors, such as the nature and strength of relationships, the orientation of social interactions, the types of support provided, and the offenders' motivation to desist or persist in criminal behavior (Schaefer et al., 2021). Thus, systematically analyzing the dual roles of social networks is crucial for understanding the outcomes of community corrections and enhancing its practical applications.

2. THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

While social networks of offenders are sometimes viewed as part of the problem, they can also play a crucial role in solutions aimed at reducing recidivism and fostering rehabilitation (Schaefer et al., 2019). This duality is inherent in the characteristics of social networks themselves.

2.1 Broad and Diverse Membership

Social networks consist of a wide range of members, including primary groups such as family and friends, as well as secondary groups like institutional staff, colleagues, support groups, or mentors (Kjellstrand et al., 2023b). These members possess formal or informal supportive resources, enabling the provision of diverse support types.

For instance, probation and parole officers often collaborate with PoPPs (Parents/Partners/Peers of Probationers and Parolees) to reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Schaefer et al., 2022). Support from family, friends, and individuals invested in the offender's well-being mitigates the stress of reentry, which is critical for reintegration into society (Maruca et al., 2021). Family and peers also provide informational support related to community

resources, employment opportunities, and coping strategies during reentry (Kjellstrand et al., 2023a). Additionally, support from both communities and family members helps female offenders make positive choices free from the influence of drugs and alcohol (Hoskins, 2022).

Bares and Mowen (2020) similarly emphasize the importance of family and peers, suggesting that strong attachments to others act as a form of social support, with emotional bonds shared between offenders and network members deterring criminal behavior. These groups provide key mechanisms of support, including emotional and instrumental assistance. Furthermore, significant individuals or groups can serve as pillars of support for offenders, fostering their sense of belonging within a larger community, which in turn promotes optimism about the future (Kjellstrand et al., 2023a).

2.2 Shared Goals and Collaborative Efforts

For offenders under community corrections, the alignment of their personal goals with those of their social network members plays a pivotal role in their rehabilitation journey. When social network members share a commitment to the offender's positive transformation, they can become powerful agents of change. These individuals demonstrate their support by actively participating in the offender's efforts to plan and achieve future objectives. Whether it involves helping the offender set realistic goals, providing guidance on actionable steps, or offering encouragement during setbacks, this collaborative process fosters a sense of agency and purpose. Through such joint efforts, offenders are better equipped to envision a life free from criminal behavior and to take concrete steps toward that vision (Schaefer et al., 2021).

The support system for offenders often extends beyond immediate family and friends to include a broader network of neighbors, community organizations, local government agencies, and law enforcement. Each of these entities brings unique resources and expertise to the table, contributing to a comprehensive support framework. Family members and close friends typically provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, helping offenders rebuild trust and confidence in their ability to reintegrate into society. Neighbors, community organizations, and local agencies, meanwhile, play essential roles in creating opportunities for offenders to engage in prosocial activities, such as employment, education, or volunteering, which are crucial for their long-term rehabilitation (Jiang et al., 2022).

Moreover, this collective effort serves a dual purpose: not only does it help offenders avoid high-risk environments that could lead to recidivism, but it also establishes a structure of accountability. When offenders know that their actions are being monitored by a network genuinely invested in their success, they are more likely to stay on the path of desistance. These supportive networks act as a buffer against the temptations of past behaviors, offering practical advice on navigating challenges and providing constructive feedback when offenders face obstacles.

The shared aim of positive transformation reinforces the role of social networks as fundamental pillars for desistance. By identifying potential risks and intervening proactively, these networks minimize opportunities for reoffending. At the same time, they foster an environment that encourages offenders to focus on building a better future. The emotional support provided by these networks—such as reassurance during difficult times and acknowledgment of progress—bolsters offenders' motivation and resilience. Practical guidance, such as advice on maintaining employment or adhering to legal conditions, further empowers offenders to make lasting changes in their behavior. Together, these forms of support form a comprehensive system that not only prevents reoffending but also facilitates the offender's successful reintegration into society (Schaefer et al., 2021).

2.3 Practical Benefits

Perhaps the most tangible and impactful aspect of social networks lies in the concrete assistance they provide to offenders navigating community corrections. These networks act as lifelines, offering a wide range of resources that address both immediate and long-term needs. For example, social networks may provide access to stable housing, which serves as a cornerstone for an offender's successful reintegration into society. Housing security not only ensures a safe and consistent living environment but also reduces stress, allowing offenders to focus on other critical aspects of rehabilitation, such as employment and education. Employment opportunities offered or facilitated by network members play an equally crucial role by granting offenders a legitimate means of financial independence and fostering a sense of purpose and responsibility. Beyond material needs, social networks contribute to social inclusion, helping offenders reconnect with their communities and feel valued as contributing members of society (Schaefer et al., 2019).

In addition to material and social resources, social networks provide essential personal and emotional support that can significantly influence offenders' rehabilitation trajectories. Mentorship is a particularly powerful form of support within these networks. Mentors, often individuals with shared experiences, are uniquely positioned to empathize with offenders and guide them through challenges such as overcoming stigma or navigating the complexities of reintegration. These mentors serve as role models, demonstrating that change is possible and offering practical advice on how to achieve it. Meanwhile, trained professionals, including social workers, counselors, or nurses, deliver targeted interventions designed to address specific needs. For instance, emotional support helps offenders cope with feelings of shame or hopelessness, informational support provides guidance on legal obligations or accessing resources, and instrumental support assists with tangible needs like securing transportation or childcare (Hochstatter et al., 2022).

The presence of robust support networks has a demonstrable impact on reducing the likelihood of criminal activity. By addressing the root causes of criminal behavior—such as poverty, lack of education, or social exclusion—these networks create an environment where offenders can focus on positive growth rather than being drawn back into cycles of crime. The consistent encouragement and validation provided by network members also foster a sense of accountability, motivating offenders to stay committed to their rehabilitation goals (Kjellstrand et al., 2023a).

Importantly, offenders themselves often emphasize the transformative value of emotional and peer support within their networks. Such support creates a sense of belonging, which is critical for individuals who may have felt alienated or marginalized due to their criminal history. Feeling connected to a community helps offenders combat isolation, which is often a significant barrier to change. The emotional uplift from knowing they are not alone in their struggles enables offenders to face challenges with greater optimism and resilience. Peer support, in particular, offers a unique dynamic where shared experiences foster mutual understanding and camaraderie, further reinforcing offenders' commitment to desistance and their belief in the possibility of a better future (Schaefer et al., 2021).

2.4 Levels of Network Support

Some scholars categorize social network members into distinct levels, analyzing the specific types of support provided by each. Goodson-Miller (2022) emphasizes the need to quantify the composition of social networks, the connections shared among members, and the resources provided to focal participants. In a study on women on probation and parole, social network members were classified into core network members, active peripheral members, latent peripheral members, and estranged members.

Core Network Members: These individuals often provide critical resources, such as temporary housing, job references, small loans, and financial advice. Women reported receiving both emotional and financial support frequently from this group.

Active Peripheral Members: These members share "close" emotional ties and provide occasional emotional and financial support. They are seen as valuable for specific needs like advice or connections to employment opportunities.

Latent Peripheral Members: While offering limited emotional support and minimal financial assistance, these members still provide valuable resources, such as legal and financial advice, and connections to job opportunities.

Estranged Members: Offering very limited support, these individuals are rarely activated but may still play minor roles in key support areas.

The findings suggest that larger networks with more members can offer greater potential resources, reinforcing the notion that even less frequently engaged members can contribute positively (Goodson-Miller, 2022).

2.5 The Complexity of Social Networks

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all members of an offender's social network contribute positively to their rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. While many network members, such as Parents, Partners, and Peers (PoPPs), play supportive roles, their influence is far from universally beneficial. As Schaefer et al. (2022) highlight, the positive impact of PoPPs is often conditional and varies depending on the dynamics of the relationships and the specific circumstances of the offenders. For some individuals, identifying genuinely supportive network members

can be a challenge. They may struggle to distinguish between those who genuinely promote their well-being and those whose involvement is less constructive or even detrimental. Furthermore, offenders may perceive PoPPs as having dual influences—sometimes supportive, yet at other times enabling harmful behaviors or reinforcing patterns of dependency. This ambiguity can create uncertainty and hinder the effectiveness of network-based interventions.

The complexity extends to PoPPs themselves, who may face their own set of challenges when attempting to support offenders. Close emotional ties can sometimes inhibit PoPPs from intervening effectively. For instance, a parent or partner might hesitate to enforce boundaries or confront problematic behaviors due to fear of damaging their relationship with the offender. Others may feel unqualified to provide the level of guidance or supervision required, lacking the skills or resources necessary to address complex issues such as substance abuse, trauma, or recidivism risks. In some cases, their actions—whether intentional or not—may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of negative behavior. For example, providing financial support without accountability measures might enable offenders to engage in risky activities rather than encouraging positive change.

Moreover, not all PoPPs function as prosocial or protective influences. Some may harbor their own unresolved issues or engage in behaviors that directly conflict with the goals of rehabilitation. For instance, peers who continue to engage in criminal activities or family members who struggle with addiction can have a profoundly negative impact on offenders, drawing them back into environments that undermine their progress. These dynamics emphasize that social networks, while powerful, are not inherently positive and require careful evaluation to discern their overall influence.

This complexity underscores the importance of critically examining the negative aspects of social networks in the context of community corrections. Understanding how these networks can both help and hinder rehabilitation is essential for developing nuanced strategies that maximize their benefits while mitigating their risks. The following section will delve deeper into these challenges, exploring the ways in which social networks can sometimes act as obstacles to desistance and highlighting strategies for addressing these issues effectively.

3. THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

It is often assumed that individuals deemed as “social supporters” inherently play prosocial roles, especially in their interactions with offenders, largely contributing to positive outcomes (Schaefer et al., 2021). Family members and friends, for instance, are commonly viewed as integral social supporters who provide critical assistance to offenders in need. However, this assumption may overlook the complexities and contradictions inherent within social networks. It is equally possible that certain individuals within an offender’s social network may have contributed to the onset of criminal behavior. Even family members and friends—traditionally seen as positive influences—might play roles in perpetuating criminal behaviors if they were involved in fostering or enabling these activities in the first place. Such dynamics warrant scrutiny, as these individuals may unintentionally reinforce criminal tendencies rather than promote desistance (Schaefer et al., 2021).

Schaefer et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of resisting premature conclusions about the unequivocal benefits of involving offenders’ family members in community corrections. The relationships between offenders and their PoPPs (parents, partners, or peers of probationers and parolees) are often complex and nuanced. Even when unintentional, familial interactions can adopt supportive strategies that paradoxically encourage reoffending. For instance, family members might issue threats—such as withholding emotional or financial support—if offenders fail in specific ways, such as relapsing into substance use, committing new offenses, or violating parole conditions. While these actions may stem from a genuine desire to motivate the offender toward positive behavior, they can instead create immense psychological pressure. For offenders, these interactions may feel less like support and more like coercion, undermining the supportive intent behind such strategies (Schaefer et al., 2021).

As a result, even when the goal of social support aligns with logical correctional purposes, these strategies may not be well-received by probationers and parolees themselves. This highlights the inherent duality within social networks: while they hold the potential to offer valuable support, they can also negatively impact the trajectory of criminal behavior. Improperly functioning social networks—whether due to intentional or inadvertent influences—may actively foster criminal behavior rather than deter it. Indeed, individuals within such networks might unintentionally become agents of recidivism instead of desistance (Schaefer et al., 2021).

A common assumption is that tighter and more cohesive social networks inherently maximize their positive impact.

However, evidence suggests that this assumption may not hold universally true, especially for community corrections offenders. Research indicates that close-knit social networks and strong social bonds do not always guarantee favorable correctional outcomes. On the contrary, they may sometimes act as barriers to desistance. For instance, Williams and Schaefer (2021) discovered that certain probationers and parolees perceived social isolation as a strategy consistent with correctional orders and a method for achieving desistance. Their rationale is clear: previous environments often facilitated their criminal behaviors, and deliberately isolating themselves from these environments reflects an intentional effort to avoid the entrenched factors that contributed to their offending.

This behavior—distancing oneself from certain network members—illuminates offenders' nuanced recognition of the duality of social networks. Rather than seeking greater closeness with their network, some offenders actively work to sever ties with specific individuals to improve their prospects for rehabilitation. In Williams and Schaefer's (2021) study, offenders not only acknowledged the benefits of social isolation but also adopted deliberate actions to transform their lives, such as cutting ties with detrimental influences. For example, 73% of participants intentionally distanced themselves from antisocial peers, thereby isolating themselves from those associated with or supportive of criminal behavior. Importantly, this form of isolation does not imply indiscriminate withdrawal from all social networks. Instead, offenders selectively isolate themselves from specific threats, a strategy frequently observed among would-be desisters (Williams & Schaefer, 2021).

The act of severing ties carries practical and symbolic significance. Practically, it distances offenders from antisocial peers—one of the strongest predictors of criminal behavior. Symbolically, this act enables offenders to distinguish their past misdeeds from their current aspirations for reform. For many offenders, severing harmful ties represents a tangible expression of their determination to pursue a new path. It becomes a powerful statement of commitment: "I am on the right track. This is a difficult journey, but I have taken the first critical step and am proud of my progress." Such symbolic acts serve as positive reinforcement, embodying offenders' resolve to continue making better choices (Williams & Schaefer, 2021).

These findings suggest that efforts to broaden social networks without careful consideration of their quality may not yield desirable outcomes. Instead, assessing the quality of social networks is just as, if not more, important than focusing on their quantity (Goodson-Miller, 2022). It is the nature of relationships and the type of support provided by network members that empower offenders to navigate the criminal justice system and eventually desist from crime (Copp et al., 2020; Goodson-Miller, 2022).

At this juncture, it is valuable to revisit the specific types of support that different network members can provide to community corrections offenders. By examining the distinct contributions of various network members, we gain deeper insights into the mechanisms through which social networks exert their influence.

4. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the dual role of social networks in shaping the rehabilitation and reintegration trajectories of offenders under community corrections. While networks often serve as vital sources of support—providing emotional, instrumental, and informational aid—they are not universally positive influences. The presence of pro-social relationships can foster accountability, encourage desistance, and provide offenders with a sense of belonging. However, not all social ties contribute to rehabilitation; some relationships, particularly those rooted in past criminal behaviors or environments, may perpetuate cycles of recidivism. This duality highlights the importance of evaluating both the positive and negative influences of social networks in offender rehabilitation.

Furthermore, offenders' agency in navigating their networks is a critical factor. Many offenders actively distance themselves from harmful relationships and environments, recognizing their potential to derail efforts toward desistance. Conversely, the quality of support from family, friends, and peers—not merely its quantity—profoundly impacts outcomes, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions that strengthen beneficial ties while addressing problematic ones.

To maximize the potential of social networks, future policies and practices should focus on fostering constructive relationships, equipping supportive network members with the tools to assist effectively, and helping offenders build new, prosocial connections. By leveraging the power of social networks and addressing their complexities, community corrections systems can better support offenders in their journey toward long-term reintegration and desistance.

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