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## Solid Start: supportive housing, social support, and reentry transitions

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Researchers have consistently established the centrality of the reentry experience in understanding offender life course trajectories, and housing has been cited as one of the most central bricks in establishing stable, successful lives. However, the social and structural mechanisms that explain the relationship between housing and parolee outcomes are less known. To explore this, we use in-depth interviews and a grounded theory approach to compare the reentry needs among a sample of male parolees participating in a housing program, Solid Start, with a similar sample of males on traditional parole. The results highlight the centrality of housing and social support during the reentry process, and find that housing services have important implications for structural changes, such as social relationships, and subjective, emotional outcomes. This research adds to the burgeoning literature on reentry transitions by providing narrative accounts of parolee experiences and has important implications for housing assistance programs.

**Keywords:** prisoner reentry; housing; social support; programs

### Introduction

A growing body of literature suggests that the provision of stable, independent housing is a central element in helping high-risk offenders who successfully integrate into the community upon release from prison (Roman and Travis 2006). While many offenders rely on social support networks such as family or friends for housing, this option is neither universally available nor permanent (Braman 2007; Naser and Visher 2006). Approximately 10–20% of offenders are released from prison without a home plan, and housing challenges are particularly acute in some urban areas (Rodriguez and Brown 2003; Roman and Travis 2006). Furthermore, the demand for public housing far outpaces the supply, and there are frequent, multi-year waiting lists for public housing (Graffam, Shinkfield, and Hardcastle 2008; Travis 2005). Research also suggests that building managers display reticence in renting to persons with criminal histories (Clark 2007; Thacher 2008), and offenders are financially stymied from obtaining individual housing, often hindered by poor credit and limited employment and wage prospects (Bradley et al. 2001; Graffam, Shinkfield, and Hardcastle 2008; Harris, Evans, and Beckett 2010).

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The need for housing is critical among the parolee population as it provides a base for service provision, facilitates community integration, and can help to build social capital (Bradley et al. 2001; Metraux and Culhane 2004; Padgett et al. 2011). Yet, the theoretical mechanisms that link housing to desistance are less understood. Scholars have argued that stable housing may facilitate cognitive transformation and engender agency, which are key components of desistance from offending (LeBel et al. 2008). There is emerging evidence that housing can help facilitate both structural changes, like increased employment, and psychological growth that may enhance success on parole, but most of the work has focused on recidivism (Latessa, Lovins, and Smith 2010; LeBel et al. 2008; Makarios, Steiner, and Travis 2010). Similarly, there is a developing literature that documents the types of housing programming available for parolees (see Solomon et al. 2005), but little research considers the relationship between housing and emotional changes that may engender the attainment of goals over the life course, and vice versa.

The goal of this study is to begin to address this dearth in the literature by considering the efficacy and experience of a parolee housing assistance program. Using data from in-depth qualitative interviews and a grounded theory approach, the current research compares parolees' narrative accounts of participation in a housing assistance program, Solid Start, with a similar sample of parolees not relying on housing assistance. We explore how differential housing experiences and the provision of alternative social support mechanisms relate to emotional, subjective changes over the reentry period. Implications for the housing assistance literature and policy on offender reentry are discussed.

### Structural factors

Housing provides the foundation for a successful reentry transition. Much of the literature evaluating transitions from prison to the community link stable housing to decreased recidivism, improvement in employment prospects, and enhanced opportunities to build a foundation for positive social relationships (Bradley et al. 2001; Metraux and Culhane 2004; Padgett et al. 2011; Yahner and Visher 2008). In the larger social service sphere, the growth of a 'housing first' movement has highlighted the practical role of housing in the achievement of public health goals. The model rests on the assumption that providing immediate, safe housing stabilizes the individual and facilitates the success of concomitant service provisions, particularly substance abuse treatment (Padgett et al. 2011). Therefore, prioritizing housing may increase the efficacy of ancillary services and programming, and contribute to success on parole.

Individuals returning home from prison require instant housing attention, particularly during the high-risk period immediately following release (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). While most are able to secure housing, residential instability is quite common among parolee populations (Brooks et al. 2008; La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; Makarios, Steiner, and Travis 2010; Huebner and Pleggenkuhle *forthcoming*). Movement following release may present additional problems as stable housing acts as an anchor, facilitating community integration by building social capital and social networks (Clear 2007; Coleman 1990; Haynie and South 2005) while also providing stability as individuals seek out employment, substance abuse treatment, and other services (Padgett et al. 2011).

Social relationships are essential to offender reentry and are often precursors to housing assistance (Mills and Codd 2008; Naser and La Vigne 2006; Visher and Travis 2003). Many offenders rely on family and friends to provide living arrangements immediately after incarceration. For example, interviews with offenders released in

New York City indicated that the most important functions of family were emotional support and housing assistance (Nelson, Deess, and Allen 1999). Many studies find that family is the normative provider of housing post-release, as more than half of offenders report living with family in the months following release from incarceration (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; Yahner and Visser 2008). Yahner and Visser (2008) indicate this dependence is long-term in nature, finding only 19% of their respondents were able to establish independent housing nearly a year and a half after release. While living with family provides immediate social and material benefits (see Naser and Visser 2006; Visser and Travis 2003), this opportunity is neither uniformly available nor a permanent option for all parolees. As a result, housing programming becomes a central need during reentry.

Reentry housing programs vary in format and service provision. Many housing programs, such as group homes and transitional facilities, provide congregate housing as an alternative to establishing immediate, independent housing (Latessa, Lovins, and Smith 2010). Travis (2005) advocates for housing programs that act as a 'bridge' – offering intensive initial assistance that ultimately links to self-supporting behaviors and more permanent residency. Limited outcome evaluations have been conducted on many of these programs though some early results indicate reduced recidivism for substance abuse and sex offender programs (Jengeleski and Gordon 2003; Willison et al. 2010). Morani et al. (2011) evaluated a housing program that offered financial assistance to returning offenders to cover the costs of housing and other needs. Participants designated half of the financial aid to housing, in addition to other needs such as food, transportation, and clothing. Most program participants (69%) were able to find long-term residential placement.

Establishing immediate and independent housing has been shown to have positive, long-term effects on well-being. Most research regarding housing first models has been conducted in public health, but there is evidence that this type of model has promise for reentry populations, such as offenders with drug addiction. Padgett et al. (2011) examined a population of homeless and mentally ill individuals and found that centering service provisions on acquiring a stable residence enhanced positive outcomes for substance abuse treatment programs. Treatment-focused participants were more than three times as likely to use drugs compared with those participants with housing as the first and central service provided (Padgett et al. 2011). Others have found that a housing first model fostered feelings of trust and accountability between service providers and clients, as well as increased housing stability among transient populations (Tidderington, Stanhope, and Henwood 2013; Tsemberis, Gulcar, and Nakae 2004). Program evaluations suggest the housing first model has great promise, but less is known about the types of housing available and service provisions that are useful for general offender populations (Padgett, Gulcar, and Tsemberis 2006).

### **Subjective–social factors**

Life course scholars suggest that both subjective (e.g., motivation and self-concept) and social/structural factors (e.g., relationships or employment) influence desistance (Maruna 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Kazemian 2007). While the housing first movement attempts to address social factors, especially critical reentry needs, less is understood how these intersect with subjective, emotional transformations. LeBel et al. (2008) attempt to untangle the relationship between social and subjective changes using a prospective dataset of 126 male offenders and find that subjective states prior to release from prison have direct effects on recidivism and indirect effects on the social factors

related to recidivism post-release. Essentially, Lebel et al. establish the sequencing of subjective and social changes matters for desistance. This linkage is vital to the reentry process where uncovering changes within the individual as social circumstances change is essential to understanding success on parole (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Maruna 2001). Moreover, the authors found that participants with greater feelings of hope and optimism were less likely to be reconvicted while those with more reentry problems were more likely to be reconvicted. Furthermore, the experience of stigma upon release is related to recidivism, so it is plausible that reintegration is a critical component of the dynamic and reflexive reentry process. While LeBel et al. (2008) suggest that the cognitive shift begins before release, uncovering how social and structural changes post-release influences ongoing identity transformation is necessary to enhancing the reentry process.

## Data and method

### *Program description*

The Solid Start program is a voluntary housing program managed and operated by the Criminal Justice Ministry (CJM), a Catholic charity in St Louis, Missouri. The program provides housing for approximately 30 male parolees per year. Eligibility criteria include one or more of the following: a long stay of incarceration (traditionally > 10 years), little social support in the community, substantial child support or other financial obligations, no consistent work history, a 'maxed out' their prison sentence, or mild-to-moderate mental health disorder.

The program is 1 year in length, and participants can enter directly from prison or after a short stay in the community. Participants must volunteer for the program, and clients can take several pathways to the program. CJM posts informational documents on the program in prison and distributes flyers to local service agencies and the Missouri Department of Probation and Parole, and several clients indicated they learned about the program through word of mouth. The program staff screens all applicants. Parolees who are not willing to abide by programmatic guidelines or have severe mental illness or substance abuse needs are not accepted into the program.<sup>1</sup>

The program model centers on housing provision and social support. The organization maintains contracts with local landlords for safe, furnished apartments that are dispersed throughout the city, rather than concentrated in one area. CJM pays the security deposit and rent for the first 3 months, and then rental payments step down each month thereafter until the 12th month when the parolee takes over paying his rent in full. Beyond housing, the program follows a case management approach where additional individual support is provided based on the parolee's need, and services are coordinated with the client's parole officer (e.g., transportation or program referrals). During regular office appointments with their case manager, progress toward goals is assessed and discussed. CJM also requires weekly group therapy sessions that act as a support group and forum for accountability among parolees in the program.

### *Data and sample*

Data for this study come from two contemporaneous qualitative studies occurring in 2010. The first study collected interviews with parolees participating in the Solid Start program. The comparison group comes from a larger study on offender reentry. Eighteen men who have characteristics similar to the men in Solid Start were selected from this study. The groups were closely matched on demographic characteristics and data.

The Solid Start sample includes all 18 individuals enrolled in the program at the time of data collection. The study was developed as a preliminary program evaluation designed to consider program provisions, including strengths and weaknesses, and to gain better insights into the challenges parolees face when returning from prison to the community. To complete this task, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants in private offices at the program site.

The comparison group consisted male parolees who were interviewed as part of a larger study investigating reentry transitions (see Huebner et al. 2014). Individuals in this study were recruited by researchers at parole offices and community supervision centers. None of the participants of this study were ever involved with Solid Start. Eighteen interviewees were matched with the Solid Start sample based on demographic and offense characteristics and residence location.<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted in private offices at the community supervision office. In both studies, interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and cash incentives provided.

Demographic characteristics of both samples were representative of the Missouri correctional population and are presented in Table 1 (Lombardi 2010). Parolees in both samples were primarily white and substance abuse was prevalent among them.<sup>3</sup> Most of the parolees had been employed before their arrest, though rates of post-release employment were lower. Solid Start participants had served longer sentences in prison, averaging of 8 years (98.1 months) before their current release, and the difference between groups was statistically significant. Solid Start participants were more likely to have served time for a violent (50%) or drug offense (33%), whereas the comparison group was most often returning home from a violent charge (61%). Finally, the comparison group was statistically more likely to have earned a high school diploma or equivalent.

Both studies employed identical methodology, which included digitally recorded in-depth interviews using the same interview guide, and all participants were assured confidentiality and signed a consent form. The interview guide was semi-structured and modeled after prior research of this type and covered a range of topics of both prison life and reentry, including housing, employment, substance abuse, treatment, and mental health

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sample.

Variable	Overall ( $n = 36$ )	Solid Start ( $n = 18$ )	Comparison ( $n = 18$ )
Age	37.5	40.8	34.2
White (%)	58.3	61.1	55.6
Substance abuse (%)	83.3	77.8	88.9
Mental health (%)	26.5	23.5	29.4
High school diploma* (%)	54.8	47.1	64.3
<i>Criminal history</i>			
Property (%)	19.4	16.7	22.2
Drug (%)	25.0	33.3	16.7
Violent (%)	55.6	50.0	61.1
First incarceration (%)	48.5	55.6	40.0
Number of incarcerations	1.88 (1.60)	2.13 (2.07)	1.67 (1.09)
New arrest since release (%)	6.1	5.6	6.7
Parole violation (%)	30.3	22.2	40.0
Served time (in months)*	69.63 (61.64)	98.13 (75.73)	38.23 (18.21)
Months since release*	10.77 (10.24)	9.19 (4.68)	12.44 (13.92)

Notes: Between group differences for significance using  $t$ -tests and chi-square test. Significant differences between Solid Start and comparison samples are noted.

\* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test).

(see Visher, LaVigne, and Travis 2004). Parolees were probed about their expectations for the future and their ability to be successful, such as ‘Where do you see yourself one year from now?’<sup>4</sup> Parolees in the Solid Start sample were asked additional questions about the impact of the program on their reentry including perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

### Analysis

All interview transcriptions were imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo (Version 10, QSR International Pty Ltd 2012). The current analysis proceeded in three phases. First, a grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data (Charmaz 2006). This approach utilizes an open coding technique that allows for inductive analysis. Open coding involves first reading the data and applying themes or codes to particular actions, thoughts, or descriptions. Then, a focused coding approach analyzed these themes for additional subthemes. For this study, focused coding analysis involved examining patterns in offender statements related to their housing, social support, and reintegration to the community. The final stage of analysis included a comparative approach. This technique involves comparing statements within and across interviews of both groups to demonstrate additional patterns and themes. To enhance the validity and reliability of the coding schemes, two researchers were involved in individual analysis, and then corroborated their findings. Any ambiguous themes were then compared and discussed to reach consensus. The illustrations typify the most common patterns in the offender’s accounts.

### Results

The results bifurcate into two broad provisions from Solid Start: housing and social support experiences. First, the role of Solid Start in overcoming housing challenges is highlighted, as well as its provision of a unique social support network. We then discuss our emergent finding that peer networks and attitudinal shifts were related to the differential housing experiences, demonstrating the intersection between social (housing, stability, and social support) and subjective factors (attitudes). Table 2 provides a comparative overview of housing and social support experiences post-release, which are further highlighted throughout the ‘Results’ section.

Table 2. Housing and social support experiences of sample.

Housing	Overall ( <i>n</i> = 36)	Solid Start ( <i>n</i> = 18)	Comparison ( <i>n</i> = 18)
Number of residential moves	0.94	1.18 (0.95)	0.72 (0.90)
Resided in transitional housing** (%)	41.7	66.7	16.7
Felt housing was permanent housing*** (%)	74.2	94.4	33.3
<i>Social support</i>			
Picked up from prison by social support: <i>family, intimate partner, friend</i> ** (%)	57.3	38.9	78.8
Received any support (%)	94.4	88.9	100.0
Received emotional support (%)	88.9	83.3	94.4
Received material support** (%)	66.7	44.4	88.9

Notes: Between group differences for significance using *t*-tests and chi-square test. Significant differences between Solid Start and comparison samples are noted.

\*\**p* < 0.01, \*\*\**p* < 0.001 (two-tailed test).



### *Housing placement and independence*

All respondents documented challenges in finding housing upon release, but Solid Start participants reported fewer problems and were more satisfied with their current residential situations. In the study state, parolees must have an approved home plan prior to release. The comparison group often returned to live with family (83%) whereas Solid Start participants were likely to rely on the state-run transitional housing facility (67%). Both groups paroled to homes they considered nonpermanent options and they experienced obstacles in finding reliable housing, independent of residential history and access to social support.

Parolees in both groups reported encountering landlords who were reluctant to lease rental property, citing criminal backgrounds and poor credit history. Landlords increasingly utilize criminal history and credit checks and potential tenants with felony convictions and unstable finances are the least desirable (Thacher 2008). Bradley, a Solid Start parolee, described landlords as reluctant to 'accept my conviction.' To navigate this challenge, parolees seek out landlords who will bypass these checks but at an increased cost. In one notable case, a comparison group participant paid a large deposit on an apartment to avoid the credit check. John explained about his landlord: 'He owns his own property and he requires a \$900 deposit because he doesn't do a credit check or a background check.' This situation was remarkable considering median rent for properties in the St Louis is approximately \$700, showing an increase of several hundred dollars to find suitable housing (Kresin and Schwartz 2010). Frank, a member of the comparison group and living with his mother, indicated that his felony status was not disclosed to the landlord because 'If they did [know], I wouldn't be living there. They kinda look down on these people.' Frank also experienced housing discrimination when searching for an independent home, stating 'people treat you like you're not allowed to live here.' Frank had few alternative options aside from continuing to live with his mother, as he had done for the prior 3 years.

In contrast to comparison group experiences, Solid Start parolees benefitted from direct housing provision. Recall that Solid Start had connections with landlords who rent to felons participating in the program. In cases of long-term incarceration, participants had little knowledge of how to obtain housing upon release from prison, and lacked the support network to assist them. Alfred came to Solid Start after serving nearly two decades in prison for second-degree murder. Alfred met a Solid Start employee at a state-run transitional housing facility. He had been seeking out employment and housing programs, but struggled as he explained, 'I mean, it's been so long since I've rented a place, you know? No credit. I didn't have bad credit; I just didn't have any credit, right?' To address this issue, Solid Start case managers relied on their housing contacts to locate an appropriate residence and coordinate the lease. To Alfred, this also meant to opportunity to leave the state-run transitional housing facility and pursue independent living. Alfred stated, 'They helped me put the deposit down on my place. They helped me get a place to live and helped me get out of the [transitional housing facility].'

Parolees often return to precarious financial circumstances and generally lack economic capital, which further limits housing options. Solid Start played a central role in helping parolees to overcome the financial obstacles to independent living. Approximately half of the offenders ( $n = 8$ ) in the comparison group indicated that financial constraints contributed to their inability to procure independent housing.<sup>5</sup> Robert, who was living with his sister, anticipated he would continue living with her until he was able to secure employment and accumulate savings. Despite the willingness of his sister to provide him



a place to live, Robert felt his life was still out of order, citing that he did not have a stable place to re-establish a relationship with his children. In general, the comparison group relied heavily on family and friends to gain financial support for housing. For example, David resided with his aunt and paid only \$50 per month in rent. Although he expressed appreciation to his aunt, David felt he would be more successful in pursuing higher education and better employment if he had independent housing. To David, and other comparison group members, living independently would symbolize greater control over their lives overall. Continued reliance on their social supports facilitated feelings of a powerlessness to reach other important milestones.

While both groups received housing support, Solid Start participants indicated that they felt more autonomous, whereas dependence on others was a recurring theme among the comparison group. Solid Start parolees admitted they needed assistance in getting on their feet, but they perceived greater personal agency and viewed the support as temporary in nature. The comparison group was more pessimistic about future opportunities and felt they would be financially tethered to family and friends for a longer period of time. Although Solid Start provides initial financial capital, a key component of the program is that it gradually transfers financial responsibility to the parolee. This process teaches basic financial and life skills to participants as well as contributes to their sense of independence as they take over rent payments. Jacob came to Solid Start after learning more about the program through a CJM case manager. At the time of his interview, he had lived in his own apartment for 5 months, following 6 months at a halfway house, and provided an overview of the program model: up to ‘the fourth month you pay \$50. Then your fifth month you pay \$100. And so on, it goes up. Based on your income, it goes up.’ After 4 months, the parolee is obligated to take on a portion of the rental obligation, but flexibility is allowed based on individual’s circumstance and needs. For example, Jonathan struggled with securing steady employment upon release from prison and his financial payments differed as a result. After the 4th month he began paying only \$25 (as opposed to \$50), then gradually increased payments as he obtained more consistent income by reinstating disability payments supplemented by part-time work with a local church. The participants expressed appreciation for the flexibility the program offered, accounting for individual circumstance. Overall, Solid Start participants felt better integrated into their community and capable of stabilizing their lives due to their independent home placement.

### *Housing stability and safety*

Housing instability post-incarceration is common, given the heavy reliance on temporary (both familial and official) structures (Petersilia 2003). Both groups reported an average of fewer than two residential moves post-release, yet had strikingly different perceptions of housing stability and safety (see Table 2). The comparison group felt grateful to their families for housing support, but perceived their current housing situation as non-permanent. This perception of instability was associated with increased frustration and anxiety in the parole process. Despite social support networks, the comparison group felt less commitment and attachment to their housing situation. Most comparison group members made limited financial contributions for housing and usually maintained informal leases making abrupt residential shifts possible. For example, David initially lived with his girlfriend after prison, then moved in with his mother, and was living with his aunt at the time of the interview, all of which occurred within 6 months. This degree of mobility often reflected family conflict, changing relationships, or financial strain where the individuals providing housing was either unable or unwilling to continue their support.

In contrast, Solid Start parolees felt confident and secure in their current residence, and all but one of the Solid Start parolees expressed intent to continue living in the same residence after the program was completed. For example, Leon wanted to renew his lease after graduation from the program 'because it works for me.' He noted that the residence had easy access to public transportation and felt safe within his neighborhood. In contrast, only one-third of the comparison group described their current residence as permanent, and expressed eagerness to obtain individual housing as opposed to continued residence with family and friends.

Members of the comparison group were also more likely to report that they were living in undesirable or criminogenic environments. Several described feeling trapped because they lacked the finances to move, and were anxious about encountering negative situations. David, who lived with his aunt and her boyfriend, appreciated the stable residence and affordability yet considered it an environment that could potentially land him in trouble. He explained:

I noticed that a lot of people that stay down where I'm staying at now, a lot of them get trapped up in the inner workings . . . and people just get stuck down there, getting high and doing all kinds of stupid stuff . . . It's not anything that I want to be around. 'Cause I'm on five years paper, and I can't mess it up.

In contrast, by participating in the Solid Start program, Floyd was able to avoid 'all the wrong people and all the wrong places.' Floyd admitted that he had a drug problem, and his current residence was far away from the individuals with whom he used to abuse methamphetamine. The program offered alternatives to residing in these unsafe environments, seeking out housing options with landlords and in neighborhoods that supported safety and stability.

### ***Social support: family and peers***

Like housing, social support is an essential component of successful reentry (Naser and Visser 2006; Visser and Travis 2003; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; LeBel et al. 2008). Much desistance work highlights the important role of prosocial supports, attributing successful reentry in part to regaining fulfilling social roles and benefitting from basic forms of support (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003; Naser and La Vigne 2006). Table 2 demonstrates Solid Start participants reported less material familial support overall upon entry into the program than the comparison group. Solid Start participants also experienced a higher degree of emotional distance from their social support systems often due to geographic distance and familial conflict. Some participants intentionally alienated themselves from family and friends, citing the relationships and environment as criminogenic. For example, most of Glenn's family was deceased and his brother was involved in illegal activities. Despite no other support options, Glenn chose to separate from his brother, which he felt was to his benefit, and therefore relied on the support networks at Solid Start. Although Derek loved his family in Florida, he recognized it is 'not a healthy environment down there for me, even though it is my family. I need to concentrate on me.' Derek felt his brother helped facilitate his relapse into drug use and by establishing a separate life in Saint Louis let him concentrate on choice and kept him on a better path. Others were not offered support from family because past criminal behaviors had severed bonds. In two cases, participants reported that housing and other material support was not offered 'this time around', due to lack of change when support had previously been offered. Leon, for instance, explained that due to his prior struggle with addiction, his father was reluctant to offer housing,

though there was still encouragement provided. For him, Solid Start was a way to stabilize his living situation so he could address substance abuse issues.

The Solid Start program provided not only a substitute, but a complementary form of social support. Solid Start staff certainly provided basic emotional support, being on-call to the participants and aiding in societal transitions post-incarceration. Derek stated how overwhelmed he felt upon release, citing confusion and anxiety during his initial trip to the grocery store. A staff member accompanied and aided him in evaluating products and making price comparisons, while providing guidance and advice. Derek further explained the support from the staff member was not based on friendship, stating 'we're not buddies or nothing like that,' but that the consistent support and guidance was highly valued. Prior to incarceration, Leon had worked for an agency that provided services to the homeless population and expressed unfamiliarity in leaning on others for social support. He realized the necessity of the available resources, and particularly valued the 'give and take' of the program.

When describing the emotional support provided by Solid Start, it was clear that this type of support also was centered on facilitating independence. While readily available, the program participants recognized their progress and considered the staff to be competent advisors who helped to produce reentry success as opposed to providing support without an expectation of growth. Additional narratives of the program description echoed Leon's description of 'give and take', the aid provided with an expectancy of change.

Peer relationships emerged as an important theme in the data. Nearly half ( $n = 16$ ) of all parolees in this study recognized their friendship networks immediately before incarceration as criminogenic, particularly those in the comparison group ( $n = 10$ ). The connection between criminogenic peers and criminal behaviors is well documented, and breaking away from negative social groups may be an important catalyst of desistance (Warr 1998). Robert, a member of the comparison sample, described his friends as 'trouble,' explaining drug use as normative behavior in his peer group. The parolees deemed these peer networks as potentially criminogenic, preferring to isolate themselves and minimize the risk of experiencing setbacks. Similarly, Frank expressed his seclusion: 'I don't have any friends. Friends will get you in trouble.'

The experience of the comparison group is contrasted by the extended and unique peer social support relationships facilitated through Solid Start. Solid Start required participants to attend bi-weekly meetings that focused on sharing emotions, experiences, and solving problems. Entitled the 'Stay Out' group, this opportunity was highly valued among the parolees for its motivational and therapeutic benefits. The Solid Start participants noted the benefit of similarly structured groups like Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous, but perceived Stay Out as a mechanism to staying out of prison. The broad focus of the group allowed parolees to share challenges and receive advice and support from similarly situated peers in a nonjudgmental and relatable environment. Kyle, who had been incarcerated numerous times over 22 years and was part of the Solid Start program for 3 months, explained, 'We come in and discuss our victories and defeats and the problems we're having.' The opportunity to share similar challenges with peers was a significant resource. Derek stated:

Every now and then someone says positive things that I relate to and I can say 'that's happened to me before' and they're like 'this is how I deal with it' and I'm like 'this is how I deal with it.'

Derek cited the most helpful portion of the program were these positive interactions and discussions with other parolees. In particular, the environment was valued as an

opportunity to admit temptation and find solutions without judgment. Solid Start participants felt that the small peer group meetings offered an environment where achievements were acknowledged and was perceived as a safe place to share challenges and develop solutions, as well as a source of hope from successfully transitioned parolees. Lee contrasted the Solid Start program with earlier programming experiences, stating it was supportive and helped to understand how to avoid or learn from mistakes specifically, as opposed to immediate judgment or behavior enablement.

The development of social support is a vital aspect of reentry and the Solid Start program was able to serve as a proxy for the participants' lack of consistent or viable support networks. Although the comparison group identified a higher number of support actors in their networks, they were less likely to report a consistent support that aided in their stability and independence upon release. The combined effort of both material and emotional support is important, as both are necessary for successful reintegration into the community.

### *Personal agency and attitude change*

Positive cognitive changes are a strong correlate of desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Maruna 2001). In general, both groups expressed optimism about the future by articulating positive goals for employment, housing, and family connections, with a determination they would maintain crime-free lives. Stability emerged as a goal for both groups, particularly within the realm of employment and financial circumstance. The two groups had differing perceptions of future housing stability. Solid Start parolees already felt residentially stable, whereas the comparison group expressed a sincere, though tenuous, hope of obtaining residential independence and stability. Robert, a comparison parolee, illustrated this stating, 'Hopefully if you came back in a year, I should be in my own house. Give me a good year, I should be in own apartment or something. Working good.' For the comparison group, residential independence signified both stability and autonomy, and would represent a successful reentry experience.

Although both groups expressed optimism in their future plans, the comparison group was more ambiguous in their description of employment goals, explaining that they hoped to 'just be working' and earning good money. For example, John expressed an intent to 'go to school' and 'get some type of training' without any further specification. Those looking to go into business for themselves demonstrated little organization or plans to accomplish such ambitious goals. In contrast, Solid Start parolees were more articulate and clear when describing future plans. For example, Solid Start parolees identified specific career paths or more definite educational or vocational plans. To illustrate, Bradley hoped to be 'going to school for heating and cooling,' and provided details about the specific school in which he planned to enroll. Lloyd explained that he had the 'ability to actually put my ideas and goals into action as opposed to just think about them and daydream,' and demonstrated his capabilities by explaining that he had scheduled meetings with bankers for a start-up business loan. The future descriptions demonstrated a likelihood of change through personal agency; the Solid Start parolees were able to see their individual role in accomplishing future goals.

Furthermore, the Solid Start offenders were also more aware of potential obstacles or barriers they may face in attaining goals. They demonstrated a more pragmatic and realistic attitude in descriptions of the future. Tommy, a Solid Start parolee, had some college credits and was working through an agency for temporary employment in warehouse and retail environments. Since his release, he had experienced some setbacks

with his vocational programming for residential and commercial plumbing and had an extensive criminal history. As a result, Tommy acknowledged many of the potential problems he would experience:

It seems rosy, but I already know what's upon it [reentry] is a whole bunch of gravel and glass and everything. I'm just trying to prepare myself for that, so I want to be able to embrace that impact when it comes so it don't be a real culture shock because certain guys, I know certain things happen and it just collapses all the way around. Some things may appear to be fine, but just under the surface it's just . . . . That's one thing a lot of guys that come out of prison, they don't be prepared for that. So I think this time around, I prepared myself because I had a lot of hard times.

Tommy reflects the Solid Start mentality in understanding the obstacles that parolees would likely experience. He had already experienced deferment on job placements due to his criminal past and recognized he would not be successful or able to work in some industries. However, Tommy continued to seek out vocational training in a practicable area and did not allow prior bad experiences derail his path. The majority of the Solid Start parolees ( $n = 10$ ) recognized the possibility of bumps in the road, but in that acknowledgment felt prepared and would not perceive initial problems as complete failure.

Goals were not the only evidence of an attitude difference. All parolees acknowledged how past choices and situations were instrumental in their criminal behavior, such as substance abuse histories and socializing with criminogenic peers. Charles, a member of the comparison group, explained, 'I don't sell marijuana no more. I don't smoke marijuana no more, I don't drink. I don't hang out with idiots. I don't go to the bars.' He credited his girlfriend with providing important support in making prosocial decisions. While both the comparison and Solid Start groups asserted that outside support and cognitive changes were the key to success, the Solid Start group emphasized the importance of personal decision-making, highlighting their own agency in prior behaviors. Jonathan explained that it was his choice to engage in criminal behaviors and knew the behaviors that he could control. Jonathan stated:

Basically what I need is to watch myself and how I react around other people and watch what I do and how I do it. That's basically what I need to do for myself to be successful and stay out of prison.

While both groups acknowledged the role of social support through family, children, or other positive groups, the Solid Start parolees articulated more personal responsibility for their future and their current and past behaviors. In reference to the Solid Start program, Marvin stated 'It teaches compassion, it teaches responsibility. It teaches ownership, all kinds of different things.' The recognition of responsibility and independence were prevalent in the program offerings, and clearly evident in the parolee narratives. The accountability afforded them agency among other signals of independence, like housing and a supportive peer group, and adoption of prosocial and conventional norms.

## Discussion

This study examined the participation of parolees in a supportive housing program, and compared the post-release housing and social support needs among the program participants and a comparison group. Both groups expressed substantial challenges to finding housing upon release from prison. Fashioned from the housing first movement, stable housing provides a base from which to build a prosocial network and connect to the community, a critical element of desistance and reintegration (Laub and Sampson 2003;

Maruna 2001). Results from this study suggest that the provision of housing not only facilitated feelings of stability and independence, it also influenced cognitive shifts in commitment to change and hope for the future for those in the Solid Start group. In addition to housing, the importance of social supports via peer networks served as another social factor influencing subjective change.

Stable housing provides the foundation for successful social relationships and reentry transitions, as success in employment and substance abuse and mental health treatment is often contingent on a secure, stable, and financially accessible residence (Padgett et al. 2011; Roman and Travis 2006). Our findings suggest the majority of the comparison sample was unable to establish independent or stable housing, which leads to potentially negative implications. The population of offenders without home plans typically does not have the resources to obtain housing and many have to live in undesirable locations, including transient motels, with friends who may not provide pro-social support, or homeless shelters (Brooks et al. 2008; Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, Sex Offender Management Board 2004; Rodriguez and Brown 2003; Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001). Brooks et al. (2008) found between a third and half of respondents reported living with people with substance abuse dependencies and criminal records, both circumstances that can lead to undesirable behaviors. Subsequently, the establishment of independent housing may remove offenders from potentially dangerous environments and can facilitate desistance. For example, Yahner and Visser (2008) report after 3 years, only 35% of those housed in their own residence recidivated compared with 62% of those who continued residence with family or friends.

The findings also indicated Solid Start participants felt safe and secure in their home placement, in a broader context. Firstly, the program contrasted typical congregate reentry housing services that group many parolees in concentrated locations. Rather, parolees were integrated throughout the community to a variety of residential environments. This is important, as many offenders who return to their pre-incarceration neighborhoods cite substance temptations and antisocial peers as both contextually common as well as problematic (Yahner and Visser 2008). Kirk (2009) found those who had changed their county (parish) of residence post incarceration were less likely to be reincarcerated, arguing that the likelihood severed ties to criminal peers and a removal of tempting yet criminogenic behaviors. Our findings support these perceptions, and help to explain others' explanation of residential change linking to less recidivism (Kirk 2009; Yahner and Visser 2008). Second, offenders often return to communities characterized by disadvantage and high crime which can increase negative outcomes (Kubrin and Stewart 2006; Mears et al. 2008). In fact, many offenders in this study anticipated staying in the apartment following completion of the program appreciating access to public transportation and the security of the residence. Most prior research demonstrates that parolees are aware of neighborhood opportunities and value appropriate placement in regard to the probability of success (Brooks et al. 2008; La Vigne, Brooks, and Shollenberger 2007). Solid Start provided a physical separation from prior residence and opportunity for those who expressed a desire and need for change.

Overall, the program went beyond simply providing housing assistance. The underlying theme from the parolees in this study was that Solid Start helped them become independent and successful. While providing a variety of material provisions, the program engaged in case management-centered supervision and supportive peer communities for the offenders to successfully reintegrate while gradually becoming independent. The program participants recognized the gradual process of reentry and appreciated the positive emotional support that accompanied the housing assistance. The program



provided an environment that understands possible setbacks but may also facilitate success, with support provided by both staff and fellow parolees. The program participants had fewer resources and had spent a longer time in prison. These are characteristics that often limit positive outcomes, yet the results indicate this group presented specific pathways to success. While we cannot definitively establish that participation in Solid Start was the cause of these perceptions (as Solid Start participants may have had greater motivation before joining the program), at the very least, participation in Solid Start maintained that type of psychological state and speaks to the importance of early intervention post-release.

Although the intersection of subjective and structural change can be difficult to entangle (see LeBel et al. 2008), change as a process is well documented. The practical planning and hope demonstrated by the Solid Start parolees suggest those individuals are further along a path of change (Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross 1992). Specifically, although both groups articulated optimistic attitudes and goals, the comparison group had fewer specific action plans despite having a longer time in the community. Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1992) differentiate between decision and preparation, which is where the Solid Start parolees seem better suited to begin preparation and sustain action. While the current research suggests that the structural change of housing preceded the attitudinal shift, debates remain in understanding if cognitive changes lead to structural or social success or vice versa. LeBel et al. (2008) investigate such issues, and indicate social problems are impacted by subjective states though both are linked to behavioral outcomes. Solid Start addresses fundamental reentry needs such as housing and social support, both being structural entities. The subjective attitudinal differences between the groups may be attributed to program participation, or a reflection of how subjective states lead to better structural opportunity. Either way, the facilitation of positive and practical attitudes among those with limited resources is an important inclusion of reentry programming as these can be important mechanisms of desistance. Although there was no difference in self-reported criminal behavior within the limited time frame of the study, the differences in structural and subjective states between the groups may have longer term effects.

The Solid Start program recognizes change and is characterized by tolerance, the role of personal agency, and support. This was evident in the relationships between both staff and peers. Parolees highlighted their appreciation and respect of program staff, which contrasted experiences in alternative housing programs. The inclusion of supportive and a focus on the establishment of independence differed from many other housing programs. The general tone of communication, respect, and recognition of success is a fundamental part of reintegration (Maruna 2001). The relationships between the program participants were also noteworthy. The participants highly valued familiarity and relationships, particularly advice and mentorship. The use of peer mentorship has been introduced in desistance work, and suggests that altruism can facilitate recovery (Cressey 1965; LeBel 2007; Maruna 2001). Maruna (2001) connects the idea of using past mistakes to help others in forming redemptions scripts, which is further supported by LeBel (2007) in his evaluation of 'wounded healers.' This has benefits for the parolees in terms of social support and practical application of advice. It also has subjective implications, as LeBel (2007) provides evidence that attitude orientation toward helping or healing benefits ex-offender self-perception and minimizes criminal attitudes, which are important facilitators of desistance. Programs, such as Solid Start, that encourage these attitudes and offer a forum for giving and receiving help from relevant audiences potentially provide an important function for ex-offenders.



While informative, the current research is not without limitations. Evaluating a single program limits the generalizability of the findings. While program participants perceived great benefit from the program, this level of housing support is atypical and findings do not reflect the life circumstances of the typical parolee. There remains a great deal of work to be done to identify 'best practices' in the provision of housing for parolees without home plans, but the congruence of this model to housing first philosophies gives credence to the housing model as a whole. There are very few, if any, large-scale housing programs for inmates, so most evaluations of this type will be de facto use small samples. In addition, the research design did not allow for random assignment of groups, so there may be unobserved heterogeneity that influence both selection into the study groups and reentry outcomes. The admissions criteria make selection of an appropriate comparison sample more difficult, and there was variation in the level of social support systems, especially when considering the length of sentence for Solid Start participants and available resources post-incarceration. Program participants are also volunteers and may have had more motivation to change and perhaps greater subjective investment in the reentry process. That said, the homogeneity of assessments on program quality across participants gives credence to the program model, and the results, although not without limit, highlight the importance of considering agency, cognitive change, and subjective factors when exploring parolee outcomes.

In summary, the results of this research suggest that housing-centered programs can be an important 'bridge' in the reentry process. Consistent with the suggestions of Travis (2005), this program provided intense reentry support with the goal that clients would eventually be self-supporting. The results suggest that the provision of *both* material and emotional support is what makes the program and reentry in general, successful. Both forms of support work together to produce a more motivated and responsible citizen, further highlighting the efficacy of reentry programs as a transition toward desistance in the life course.

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### **Notes**

1. Although the program is managed by a Catholic Charity, the program model does not include any religious or spiritual programming. Individuals of all faiths are served by the program, and faith is not a criterion used for program admission.
2. All parolees were interviewed in the same metropolitan statistical area, as defined by the US Census. The offense background was also comparable between the two groups, with a variety of person, property, and drug offenses. We eliminated all violent sex offenders from the comparison parolee group as this group is subject to sex offender residency restrictions. Finally, the time frame of the interviews was similar, the groups being interviewed within 6–12 months of each other.

3. Due to the nature of data collection, we were unable to compare groups on key background characteristics such as age, institutional record, or risk level. From the comparison group, Department of Corrections data were provided as part of the separate research project but we were unable to access institutional records for the Solid Start group.
4. Other questions included things like 'Did you have difficulty locating a place to live after release?' with follow-up probes; 'Do you live in a neighborhood where individuals are abusing drugs or alcohol?'; and 'What do you think will be most important in helping you stay successful?'
5. Parolees were not directly asked about financial limitations and housing, though their financial struggles came through in their narratives. The level of financial difficulty in terms of housing procurement is likely underestimated, as not all described specific practical barriers regarding housing.

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