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Incarcerated Sex Offenders' Perceptions of Family Relationships: Previous Experiences and Future Expectations

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Abstract: *Utilizing semi-structured interviews with 24 inmates in one medium security prison, this study examines how incarcerated sex offenders approaching release perceive previous experiences with and future expectations for their families. Observed characteristics of family associations among these inmates, both prior and subsequent to their labeling as sex offenders, will help identify how such public identification may impact social support from loved ones that is often necessary for successful community reintegration. Findings reveal that incarcerated sex offenders held both positive and negative outlooks toward their families before and after their labeling. Almost without exception, sex offenders reporting positive family experiences prior to their public identification described relationships that featured support, encouragement, and intimacy. However, those detailing negative family experiences discussed traumatic situations riddled with separation, violence, and sexual abuse. The majority of sex offenders anticipating positive family experiences upon release described personal acceptance, employment opportunities, and housing options. Most of these inmates, however, also possessed negative expectations for their families, including relationships characterized by rejection and doubt. Limitations and directions for future sex offender research are discussed.*

Keywords: sex offenders, sex offenses, families of sex offenders, sex offenders' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

As a result of increasingly large numbers of incarcerated offenders in the United States, numerous inmates are returning to society from prison each year. There are currently over 1.6 million criminal offenders living in American correctional facilities; approximately 1 in every 201 people in the U.S. are locked behind bars (Guerino, Harrison, and Sabol 2011). The majority of these people, nearly 650,000 inmates annually, are released from state and federal prisons (Swanson, Rohrer, and Crow 2010). Following release from incarceration, many of these ex-inmates quickly discover considerable setbacks in the community. Despite their liberation from

incarceration, former inmates may encounter debt, homelessness, substance abuse, and unemployment that make life on the outside more arduous (Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001; Visher, La Vigne, and Travis 2004).

For these reasons, robust family ties are essential for both current and former inmates, as these relationships may increase post-release success. Lower recidivism rates are common among former inmates that have family contact throughout their incarceration (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest 2003; Klein, Bartholomew, and Hibbert 2002). Specifically, prison visits from loved ones significantly decrease the risk of backsliding into criminal activity (Bales and Mears 2008; Duwe and Clark, 2011). Family attachments also prove to be influential in assisting

ex-offenders with employment in the community (Berg and Huebner 2011). Further, family relationships often afford former inmates opportunities for financial assistance and housing (La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Nelson, Deess, and Allen 1999; Visher et al. 2004; Visher, Yahner, and La Vigne 2010).

Strong family support may be especially critical for sex offenders. Between 10,000 and 20,000 such offenders are estimated to be released annually from American correctional facilities (Center for Sex Offender Management 2007), and today, more than 700,000 individuals are registered sex offenders in the United States (Ewing 2011). Sex offenders arguably face more challenging impediments to successful reintegration (Burchfield and Mingus 2008; Levenson and Cotter 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, and Hern 2007; Levenson and Hern 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson 2008; Robbers 2009; Tewksbury 2004, 2005; Tewksbury and Lees 2006, 2007; Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Publicly identified sex offenders experience feelings of anxiety, depression, embarrassment, isolation, and shame (Burchfield and Mingus 2008; Levenson and Cotter 2005; Levenson et al. 2007; Robbers 2009). Harassment and ostracism in the community also represent significant barriers that may prevent sex offenders from returning to society as productive, law-abiding citizens (Levenson and Cotter 2005; Tewksbury 2005; Tewksbury and Lees 2006; Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Another roadblock facing these former inmates is the stigma that is associated with labeling as a sex offender, especially in regards to issues of employment, education, and community activity (Tewksbury in press; Tewksbury and Lees 2006, 2007; Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004; Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Sex offenders in numerous studies report these marks of disgrace as common experiences, with feelings of vulnerability, stigmatization, and housing difficulties especially common (Levenson and Cotter 2005; Levenson and Hern 2007; Levenson et al. 2007; Mercado et al. 2008; Tewksbury 2004, 2005, in press; Tewksbury and Lees 2006).

SEX OFFENDERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

Relatively little is known about sex offenders and their family members. In particular, how families respond to the return of sex offenders to the community is unknown. However, available studies suggest that those with family linkage to a known sex offender are likely to experience negative repercussions (Comartin, Kernsmith, and Miles 2010; Farkas and Miller 2007; Levenson and Tewksbury 2009; Tewksbury and Levenson 2009).

Farkas and Miller (2007) focused on adult family members of convicted sex offenders, interviewing 72 family members (within 28 families) from six different states. The most commonly reported feelings by family members were those of persistent hopelessness,

depression, and frustration that stemmed from adjusting to life with a publicly identified sex offender. Some family members also reported deterioration of relationships with other relatives, which came about as a result of their decision to remain in contact with the convicted sex offender.

Similarly, utilizing online survey data from 584 family members across the United States, Levenson and Tewksbury (2009) and Tewksbury and Levenson (2009) found that a substantial number of individuals related to known sex offenders experienced adverse consequences. As a result of their association with a sex offender, most family members (86%) reported experiencing a significant amount of stress, and nearly half (49%) often felt afraid for their own safety because of their loved one's status as a sex offender (Tewksbury and Levenson 2009). Half of the family members had lost friends or a close relationship, and 66% said that shame and embarrassment often prevented them from participating in community activities (Tewksbury and Levenson 2009). Those living with a known sex offender were more likely to encounter threats and harassment by neighborhood residents (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). Children of sex offenders also reported unfavorable outcomes, with more than half stating that they were treated differently by teachers and other children at school. Tewksbury and Humkey (2010) found that, when legally permissible, school officials are likely to prohibit sex offender parents from attending school events. In a much smaller study, Comartin, Kernsmith, and Miles (2010) conducted a focus group with four mothers of sex offenders. Like the earlier studies concerning family members of sex offenders, the authors found that being related to a sex offender often generates negative ramifications, such as stigmatization, isolation, and changes in personal relationships.

In sum, the existing studies show that family members of sex offenders experience negative repercussions (e.g., "courtesy stigmas" [Goffman 1963]) because of their sex offender family member. These negative consequences include adverse emotions, sacrificed personal relationships, and admonition and harassment from others. In this way, actively pursuing and maintaining a social relationship with a publicly identified sex offender does not appear to be a desirable responsibility. Because the literature has only focused on family members' experiences in these relationships, the present study looks at perceptions of sex offenders regarding their relationships with family members.

THE PRESENT STUDY

To more fully understand how the public identification of sex offenders may impact their reintegration into society, this research examines how such inmates approaching release perceive their previous experiences with and future expectations for their families.

By means of in-depth, qualitative interviews, the analyses focus on the perceived quality of family relationships before and after their public identification as sex offenders. Examining family associations for these inmates, both prior and subsequent to their identification as sex offenders, will help identify how such public identification (i.e., labeling or recognition as a sex offender) may impact social support from loved ones that is often necessary for successful community reintegration.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the present analyses originate from semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 male sex offenders incarcerated in a medium security prison in the Midwest. All participants were incarcerated for at least one sex offense and had release dates within three years of the time of their interview (with a mean of approximately one year until release). The age of participants ranged from 24 to 67. Five interviewed inmates were African-American, and 19 were white. The most frequent criminal charge among these sex offenders ($n = 11$) was first degree sexual abuse. Additionally, seven were incarcerated for third degree rape, five for third degree sodomy, four for first degree rape, two for second degree rape, and one each for second degree sodomy, promoting a minor in a sexual performance, and incest. Participants had served a mean of 47.3 months at the time of their interview (range = 15 to 95).

The interviews were semi-structured to avoid imposing artificial concepts and categories on sex offenders, thereby allowing participants to speak freely using their own terminology. This style of interviewing allows participants to discuss their thoughts and beliefs in detail. Moreover, it allows researchers to gain extensive knowledge about the subject matter, in this case, inmates' perceptions of family before and after their public identification as sex offenders. Specifically, interviews focused on: with whom sex offenders have maintained contact while incarcerated; what types of contact maintained; feelings about these contacts; anticipations of how family, friends, and others may receive them upon return to the community; types of contacts with family and friends prior to their incarceration; and plans and anticipations for managing the public label of "sex offender" upon return to the community.

Interviews were conducted in a private office at the prison and audio-recorded with the permission of correctional administration and participants. All interviews were transcribed in full. The authors made every attempt to transcribe the interviews in a way that reflected natural speaking patterns, although some words and phrases have been edited to aid readability. All identifying information was removed during this process; when introducing quotes, each sex offender was assigned an alias to protect his confidentiality.

Data were coded by hand, following principles of analytic induction in multiple readings (Charmaz 1983, 2006). This approach utilizes numerous readings of all transcripts, with each reading focused on a narrow range of issues and conceptual categories. As this is an exploratory study, open coding was used, and findings reflected issues that emerged from the data during the coding for the concepts of primary interest (i.e., perceptions of family prior and subsequent to public identification). Prior to data collection, all procedures were reviewed by the institution warden, state Department of Corrections, and the authors' institutional review board to ensure that ethical standards were met.

It is recognized that the sample of 24 is relatively low, which some may see as a limitation of the data. However, the goal of exploratory qualitative research is to interview enough participants to reach saturation, which occurs when no new themes or information arise from additional interviews. Although there are no clear, universally accepted guidelines for how many interviews are sufficient to reach saturation, a review of ethnographic research in the leading criminology and criminal justice journals shows that the median sample size was 35 for studies based on semi-structured interviews (Copes, Brown, and Tewksbury 2011). Additionally, recent empirical evidence suggests that saturation can be reached with as few as twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). The more homogeneous the population, the more likely saturation can be reached with fewer interviews. This appears to be the case for incarcerated sex offenders, as saturation was achieved with the sample of 24. Further, despite the fact that many of these sex offenders shared similar observations concerning their family members, it is acknowledged that these findings may not apply to offenders in other facilities or jurisdictions.

FINDINGS

Incarcerated sex offenders articulated both previous experiences with and future expectations for their families. Described family relationships hinged on the perceived quality of these associations before and after their public identification as sex offenders.

Previous Family Experiences

When reflecting on the quality of family relationships before their public identification as sex offenders, incarcerated sex offenders expressed both positive and negative outlooks. Almost without exception, sex offenders reporting positive family experiences described relationships that featured support, encouragement, and intimacy. Alternatively, those detailing negative family experiences discussed traumatic situations riddled with separation, violence, and sexual abuse.

Positive Experiences. Many incarcerated sex offenders perceived their family experiences positively before their public identification as sex offenders. Among those sex offenders who believed their families provided support, this belief appeared to be largely based on recollections of family members displaying compassion and generosity toward others. For instance, Jeff explained the loving actions of his spouse. "When my aunt came down with lung cancer," he recalled, "my wife went to [my aunt's hometown] for a year to take care of her." Interestingly, sex offenders rarely discussed being the personal recipients of such kind actions. As an exception, when these inmates described support they directly received, they discussed situations following their own poor decisions, for which they sought forgiveness. Thus, it was only after making errors in judgment that sex offenders described their family members as personally supportive. Marcus, a 45-year-old serving time for first degree sexual abuse, stated, "My parents were there even when I failed, even when I messed up."

More common, however, was the view that sex offenders themselves were somehow responsible for the supportive bonds that characterized their families. As Dylan, a child pornography offender, succinctly declared, "I was sort of the glue that kept my family together on the outside." Further elaborating on this shared perspective, Jack remarked, "I was there for my kids, playing sports, fixing their bikes, you name it, I'd do it for them."

In addition, some inmates referenced encouragement that was associated with positive family relationships prior to their sex offender status. Like many sex offenders, Brent, a 34-year-old serving time for second degree sodomy, recalled a particular family member constantly inspiring him to move beyond his mistakes. "My mother-in-law," he said, "used to tell me that you can't change the past, but you can always make the future a better place." Other sex offenders credited certain family members for their unwavering fortitude in prison. Jimmy, likely to be released in less than one month, asserted, "My family has always taught us to be confident." Likewise, scheduled to be released in less than three months, Reese recalled, "My mother always told me to do what you got to do, take it one day at a time, and see what happens." Families were often seen as sources of encouragement, leading sex offenders to recall happy and blissful memories of specific relatives. These recollections were important in that they served to provide a sense of hope to incarcerated sex offenders. While incarcerated, these inmates perceived such family encouragement positively, and they trusted and staunchly believed the advice of family members to be applicable to their future lives as identified sex offenders.

Many sex offenders also talked about positive family relationships that were characterized by significant levels of intimacy. Jeff, again wholly focused on his spouse, referenced the fondness that he had for her. "Women are not even in my world," he promised, "because I've never

found a woman that had anything my wife didn't have at home." Derrick also echoed these experiences of marital closeness, as he reflected on travels with his wife. Recalling how spontaneous adventures sustained their marriage, he excitedly declared, "When I was out, we went roaming the country, just wandering around." Although some sex offenders spoke primarily of marital accord, others discussed relationships with particular relatives that featured comforting, supportive, and pleasant experiences. Reflecting on life before he was identified as a sex offender, Mark cherished thoughts of the close-knit relationships he once had with his brother's children. "We were real close," he lamented, "me and my niece and nephew, all three were real close."

Prior to their identification as sex offenders, it became evident that inmates detailing close family relationships regularly maintained limited social contacts. As stated by Jaden, "I really didn't associate too much with anybody." Incarcerated sex offenders, separated physically and emotionally from their loved ones in the free world, often glamorized these affectionate aspects of their family relationships. Unable to experience meaningful connections in prison and isolated from their small social network, many sex offenders described physical and emotional connections with family which they could not have behind bars, but for which they yearned.

Negative Experiences. Although it was apparent that many incarcerated sex offenders perceived their family experiences positively, many also described negative family events that transpired prior to their identification as sex offenders. Near-universal themes expressed by sex offenders reporting negative family experiences were traumatic situations involving separation, violence, and sexual abuse. More often than not, separation in the form of parental divorce and family estrangement remained significant and prominent themes for these inmates throughout their lives. Sex offenders frequently related their predicament of incarceration to these dilemmas experienced earlier in their childhoods. Reflecting on the sudden death of his grandparents, John contended, "My whole world crumbled from the loss of two people." Like others, he attributed his prison sentence to earlier family tragedy.

Inner turmoil resulting from traumatic experiences and losses was common among sex offenders. When discussing these unfavorable family dynamics prior to their public recognition as sex offenders, many inmates rationalized the seemingly irresponsible behavior that was demonstrated by particular family members. As an example, Jerry explained the absence of his father from his childhood as a mere consequence of parents splitting up. Likewise, a few sex offenders emulated the somewhat erratic behavior of family members, and they often justified their decisions to do so by describing such actions as ordinary. This included the perpetuation of extramarital affairs and child abandonment. Here, clear evidence of

socialization was seen, in that these sex offenders looked to what they knew as “common” or “typical” behaviors – e.g., that which they experienced and learned from earlier in life – and determined that such actions were normative, despite such behaviors being illegal, harmful, or unhealthy.

Indeed, the fracturing of family bonds through separation clearly impacted many inmates before, oftentimes many years prior to, their public identification as sex offenders. As a result of family separation, many sex offenders placed at least partial responsibility on family members for their incarceration. Other sex offenders were left to defend the ostensibly distasteful behavior of certain family members, while some additional individuals admitted involvement in similar conduct. Regardless of exactly how much earlier in life these experiences occurred, inmates reporting such events universally expressed continued, mostly negative, resulting consequences.

Another common set of perceptions regarding negative family relationships centered on violence. For many sex offenders, violence was perceived to be a persistent, frequent, and expected component of family life. Incidents of both executed and witnessed physical assault and exertions of force were commonplace in their reflections on childhood, adolescence, and pre-prison adult experiences. The regularity of violent behavior between family members stood out as the most prominent memory and family experience in the minds of numerous sex offenders. According to Jerry, such customary family violence ultimately led to the death of his six-year-old son, who was killed by the child’s stepbrother with a shotgun.

Women were commonly the victims of described physical aggression within families, especially when sex offenders themselves were the assailants. Like many sex offenders, Aaron confessed, although reluctantly, to engaging in violence against women. “My ex-wife,” he said, “we got into it, and I did put my hands on her.” Some sex offenders experienced verbal conflicts with female significant others that routinely escalated into physical assaults. Blaming his cloudy memory and erratic behavior on crack cocaine use, Kelly admitted to one instance, saying, “I evidently assaulted my wife over a four day period of time.” Although inmates were not eager to admit to their personal involvement in such behavior, many sex offenders readily discussed the routine violence that surrounded their relationships with families of origin, significant others, and children. The inmates who participated in and witnessed violent behavior against women, before their public identification as sex offenders, subsequently committed sex offenses against women. Thus, a connection between violent behavior and sex offenses was established.

One perceived traumatic event with negative family associations that was not afforded justification or minimization by sex offenders was sexual abuse. Prior to their public identification as sex offenders, some inmates

reported witnessing sexual abuse of siblings at the hands of relatives. After revealing that his younger sister was molested as a child, Devon announced his severe dislike of sex offenders. “I’ve hated people like that my whole life,” he fumed. Like Devon, most sex offenders describing experiences of family sexual abuse refrained from including themselves in such narratives. However, Dylan briefly acknowledged, “I was molested growing up and stuff.” It was possible that a greater number of these sex offenders endured sexual abuse, as those revealing such experiences were often reluctant in doing so. When sex offenders discussed sexual abuse, they consistently referred to the molestation of close family members, and they expressed their abhorrence of such behavior. Despite their own sex offending, incarcerated sex offenders viewed sexual abuse by family members as appalling conduct.

The fact that some sex offenders disclosed experiences of family sexual abuse earlier in life may explain their own behavior as adults. Several sex offenders continued known family relationship patterns of sexual abuse by victimizing relatives themselves. Moreover, pronouncing family members as individuals suffering from sexual abuse allowed these sex offenders to divert attention away from themselves as victims.

Future Family Expectations

When considering family responses subsequent to their public identification as sex offenders, inmates also held both positive and negative outlooks. With only two exceptions, sex offenders anticipating positive family experiences upon release described personal acceptance, employment opportunities, and housing options. Following their labeling as sex offenders, most inmates, however, also expressed negative expectations for their families.

Positive Expectations. Nearly all incarcerated sex offenders expressed positive expectations for their families. The most common theme across sex offenders was the idea that at least some family members would accept them as individuals, despite their status as convicted sex offenders. “They’ll be there for me the same way as they always have,” announced Devon. These conclusions by sex offenders appeared to be based on past experiences, before their public identification as sex offenders, when family members were perceived positively. Despite their sex offenses, assumptions were also made by sex offenders that many relatives believed in their inherent goodness. As John attested, “I don’t see family rejecting me, because they know who I am.” Sex offenders recognized that family members did not approve of their sex offenses; however, they felt that their criminal behavior would not define them in the eyes of their family members.

Also common among sex offenders was the sentiment that particular family members naturally understood their plight more than others. More often than not, these family

members, credited with the ability to empathize, maintained close relationships with sex offenders before they were publicly identified as such. Already extremely close to his parents, Jerry stated, "I think my mother and father understand the situation I'm in." Moreover, some sex offenders indicated that those closest to them were aware of the full details of their sex offenses. Hunter declared, "My immediate family, they understand, they know the whole thing." These sex offenders were confident that such close family members would remain in their lives once they were released from prison. Perhaps this was because these people have previously supported sex offenders during their incarceration. As Devon reported, "I've got good parents, and they've been here for me the whole time."

For many incarcerated sex offenders, time spent in prison also helped them distinguish between accepting family members and those likely to reject them. According to Jack, who considered himself a seasoned inmate after nearly six years incarcerated, "When you come to jail, you find out who your family and friends are real quick." Indeed, sex offenders were certain that at least some family members, often those closest to them prior to their sex offenses, would remain accepting of them. At the same time, sex offenders realized that many relatives, usually those on the periphery of family ties, would reject them. This allowed most incarcerated sex offenders to look with confidence to their release dates, as at least a few family members were perceived as remaining supportive.

Another common positive theme voiced by incarcerated sex offenders concerned the potential for employment. Recognizing the various challenges ahead of them, sex offenders believed strongly that family relationships would provide them with necessary work opportunities to survive while on parole supervision. On the whole, family members were perceived as being the driving forces behind employment opportunities. In some cases, sex offenders expected that family members would provide them directly with employment. Nathan recalled, "My uncle owns his own business painting houses, and he said I could work for him." Several sex offenders also reported having received job offers from family members that were contingent on their behavior in the community. Reflecting on a promising position as a groundskeeper, Jimmy expressed, "My dad's got everything lined up for me, all I got to do is get out of here, and do what I'm supposed to do." Sex offenders largely anticipated advantageous employment opportunities garnered from family relationships.

For the few sex offenders that did not see family members providing them with immediate employment opportunities, these inmates were still confident with their chances of returning to work as a direct result of their relationships with relatives. This strong belief concerning their ability to obtain employment always emanated from relationships that sex offenders maintained with family. "I

might go back to one of the jobs that I used to have," Barry said, "because it's where my mom works." In the end, many sex offenders saw family relationships as a primarily pragmatic means to attaining work in the community.

Numerous sex offenders also described advantageous housing options stemming from family relationships. Most inmates holding this view anticipated being able to live with particular family members in the community. Those with whom sex offenders expected to live were consistently regarded by inmates in positive terms. As reported by Marcus, "I love my mom, and I know I'd be welcome there." Such positively perceived family members also seemed to play influential roles in the overall lives of sex offenders, both before and after their public identification as sex offenders. This was significant because housing options are especially critical for sex offenders, considering residency restrictions for these inmates exist in the jurisdictions where almost all will return. Other sex offenders believed family members were preparing home placements for them. "My sister's husband knows the owner of a halfway house," Aaron recounted, "and he set it up to where I could come there." Following their release from prison, sex offenders largely expected and depended on family relationships to offer them access to housing accommodations. Thus, practical matters related to housing were identified by incarcerated sex offenders as central to their expectations for family members.

Negative Expectations. In addition to positive expectations, most incarcerated sex offenders also held negative beliefs about their families. Almost without exception, inmates anticipating negative family experiences following their public identification as sex offenders described relationships riddled with rejection and doubt. For many sex offenders, serving prison time for sex offenses had left them with the expectation that at least some family members would reject them outright, simply because their offenses were sexual in nature. As stated by Edward, "My ex-wife, stepdaughter, and stepson kicked me to the curb after all this." After pointing out his parents as supportive, Jerry conversely surmised, "My sister, that's another story." More often than not, these family members, perceived as very likely to reject the offender, did not maintain close relationships with inmates before their public labeling as sex offenders. Family separation, which was conspicuous in the lives of inmates before their public sex offender status, surfaced again to explain prolonged distance among certain family members. In this way, one's sex offenses or criminal actions were not necessarily the issue, although being labeled as a sex offender was certainly perceived to solidify or maintain the disposition of these relationships.

The sexual nature of their offenses prompted several sex offenders to speculate as to whether or not family would accept them. Although he reported having no adversaries prior to his public identification as a sex

offender, Hunter was quite aware that many people now despised him, including some family members. "My in-laws," he concluded, "are going to be my enemies." As with most sex offenders, Hunter observed that specific family members would repudiate him simply because he committed sex offenses. Sex offenders identified both family members who were certain to reject them and those likely to reject them, while focusing on the nature of sex offenses as potentially troublesome for family relationships.

It is important to note that some inmates felt their status as sex offenders thwarted family interactions. In other words, if they had been classified as another type of offender, some sex offenders believed that family reactions would be different. In the words of Aaron, "A sex offender has to always be careful of everything they say and do, because you never know how a person might take it." Because they were labeled as criminals engaged in sexual misconduct, these sex offenders felt that at least some family members would be unable to tolerate their actions. Perhaps the loathing of sexual abuse, which was prevalent before their identification as sex offenders, caused these inmates to become concerned how family members would regard them.

Common across these sex offenders was a strong belief that family members would likely direct feelings of doubt or uncertainty toward them. No matter how accepting or supportive loved ones appeared, these sex offenders anticipated that many family members would question their integrity and character, even if they did not overtly reject or distance them. Jerry asserted, "At first, a lot of them are going to be glad to see me, but after that, they'll have that doubt in their minds." Their concerns were aggravated when thinking about family members with children. "In the back of your family's mind," Hunter advised, "they're always going to have a small doubt, especially if they got kids." Jimmy worried that his adult children would harbor ill-will toward him for being a sex offender. "They say they forgive me," he said, "but they hold grudges, and I know it."

An additional issue for these sex offenders was a sense of doubt and uncertainty about whether family relationships could be maintained in any form. This was most prevalent when inmates contemplated whether or not their spouses remained faithful to them throughout their incarceration. Hunter, likely to serve another two years in prison, expressed, "I just hope I don't get out too late, before my wife ends up getting lonely." Although many inmates anticipated outward support from their families, these sex offenders were still distressed over the possibility of encountering doubt and uncertainty from at least some family members.

It is important to note that most incarcerated sex offenders reported never receiving visits from family members. When sex offenders discussed family visits taking place, they were extremely limited and certainly

uncommon. Many inmates attempted to downplay this absence of face-to-face meetings with family. Some sex offenders indicated that the lack of family visits was not necessarily harmful, as receipt of routine visits would likely prove to be personally detrimental. According to Jack, "I don't deal with visiting, because I don't take visiting very well, because my wife and my kids have to leave and they end up crying." These inmates often expressed a preference for phone calls and letters, as the inherent physical distance present in such written and verbal correspondence allowed them to keep family members somewhat removed from their incarceration as sex offenders. Other sex offenders placed responsibility on the correctional facility to explain their limited visits from family. According to Reese, "When my family gets through that gate, they got their rules and regulations they have to follow, and it's a pain." Nathan blamed the correctional facility's architecture. "My three oldest, they didn't like coming up," he stated, "because of the barbed wire and fences." Some inmates felt that the remote location of the prison was problematic for their families. "It's hard for them to come all the way out here," Hunter contended. Similarly, Larry expressed, "It's a pretty long haul for them to come." Although incarcerated sex offenders largely suggested that absent or limited family contact was of little or no importance to them, it appeared that these inmates intentionally minimized the negative impact of this reality.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the perceptions of incarcerated sex offenders about previous experiences with and future expectations for their families. By means of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this paper highlights the perceived quality of family relationships before and after their public identification as sex offenders. These incarcerated sex offenders held both positive and negative outlooks prior and subsequent to their labeling as sex offenders. The results of this study lend support to the existing literature about publicly identified sex offenders, provide insights into family dynamics and societal reintegration among known sex offenders, and suggest directions for future research.

Almost without exception, sex offenders reporting positive family experiences prior to their public identification described relationships that featured support, encouragement, and intimacy. However, sex offenders only described their family members as demonstrating support for them for the period following their offending and identification as an offender. Perhaps family members were largely unsupportive earlier in their lives, which may explain the view that sex offenders themselves were somehow mostly responsible for the supportive bonds that characterized their families. Similarly, although families

were often seen as sources of encouragement, sex offenders only recalled happy and blissful memories of specific relatives, suggesting that other family members may not have been associated with positive recollections.

Indeed, sex offenders also discussed traumatic family situations prior to their public identification, including separation, violence, and sexual abuse. This may explain their sex offending behavior later in life, which is consistent with earlier research contending that many sex offenders experience damaging and volatile family relationships throughout their childhood (Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, and Kaplan 1987; Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack 1987). These negative family experiences also likely account for the considerable reluctance among sex offenders to describe in detail negatively perceived family members. More research should consider how such absence of specificity impacts both sex offenders and other inmates returning to society from prison, especially in regard to quality of life issues and future offending.

Family intimacy reported by sex offenders prior to their public identification focused on specific relatives, but also exposed strong emotional dependency on their small social network. Evidence of limited social connections among sex offenders is consistent with earlier research, which found antisocial orientation to be a major predictor of sexual recidivism for adult offenders (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon 2005). Recollections by sex offenders also often glamorized these specific affectionate aspects of their family relationships before their public labeling. These findings illustrate the fact that positive social relationships should remain steadfast, in order to successfully assist sex offenders both while behind bars and upon reentering society. Ideally, these family relationships would provide sex offenders with extended social networks and increase their exposure to healthy associations that promote a sense of belonging and law-abiding conduct.

The majority of sex offenders approaching their return to society believed strongly that family relationships would provide them with necessary work opportunities to survive in the community. This finding is also congruent with prior research, which suggests that family members may be instrumental in assisting ex-offenders with employment (Berg and Huebner 2011). Also consistent with earlier research, which found that many former inmates intend to live with their families immediately following their incarceration (La Vigne et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 1999; Visher et al. 2004; Visher et al. 2010), numerous sex offenders anticipated advantageous housing options stemming from family relationships. However, for many released sex offenders, employment and housing emanating from family relationships may not be feasible or realistic. Family members, in reality, may be unwilling or unable to provide employment opportunities and housing accommodations for a known sex offender. This is likely

to be the result of both legal restrictions (such as residency restrictions) and the stigma that is associated with labeling as a sex offender (Tewksbury in press; Tewksbury and Lees 2006, 2007). A "courtesy stigma" may also be attached to families for providing support to sex offenders (Farkas and Miller 2007; Goffman 1963). Nonetheless, findings from this study indicate that family relationships appear to be the most consistent and reliable way in which incarcerated sex offenders may obtain work and housing in the community.

This research is not without limitations. First, the sample is small and drawn from only one jurisdiction and institution – therefore, readers should generalize from this sample with caution. Also, as interviews focused in part on past experiences, sometimes including events many years earlier, it is possible that both the passage of time and the effects of stigma recognition on the part of these sex offenders may have modified the ways that recollections are constructed and reported. Despite these limitations, this study sheds light on the ways that soon-to-be-released, incarcerated sex offenders approach their families and return to the community.

Although both positive and negative issues pervade the family experiences and expectations of sex offenders, these findings reflect both consistencies and variations across inmates. To more fully understand how the public identification of sex offenders impacts their reintegration, especially in regards to social support, more research should center on the experiences, approaches, and obstacles for sex offenders reentering communities. By further studying characteristics of social support within family units, it may be possible to identify ways in which loved ones can effectively assist sex offenders with their return to society. This may also allow for the enhancement and promotion of reentry efforts specifically designed for sex offenders. Ultimately, a more thorough understanding of sex offenders and their families may lead to reduced recidivism rates, increasing the opportunity for successful reintegration.

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