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A New Way of Doing Time on the Outside: Sex Offenders' Pathways In and Out of a Transitional Housing Facility

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Abstract

Although housing has been highlighted as a key element of successful reentry experiences, little research has considered the perspectives of sex offenders living in transitional housing upon release from prison. This topic is important given the increasing legal restrictions faced by this offender population. The current study utilizes qualitative data to explore the pathways from prison to transitional housing, the experience of residing in these facilities, and how transitional housing is perceived to affect the overall reentry experience. In general, results suggest that sex offenders reside in the facility because of lack of access to a suitable home, and report a need for service provisions. However, most view their experiences in the transitional facility (TF) as contrary to the rehabilitative ideal, and some indicate that this type of programming has collateral consequences for reentry. The proliferation of sex offender restriction laws has only exacerbated the challenges faced by sex offenders living in the TF.

Keywords

transitional housing, sex offenders, prisoner reentry

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Introduction

The transition from prison to parole is difficult, and housing remains one of the central needs of returning offenders. Housing provides the foundation to a successful reentry transition, yet many offenders return to unstable or undesirable housing options. Housing problems are pervasive even prior to serving time in prison as Travis (2005) suggested that approximately 75% of offenders relied on some form of public housing prior to incarceration. Housing challenges continue, and in many cases, magnify upon release. Approximately 10% to 20% of offenders exit prison without a home plan, and the prevalence of homelessness is much higher in many urban areas (Petersilia, 2003; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003; Roman & Travis, 2006). Similar trends in ex-offender homelessness have been documented internationally in New South Wales and Victoria; Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone, and Peeters (2006) found that 21% of offenders were homeless upon release.

To address the housing needs of offenders, transitional housing facilities, such as halfway houses, provide temporary shelter to make a seamless move from prison to community (Beha, 1977; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Roman, Taxy, & Roman, 2012). Although highly variable, halfway houses not only address basic needs but may also include service components such as substance abuse treatment or education training (Taxman, Rexroat, Shilton, Mericle, & Lerch, 2010). Prior research has documented myriad needs of offenders relying on these services. In particular, residents of transitional housing have fewer familial and employment contacts (Hinton, 2004; Latessa & Allen, 1982), and chronic homelessness (Fontaine et al., 2012). For example, Fontaine and colleagues (2012), in a study of disabled parolees, found that those participating in transitional housing programs averaged 2.4 homeless events prior to their incarceration. Much research has explored the transitions from prison to the community but has not explored segues into transitional living facilities.

Transitional housing has long played an important role in corrections; however, much remains to be learned about the appropriate role and efficacy of these programs. Most extant research has considered recidivism outcomes of individuals placed in transitional facilities (TFs; Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2002; Willison, Roman, Wolff, Correa, & Knight, 2010), but less research has been conducted on the experiences of the individuals, particularly sex offenders, who reside in these facilities. Moreover, the need for transitional housing facilities for sex offenders has increased in the past decade as many states have passed residency restrictions laws, which severely reduce the availability, quality, and affordability of local housing stock (Chajewski & Mercado, 2009; Ragusa-Salerno & Zgoba, 2012; Socia, 2011; Socia, Levenson, Ackerman, & Harris, 2014). Despite the increasing need for alternative housing, researchers have not directly explored the pathways to transitional housing among the sex offender population.

The current analysis adds to the literature on transitional housing and prisoner reentry by documenting the pathways sex offenders take to the facility and how these experiences color their reentry experience. We use the life course perspective to frame the research (Sampson & Laub, 1993) to focus on the experiences of sex offenders

because of the proliferation of legal requirements that restrict the housing opportunities of this group (Pacheco & Barnes, 2013).

Literature Review

Parolee Housing

Housing is a critical and immediate concern for offenders released from prison (Duffee, 1990, Metraux & Culhane, 2004; Visher & Courtney, 2007). Theoretically, housing provides the fundamental structure for change as it builds the foundation on which other social bonds can be developed. Individuals with a stable residence are better integrated into the community (Clear, 2007), and consistent housing improves social networks and builds social capital (Coleman, 1990) making the development of critical social ties more likely. In turn, social ties, like those to family and marital partners, link individuals to the conventional social order and in doing so reduce impulses to recidivate (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Emerging research suggests that stable housing is a precursor to successful drug treatment outcomes (Padgett, Stanhope, Henwood, & Stefancic, 2011), an important consideration in the long-term patterns of reintegration. Stable housing has been empirically linked to decreased recidivism, improved employment prospects, and positive social relationships (Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, & Slayter, 2001).

In contrast, legislative restrictions can create barriers to housing opportunities and stability for offenders. Sex offenders face the largest legal hurdles when seeking housing. The implementation of sex offender residency restrictions in the United States has limited the housing options for sex offenders as compared with other countries (Barnes, Dukes, Tewksbury, & De Troye, 2009; Petrunik & Deutschmann, 2008; Socia, 2011). In many states, sex offenders are restricted from living within a specified distance (typically 1,000 feet) of schools, parks, and day cares. As such, permissible neighborhoods with available housing are less dense, have less available housing options, and are less affordable than housing within restricted zones (Chajewski & Mercado, 2009; Levenson, 2008; Socia, 2011; Youstin & Nobles, 2009).

Non-legal barriers, such as offender stigma, housing shortages, and lack of economic capital, also contribute to difficulties finding a residence. Recent evidence suggests building managers display reluctance in renting to persons with any felony record (Clark, 2007; Thacher, 2008), and in some cases specific to sex offenders (Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007). Housing prices are often higher than what the average offender earns. For example, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Missouri requires an hourly wage of US\$13.62 in rural areas and US\$15.27 in metropolitan areas (Bravve, DeCrappeo, Pelletiere, & Crowley, 2011). These barriers are particularly steep for sex offenders. Registered sex offenders in the community have reported financial hardship and difficulty securing employment due to residency restrictions, and they often report psychosocial stress and emotional problems as a result of policies including having to live farther away from family and other sources of social support (Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson & Hern,

2007). Levenson, Ackerman, Socia, and Harris (2013) suggested that sex offenders who are not allowed to reside with family or other forms of social support may be denied the protective factors associated with these social ties. Thus, sex offenders may face an increased range of challenges due to both legal and extra-legal challenges, and a higher likelihood of being homeless upon release from prison (Levenson et al., 2013; Socia et al., 2014). In response to these barriers, transitional housing facilities can provide an alternative to homelessness.

Transitional Housing Programs

Transitional housing, or halfway houses, originated as a “halfway step” between prison and the community (Hicks, 1987). Although facility provisions and goals vary, transitional living facilities have been described as a “patchwork of sizes and services; molded by available government money and by differing philosophies of state correctional systems” (Hicks, 1987, p. 2). Historically, transitional housing served offenders returning home from prison, though increasingly facilities have a more variable population, housing probation or parole violators or serving as a diversion from incarceration (Latessa, Lovins, & Smith, 2010). Facilities can be managed by states, the federal government, and private agencies.

A common goal of transitional housing is to facilitate the gradual return of offenders to society. Beha (1977) suggested that while supervision is important, transitional housing was designed to provide an environment where service provisions matched offender risks and needs (see also Fontaine et al., 2012). In general, TFs allow a “test period” to “acclimate to the free world,” providing a stable residence so offenders can focus on seeking more permanent housing while maintaining some support and rehabilitative needs (Petersilia, 2003, p. 98). Bartholomew, Patton, Balkin, and Stock (2004) conducted an evaluation of a pilot program targeted at improving the transitional experience of parolees in Victoria. Their findings demonstrated that offenders who received housing assistance had lower recidivism rates than a comparison group who did not receive housing assistance. Qualitative data showed that 95% of offenders in the program felt better able to transition from prison because the program was individualized to their needs, including housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment (Bartholomew et al., 2004).

Over time, the role of transitional housing has changed and parallels the shift in correctional management philosophies (Feeley & Simon, 1992). Under the “new penology,” correctional administrators are primarily concerned with risk management strategies, minimizing reoffending events by increasing surveillance and strengthening custody. This contrasts earlier goals, which centered on rehabilitation and service provision. In fact, many new programs are designed to provide a controlled environment for offenders during the high-risk immediate post-release period (Fontaine et al., 2012). For example, Latessa and colleagues (2010) indicated that 62% of offenders in transitional housing facilities in Ohio were there as a condition of either probation or parole, or residing as a result of technical violations. The remaining third were placed in housing facilities as a transitional control. Researchers have argued that government-operated facilities, when compared with private institutions, focus on custody

over counseling, though these differences are not well understood and are in need of further investigation (Hicks, 1987). In Tasmania, Hinton (2004) assessed the housing options of prisoners post-release and found mixed perspectives on the utility of the state-sponsored accommodations. Some ex-offenders felt the services were a “life-saver,” whereas others felt the program was too intrusive and would rather be homeless.

Despite mixed findings, there is emerging evidence that transitional housing can improve correctional outcomes (Fontaine et al., 2012; Wright, Pratt, Lowenkamp, & Latessa, 2013). For example, Worcel, Burrus, and Finigan (2008) found that individuals who resided at transitional housing facilities showed increased self-sufficiency, such as attaining driver’s licenses and eventually securing housing. Lowenkamp and Latessa (2005) linked transitional housing with reduced recidivism rates (see also Latessa et al., 2010), but Willison and colleagues (2010) found no effect. Although instructive, the transitional housing literature may not be generalizable to the sex offender population as they are often precluded from private TFs and subject to sex offender restrictions. The current study addresses this limitation by providing insight into the unique experiences of sex offenders residing in a state-run TF during the era of sex offender residency restrictions.

Study State

The state of Missouri provides a unique context for the current research. The Missouri Department of Corrections (MoDOC) operates several TFs, two in major urban areas that primarily house paroles, and seven others in less populated areas that manage both parolees and probations. Individuals are mandated to reside at the TF as part of their community supervision or lack of a suitable home plan. The TF is intended to provide a structured environment for high-risk offenders with access to various forms of programming to address risks and needs. At the beginning of 2013, 785 offenders resided at two main TFs in St. Louis and Kansas City.

Offenders residing at the TF are required to obtain and maintain employment, and are also provided access to services such as drug treatment, medical care, and vocational training. TFs are different from traditional halfway houses because they are operated by MoDOC personnel, including correctional officers, Parole Officers (POs), and case managers. The TFs are lock-down style facilities, with fencing and security protocol similar to that in prison; however, residents are allowed to leave the facility for part of the day to work, seek employment, or attend classes.

Missouri was one of the first states to implement statewide residence restrictions, and this policy change has increased the number of sex offenders residing in TFs. Beginning in 2006, sex offenders in Missouri are prohibited from living within 1,000 feet of a “public or private school up to the 12th grade or state-licensed child care facility, which is in existence at the time of the offender establishing his or her residency.” Sex offenders are also barred from working or loitering within 500 feet of a school, child care facility, or *public parks with playground equipment or a swimming pool* (Missouri Revised Statutes, 2006). Missouri also maintains a comprehensive publicly

Table 1. Number of Residents in Transitional Facilities (2001-2013).

Offense type	2001		2005		2013	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Drug	177	32	212	26	130	17
DWI*	21	4	29	4	24	3
Non-violent	228	41	338	41	348	44
Sex	8	1	98	12	157	20
Violent	125	22	142	17	126	16
Total	559	100	819	100	785	100

*Driving While Intoxicated

available sex offender registry, adheres to community notification protocols, and enacted civil commitment legislation. Across the United States, 13 states maintain residence restriction zones of 1,000 to 1,999 feet, and a total of 33 have implemented some form of residency restriction (Mancini, Barnes, & Mears, 2013).

Table 1 shows the proportion of offenders, by offense type, residing in all TFs over a 12-year period. The state has seen a large demographic change in the offender population housed at the TF. As a result of residency legislation, the percentage of sex offenders residing in the TF has increased from 1% of offenders in 2001 to 20% in 2013 (D. Oldfield, personal communication, February 15, 2013). Sex offenders also stay in the facility longer. The average stay for sex offenders was 6.4 months, compared with 3.1 months for other offense types, including drug, violent, and property offenses.

Method

The present research is part of a larger study about sex offender reentry experiences, which included interviews with sex offenders and non-sex offenders. Between May and August 2010, 98 offenders were interviewed about their reentry experiences including the transition from prison to the community, housing, employment, and experiences on supervision. Approximately, 38% of participants in the initial study reported living at the TF at some time on their parole. The present study focuses on 30 sex offenders who reported living at a TF.

For the larger study, offenders were recruited at seven MoDOC locations including three parole offices, one prison, and three TFs. A non-probability quota sampling procedure was used to obtain a relatively equal number of respondents from each location (Bachman & Schutt, 2007). To be eligible for the study, offenders had to be on community supervision following a period of imprisonment, or in prison nearing their release. Interviews occurred in private offices at each location and lasted 90 min on average.¹ We used a semi-structured interview guide modeled after prior research of this type (see Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). The interview guide covered a range

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics ($n = 30$).

Variable	<i>M (SD)/%</i>
Age	44.33 (13.04)
Black	50%
Offense victim	
Child victim	60%
Adult victim	40%
Relationship status	
Married	13.3%
Partnered	16.7%
Single	46.7%
Divorced	23.3%
Education (years)	11.69 (1.57)
Children	67%
Number of children	2.71 (1.68)
History of drug use	83%
Mental health problems	39%
Physical health problems	41%
Number of prior imprisonments	2.24 (1.40)
Length of time in prison (months)	74.90 (86.36)
Interviewed at the halfway house	60%

of topics including prison life and reentry, housing, employment, substance abuse, treatment, and mental health. Offenders were asked if they ever resided in a TF upon release from prison. If yes, they were probed about this experience. A majority of offenders in this initial study who reported an experience at the TF (68%) were interviewed while residing there. Of the 30 sex offenders in this study, 60% were living in a TF at the time of the interview.

A description of the sample is presented in Table 2. The sample is all male, half of whom identified as Black, and the other half identified as White.² The average age was 44 years. A majority of the sample had offended against a child (60%) while 40% had an adult victim.³ This distinction is important because some offenders with child victims are subject to additional parole stipulations that might affect the reentry process, such as not being allowed to live with minors including their own children. Most offenders were single or divorced and 67% reported having children. A large majority had drug histories (83%) and reported approximately two prior incarcerations on average. The average time spent in prison was just over 6 years.

Analysis

Interview data were imported into the qualitative software program NVivo for coding and analysis (QSR International Software NVivo 10). NVivo allows for coding to be

done electronically while corralling like themes and patterns into “nodes.” These nodes can be further analyzed into subnodes. One benefit of this program is that it allows for the selection of themes in the data by participant characteristics, improving the efficiency and rigor of the analysis. In the original project, it became apparent that those who resided in the TF shared some unique experiences and emergent themes. After selecting the sample of sex offenders who had TF experiences, the interviews were re-analyzed using both open and focused coding strategies, following a modified grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Perry & Jensen, 2001). Open coding involves reading the interview transcripts and identifying and assigning codes to actions, descriptions, or events that emerge organically (Charmaz, 2006). A modified grounded theory approach involves coding categories developed by other researchers in theoretical or qualitative work for theory testing (Perry & Jensen, 2001). In this case, it became apparent that many of the domains that emerged in the interviews could be informed by the life course paradigm. A focused coding strategy allowed us to identify theoretically oriented themes that better captured the process in and out of the TF. After the initial open and focused coding, memos of single themes, or multiple themes within a broader topic, were compiled and re-read to detail and refine the analysis by identifying additional subthemes or divergent cases. Data analysis also consisted of a constant comparative technique, which involves comparing statements within and across interviews to demonstrate further patterns and themes.⁴

Results

The results are organized as three overarching domains. First, the pathways of sex offenders into the TF are described. Second, sex offenders’ descriptions of life inside the TF are presented to better contextualize the experience. Finally, pathways out of the facility and reintegration into the community are discussed. The results presented here reflect the most illustrative themes emergent in the analysis.

Pathways to the TF

Offenders in this sample identified three primary pathways to the TF: (a) the offender lacked the resources to obtain a viable home plan, (b) the home plan was denied because of sex offender–related restrictions, and (c) the offender violated the terms of their supervision and sex offender restrictions, and the TF was a sanction.

Pathway 1: Lack of Resources

Many sex offenders entered the TF because they did not have the financial means or social support needed to secure housing. In total, 40% of sex offenders in this sample were mandated to the TF because they had no viable housing options. Billy was convicted at age 45 of child molestation. In response to his conviction, Billy’s wife left him and took his two children, who he had not seen in 8 years. Billy reported that he went to the TF because he did not have any support in the community. Billy stated, “I don’t have any family. That was just the only option I had.”

Mark also lacked support and resources returning to the community from a long prison sentence for statutory sodomy. Mark was released to the TF closest to where his crime occurred which was an area where he had no contacts or resources. Mark explained, "I didn't know where I was at, I didn't know anybody in the city." He explained that his family was unwilling to provide support as he had "burned all of his bridges" over the course of his long criminal career, which included both sexual and non-sexual offenses. When Mark was released from prison he lacked the resources to live on his own. Mark stated, "That's probably the biggest obstacle I had out there, because I was in a city I had nothing, I had to start absolutely from scratch." The TF was Mark's only option as he was unable to secure an acceptable home plan without economic or social capital.

Parolees often lack the financial resources to establish a suitable home plan in the community and many rely on social support networks to aid in the transition (Petersilia, 2003). For sex offenders in this study who lacked social support, the TF was the only alternative to homelessness, as many private facilities across Missouri specifically exclude sex offenders or are located within restricted areas. However, in some cases, such as Larry's, residence at the TF offered time to build the capital and resources to establish an alternative residence.

Pathway 2: Sex Offender Residency and Supervision Restrictions

Another pathway to the TF was specific to sex offender residency and supervision restrictions. In Missouri, sex offenders are required to abide by residency guidelines, as well as other restrictions, such as not living with minors. Almost half of sex offenders (40%) residing at the TF were denied home plans due to residency guidelines. For example, Alan, who was convicted of statutory rape, lived with his mother for a period of time after his incarceration. His home plan with his mother was eventually denied by his parole agent because it was within 1,000 feet of a day care facility.⁵ Alan described how the residency restrictions stymied his original housing plan:

My mother had moved and when she moved the residency stipulations came into effect when she moved by daycares. See, when I first caught my case, they let me live with my mom, and she stayed by day cares, but they let me live there for some strange reason. It wasn't until she moved that they said I couldn't live there.

Unlike some offenders in the sample, Alan had the familial support to maintain a home plan in the community, but the residency restrictions superseded the viable home plan making the TF his only option. Losing his home and moving to the TF had collateral consequences for treatment and employment. Alan had to leave the community treatment program and quit a several part-time jobs because he no longer had transportation from the TF, a resource he had while living with his mother.

Another sex offender, Stanley, was interviewed while residing at the TF and described a similar scenario. Stanley, who was convicted of sexual assault of an adult, was also unable to return to his prior residence because of the restrictions. Before he

was incarcerated, Stanley had been living on his own in an apartment and had a job at a fast food restaurant. Following the conviction, he could no longer return to his apartment because it was in a restricted zone, and he was fired from his job because the restaurant catered to minors. Stanley stated,

Because like, if it weren't for my particular charge, like I could have gone right back to where I was living, got my old job back and everything. Probably wouldn't have to come here [to the TF] actually. But you know, there was like a day care center down there, so, that was out the question.

In addition, Stanley submitted his parents' residence as a home plan, but was denied. Stanley had a very supportive family who expressed a willingness to help him, but there were five minor children in the home, which violated residence restrictions.

Some offenders reported multiple stays at the TF, as well as long periods of residence. Jeremy, who was on parole for statutory rape, lived at the TF on multiple occasions. When he was first released from prison, he resided there for approximately 1 year. When asked why he lived there for such a long period of time, Jeremy stated, "Because they kept denying any home plan I put in. Either it was too close to a school building or my little brother stay there or there were other kids in the house." Jeremy reported submitting eight different home plans that were denied, indicating he had eight sources of social support, but none were within the guidelines. Jeremy appealed his case, and the parole board eventually determined that Jeremy was not a threat to his younger brother and allowed him to reside at his mother's house.

These examples represent the frustration experienced by sex offenders because they were disallowed from living with their family or other social support systems. The disconnection created additional anxiety for sex offenders who had children and were required to reside at the TF as a consequence of the restriction against living with minors. Louis was prevented from living with his own children resultant from a statutory rape conviction. Despite having the support of his fiancé and their children, he was not allowed to reside with them, explaining "as a sex offender you can't be around your kids." After his fiancé completed a class that permitted supervised visits with children, Louis was eventually able to visit but not reside with his children. He felt these restrictions hindered his readjustment to the community because he was separated from his social support system.

One emergent theme relevant to this pathway was the discussion of the purpose of the residency restrictions for sex offenders convicted of crimes against adults. The logic of the residency restrictions is to protect children at risk of victimization in locations where children congregate. Some sex offenders reported that their experience at the TF magnified the contradictions of residency laws. Kevin's pathway to the TF reflects this narrative in context of the multitude of other issues. Kevin was denied a home plan with his aunt and uncle because of the residency restrictions. Kevin, who was convicted of forcible rape, was 64 years old and had suffered a heart attack while in prison and was receiving medical treatment in the community. His attempts to secure disability payments based on his health conditions were denied because he was

residing at the TF, which is not considered a permanent residence. Kevin detailed the ways in which the restrictions had resulted in his residing at the TF:

Yeah, I had somewhere else to go, but they, but sex offenders have a 1,000 foot rule, and blah blah, you know they pass the law said it didn't pertain to me because my case is so old. And now they come up saying I got to, I can't be around kids even though my case did not involve a child, you know what I'm saying. So now I got to work on another plan to get out. Well, at first, they said it was near day care. But again, like I said, they changed it, they passed a law that said 1,000 feet rule didn't affect me. You know what I'm saying, my case is so old. My case is almost 50 years old. But now, my aunt and uncle, they got grandkids that come over, and they said I can't be around kids, even though my case is not involving a kid.

Research has made reference to the paradox of requiring offenders with adult victims to abide by the residency restrictions, which are designed to protect children (Matravers, 2003; Palermo, 2005). Kevin's case represents the nature of this legal dilemma. He had a stable reentry plan, but the nature of his reentry pathway was limited by residency restrictions designed to control offenders with child victims. The preceding narratives describe how added legal controls for sex offenders produce a unique pathway to the transitional housing facility. Despite having family support and anticipated residential provisions, the proximity to restricted areas greatly hindered approved housing options.

Unsurprisingly, sex offenders who resided at the TF due to the residency restrictions expressed the greatest amount of distress. This is likely related to the fact that they had viable housing alternatives, many of which were with supportive family or friends, or were positive sources of support prior to their incarceration. Their pathway into the TF reflected the tension between current reentry philosophies emphasizing prosocial capital and the populist punitivism that seeks to exert control over sex offenders.

Pathway 3: TF as a Sanction

Offenders in this study were also remanded to the TF for technical violations, demonstrating consistency with broad penological trends. One goal of the TF is to supply housing and programming for high-risk offenders, which would include offenders who violate the conditions of their parole. Six (20%) sex offenders resided at the TF for this reason.

Jerry, who was convicted of statutory rape, first resided with his father upon release from prison. He remained in the community for several months before experiencing problems. He returned to the TF "because I stopped going to the sex offender's program because of lack of, the financial. And I had a dirty drop for marijuana, and they sent me there because of it." Jerry exhibited numerous high-risk behaviors, such as drug abuse, and indicated he stopped attending treatment because he could not afford the weekly fee. In this case, the use of the facility as a sanction for Jerry likely met the

facility's goal of intervening in offender's lives who demonstrate the greatest risk for recidivism.

However, there were unintended consequences of using the TF for sex offender residency violations—it seemed to become a warehouse for sex offenders. Wayne, who was convicted of sexual misconduct as well as drug charges, was placed in the TF because he violated residency and registration restrictions. Wayne had been a resident in the TF for 18 months. Despite having resources, Wayne felt like he was “stuck” in the TF because there were no housing options for sex offenders, which also made him feel like an outcast. Wayne described how challenges contributed to the longer than average stay:

Like I said, I've been here a year and over 6 months. Because I can't get out into the community by not staying by a school or day care or whatever or whatnot. That's all everywhere there are schools and day cares, it's everywhere you know? What they want me to do? Move out of the United States or something? You know, it's, it's like four of us in my unit that been here 2 years or better, but I'm the youngest one, for uh, well, I've been here the leastest, and that's a year a 6 months. We just stuck in there 'cause we can't get out. And they need to change some laws or help some people get out or something.

Wayne knew he would be unable to leave the facility unless he received help. He felt there were no residential locations available to sex offenders because he had remained in the TF for so long and had witnessed others experiencing the same challenges. Having nowhere to go, Wayne felt excluded from opportunities available to other offenders.

The use of the TF as a sanction for violating conditions of supervision is appropriate and consistent with the growing supervisory purpose of many transitional housing facilities (Taxman et al., 2010). However, sex offenders in the current sample had much longer stays that hindered opportunities for ongoing treatment outside the facility, employment, and housing. The facility was also not designed for long-term stays and as described in the following section, the living conditions became an additional barrier to successful reintegration.

Life Inside the TF

One emergent theme in the analysis was the sex offenders' compelling description of their quality of life while residing at the TF. Offenders provided detailed narratives about their experiences in and perceptions of life inside the TF. Understanding the perspectives of offenders residing in transitional housing is essential to uncovering the mechanisms and processes for reentry success. One of the most prevalent and poignant characterizations of the transitional housing facility was that it compared with life in prison. The implication of such statements is that a program intended to transition from prison to community was no more helpful than being in prison. Adam said, “Some days is worse than being in prison.” He described how 1 day the staff suspected contraband in his housing wing, “They just got, they just had a major shakedown in our unit today. They herd us all out, they strip searched, they shook down the units.”

Along with strip searches and “shakedowns” sex offenders described how if they had not obtained employment in the community they were assigned jobs in the TF. Fred described the in-house jobs as similar to those in prison. Fred stated, “[Its] legal slave labor. Yeah, a dollar a day you work, its kitchen work.” Fred was referring to in-house jobs that paid US\$1 per day to offset the cost of residing at the TF. Parolees were frustrated that this pay structure resembled their experience during incarceration. It reflected the working conditions of prison, and not a transitional employment opportunity.

Some offenders detailed the nature of transition from prison to the TF. Phillip, who was on parole for statutory rape, described his perspective of residing at the release center:

The first day I didn't really feel like I was getting released at all, because I was going to the transitional facility. I'd heard all the stories about . . . which were far worse when I got there. In some areas, it was worse than prison . . . So, I mean I was never really feeling free until I got the chance to get out of there . . . I think it almost got me wanting to go back to prison. Every day I was thinking I got it better in prison than I do in this place. I don't have any freedom, I don't get to enjoy anything. You know I get 4 hour passes to go hang out with my family, but they gotta drive so far, it's like . . . to me it was the worst thing I ever had in my life to go through.

Phillip resided at the facility for 2 months before he became addicted to heroin and prescription medication, and absconded. He eventually was returned to the TF after being apprehended and underwent treatment. For Phillip, the conditions of the TF, particularly the exposure to drug users, were not suitable to a positive transition. Juan also reflected the many problems with drugs and alcohol ongoing in the TF. Juan felt like living in the TF was less than rehabilitative because of some of the other offenders residing there. Many participants in this study described the extensive drug and alcohol problems of the residents. Juan stated,

Some people call it [the TF] the rehab center, but so many guys down here, [are] just out there [walking the streets]. They go out, get high, get drunk, and they come back in the door . . . [Staff] make them take a urinalysis test, and they have to blow in the thing, and they [positive for] alcohol . . . They start their restrictions, can't go out too and all of that . . . stupidity. That's all it is.

In addition to the prison-like conditions and drug problems of the TF, participants felt increased stigma due to their sex offender status. Sex offenders experience stigma and other negative community reactions upon release from prison (Levenson et al., 2007; Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008), and participants felt this was exacerbated inside the TF as a result of being assigned to a segregated housing unit. Phillip described,

They call it E-wing, where you're waiting with all groups of people. And in the Honor Center, they separate you from sex offenses, so if you're a sex offender, everybody in the whole thing knows what wing you're in and you're in that wing, so everybody knows you're a sex offender.

Juan discussed how the staff also stigmatized sex offenders in the TF. Juan stated, "Every case is different, every person is different . . . and once you're marked [as a sex offender, they think] there's no rehabilitating." Joshua had a similar experience when he first arrived at the TF. Joshua stated,

When you're a sex offender, people don't know the difference between child molestation and rape, and 2nd degree statutory rape, so I had to go all into detail. All they hear is sex offender, they don't know the difference. They look at you different.

The experience of being grouped under the sex offender label, and its associated characteristics, made the transition from prison to the community less than rehabilitative particularly in light of other challenges established during residence within the TF.

The stigma of being identified as a sex offender in the TF added to the stress of reentry. Sex offenders felt the stigma associated with their offender label throughout their experiences in the TF including looking for housing, applying for jobs, or engaging with treatment and parole.

Pathway Out of the TF

Although TFs were originally conceived as a short-term stopgap between prison and home, many sex offenders in this study found it difficult to leave the facility. To leave the TF, parolees had to obtain suitable approved housing and demonstrate a viable income. Also, some parolees are required to complete treatment or vocational programming before release. Stanley, who had been in the TF for 18 months, explained the process to exit the facility:

They said in order to be released from here, you have to have paid at least one intervention fee, show them two paycheck stubs and have an approved home plan. Um so . . . once I have a job, you know, get some money saved up, start paying my intervention fees, then I'll start looking around for a place.

A key barrier to release was obtaining employment and having adequate income to self-sustain. Juan labeled the largest problem experienced by offenders at the TF as, "Unemployment. It's everywhere." A number of parolees did not have the means to pay for housing and employment opportunities were scarce, especially when considering the physical locations of many TFs. For example, Alan had been hired at a fast food restaurant and was scheduled to work on a weekend that he did not have permission to leave the TF. Because he could not show up for his first shift, he was fired. Alan's job loss increased his frustration and he stated, "I mean, I need money and I need to get out of here, and this is not a place for me. I can't do it." Although the purpose of the TF is to provide surveillance and rehabilitation, the close control hindered Alan's employment and opportunity for independence.

Although most respondents understood the requirements to leave the TF, some felt that their stay at the housing facility was a collateral consequence of the sex offense conviction, an additional punishment not leveled on other offenders. Respondents

indicated that the facility was not designed to support employment, and some reported that the facility was a marker of potential failure and stigma. Billy stated, “You know, a lot of employers just won’t hire people out of the transitional facility.”

Stanley felt that living at the TF made employment harder to obtain due to its negative reputation among local employers. Offenders residing at the TF were often there because of their high-risk status, and the TF is viewed as “last stop” before prison. Employers recognized this and were hesitant to take the risk hiring an offender who lived there. Stanley described his plan to leave the TF and his challenges with finding employment:

Once I have a job, you know get some money saved up, start paying my intervention, then I’ll start looking around for a place . . . You know, like I tell them [employers], that I’m in here, you know, I put it down on the app, and some people, you know, they just don’t want anything to do with this place. Like, you know, they really won’t even talk to you, for real.

Another particular challenge was the fact that offenders did not have call-back telephone numbers and all employment calls went through the facility switchboard. When asked if he had any callbacks, Stanley said,

Not that I know of. Like, I go back to the [front desk] and say “You know, um, you know, do you know if anyone has called back? I’ve had an app in here for a while and I’m just kind of wondering.” And they’re like, “You know, I don’t know like, they’ll probably call.” Like, [employers] can’t call me directly. They’ll call this place, get connected to the case manager, and then she’ll call me in, and if I’m not here at the time, I’m assuming she’ll tell me, you know, that I got a call back for an interview or they want to talk to me or whatever, but you know, that hasn’t happened yet.

The result of this dilemma is twofold. First, Stanley wonders if his caseworker or the staff was communicating callbacks effectively. Given the status of being a sex offender in the TF, this is a possibility. Second, Stanley discussed how he feels discouraged about finding a job because he has not received any calls, which he attributed to his past convictions and current residence. Many offenders in the TF described feeling pessimistic about finding employment because of the stigma associated with living inside the TF, the stigma of a felony conviction, along with any other employment deficits they may already have.

In the case of sex offenders, the added stigma of their crime created further challenges for employment. Many sex offenders described the difficulty getting an interview or employment once they disclosed their felony charge. Juan was trying to reinstate his construction business, but because of his sex offense was unable to do work on homes without gaining approval from his PO that they were within the residency restrictions. Juan was putting in applications to local labor agencies and stated,

I’m open with ’em [employers], you know? I kinda avoid the sex case issue, and being incarcerated, and being in here it’s hard to find a job, because once they find out they won’t hire you because they dealt with the staff before.

Juan eventually found a job at a bakery working the graveyard shift and highlighted that his current employer was able to overlook his criminal past. However, the stigma associated with residing in the TF added a dimension to their reentry challenges that is not by design. In Billy's case, he outlined three ways in which he felt stigmatized while looking for work:

You know, it's kinda like the three strike rule. You walk in, you have to tell a prospective employer . . . number 1 you're a felon, number 2, I'm residing in the transitional facility, number 3, I'm a sex offender . . . bam! The door slams shut. They don't even want to talk to me. And the biggest strike against me was not so much being a felon or a sex offender, it was the fact that I was living in the transitional facility. Because, every employer out there knows that if they've ever hired from the transitional facility before that guys get rolled back to prison out of there. And one day they're working, the next day they don't show up, it's not because they got lazy and didn't come to work, it's because they got rolled back to prison for some ridiculous reason. While you're living there, working. Well obviously, you know I dropped below that and uh, that's why I was rolled back to prison, for not having a full-time job.

Billy characterized his experiences as a series of "strikes" against him. He described feeling especially challenged by the stigma of being a felon, residing at the TF, which is known for high return rates to prison, and last the sex offender label. Billy also described the double-edged sword of residing in the facility—the requirement of getting a job on one end, and the potential for returning to prison for not having a job. This perception is one that employers in the community hold that fosters the stigma associated with residing in the TF. Billy is also aware that being a sex offender compounds this and increases his likelihood of not successfully reintegrating into the community.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of the current study was to document sex offenders' pathways to a transitional housing facility, their lived experiences while residing in the facility, and implications for reentry transitions. As important, we consider perceptions of and experiences while inside the facilities; therefore, this analysis also serves as a type of process analysis to further explore the "gray box" of correctional control (Duwe, 2013).

Several prominent themes emerged. First, enactment of residency restriction laws has changed the nature of reentry transition for sex offenders. Currently, at least 30 states have passed residency restrictions (Meloy et al., 2008), and research suggests that these laws can have negative effects on housing opportunities, displacing sex offenders into areas characterized by poverty, unemployment, and limited social opportunity (Hughes & Burchfield, 2008; Levenson et al., 2007). In the current sample, 40% of the individuals relied on the TF as a replacement for other means of support, and an equal proportion resided there because the residency restrictions precluded a suitable home plan.

In the first pathway, sex offenders were remanded to the TF because they would have otherwise been homeless. Sex offender homelessness has been identified as a

central threat to public safety (Socia et al., 2014; Willis & Grace, 2009), and ameliorating this concern is central to successful reentry transitions. Efforts to avoid homelessness, yet still abide by residency restrictions, have further increased the reliance on alternative housing structures such as TFs. As displayed in Table 1, the TF sex offender population has grown precipitously since the enactment of residency restrictions. As is the case in Missouri, the implementation of sex offender residency restrictions may be fundamentally changing the population of the transitional housing programs in other states with similar restrictions in place. The third pathway magnified this condition, where offenders who resided at the TF as a sanction reported being housed there for long periods of time. Therefore, the need for state-run housing is even more critical, as many local non-profit housing programs and private market housing exclude sex offenders. To address this need, some states have developed programs at the local level. For example, Ohio has developed the Returning Home project that links local service providers with returning offenders to provide housing and supportive services. The initial results from this research show promise with a reduction of recidivism in a 1-year follow-up (Fontaine et al., 2012), but more work in this area is needed.

In the second pathway, sex offenders resided at the TF because their proposed home plan was denied as a result of the residency restrictions. Sex offenders reported frustration and anxiety about being separated from prosocial support networks, as well as the additional limitations presented by the TF in terms of securing employment. Other research suggests that social support is vital to the reintegration of offenders (Petersilia, 2003; Visser et al., 2004), and sex offenders specifically, as it mitigates the stress of reentry and the added restrictions (Brown, Spencer, & Deakin, 2007; Levenson, 2008; Willis & Grace, 2009). Findings in this study demonstrate that rather than facilitate positive reintegration, being mandated to the TF led to greater social separation and hindered reentry opportunities. This implies that utilizing TFs for appropriate offenders is critical.

This research also sheds light on the lived experiences of parolees residing at the TF. The respondents identified a gap in the perceived need for treatment and the nature of services provided. TFs were originally designed with a "halfway home" mentality, where the primary concern was to benefit the lives of offenders through a therapeutic treatment and service model (Bonta & Motiuk, 1990). The reality of current facilities is that they reflect a culture of control. In the study state, TFs provide a structured environment of supervision and opportunity for rehabilitative services, but participants viewed it as concomitant to prison. Many respondents indicated that they had come to the TF looking for support, but they did not find the needed resources in the facility or from the staff. Likewise, parolees felt that being remanded to the TF was an additional punishment and often stymied their treatment and support needs, and relegated them to additional correctional supervision, making the TF a second and capricious punishment.

Respondents also raised concerns with the labeling effect of residence in the TF. Many sex offenders felt like living in the TF was another "strike" against them, in addition to their status as felons and as sex offenders. This was especially prominent during the search for employment. Although beyond the scope of this research, there

is evidence that employers use cues to evaluate the employability of an individual, and a criminal record may signal something about the character of the individual employee (Harris & Keller, 2005). As Western (2008) noted, employers layer statuses when making employment decisions. Potential employers may perceive the TF as an important, negative signal, adding another status beside felon. Members of the sample felt that the sex offender label coupled with the limitations of the residency restrictions and the TF had a negative, cumulative effect on reentry outcomes.

Although research subjects documented several limitations of the current TF model, there is evidence that transitional housing can be reconfigured to provide residential opportunities for hard to place offenders, like sex offenders. First, TFs can provide a secure residence that may enhance treatment outcomes. Transitional housing can provide a foundation on which specialized treatment may be offered, while managing a variety of offenders under a single roof (Cowan, Pantazis, & Gilroy, 2001). Second, transitional housing can also align with risk management strategies. This type of facility is particularly efficacious for the sex offender population as it can appease public concerns while offering a controlled environment (Cowan et al., 2001). Some communities mandate a period of transitional housing for sex offenders, as this group often has a multitude of risks and needs and would benefit from intensive reentry programming (Hals, 2007). However, as Stojkovic and Farkas (2013) note, the development of these initiatives at the local level can be marred by political and public pressures related to sex offender stigma.

Colorado has developed transitional housing programs specific to the sex offender population: The Shared Living Arrangements (SLA) program (Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, Sex Offender Management Board, 2004). Sex offenders live in rental properties designed to be an extension of the therapeutic community. Therapists and probation officers conduct home visits and frequent call-ins to the residence, as well as therapeutic interventions. Offenders are expected to provide peer accountability. The initial evaluation of the SLA Program was positive. Individuals housed in the facilities had fewer technical violations and new offenses than other housing arrangement, even housing with family. Overall, 100% of offenders residing at the SLA felt they had a support network compared with only 28% of offenders living with family, and 22% of offenders living with friends (Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, Sex Offender Management Board, 2004). Programs like this show promise to address the specific needs of the sex offender population to improve reentry outcomes.

Although this research provides important insight, several limitations should be noted. First, the data and research design come with strengths and limitations. Our qualitative approach allows for the nuanced uncovering of the lived experiences of offenders, and researchers have consistently detailed the efficacy of samples like this for criminal justice research (Burgess-Proctor, 2012; Gaarder & Belknap, 2003). However, our study is small in scope and results may not be generalizable to all offenders residing in transitional housing particularly given the focus on an all-male specified offense type. Also, the current study reflects a sample of inmates residing in Department of Corrections-run TFs in one state. As others have noted, the variation in

transitional housing across the United States may explain why there are no definitive findings on their success (LaVigne, 2010). It is important to continue research of this type, particularly considering much of the previous literature focuses on privately run facilities. Many of the agencies operating TFs are fragmented and not cohesive (Roman & Travis, 2006). Prison authorities are typically not in contact with community housing resources, perpetuating our lack of knowledge on offender housing post-release. Nonetheless, the results presented here suggest the pathways into and out of transitional housing, as well as the experiences in residence, will further our understanding of how these types of intervention may affect offender outcomes.

In summary, the current study provides important context on the nature of transitional housing for sex offenders. The narratives reveal myriad needs among this reentry population, such as employment, treatment programming, and social support systems. As important, the results highlight the lack of available housing for sex offenders after the advent of residency restrictions, resulting in an ad hoc solution not ideally suited for this offender population. Moreover, the respondents noted disconnection between the perceived therapeutic nature of a halfway house and the reality of residing in a TF. Although risk management is often the priority, TFs provide an opportunity to provide both supervision and rehabilitation. This research provides a starting point that offers insight into the perceived imbalance of the purpose of TFs. The results suggest TFs have an important role in facilitating not only beneficial treatment efforts but also the ability to obtain employment. Future research should continue to explore the function TFs may have in employment assistance and limitations. In conclusion, although our results emphasize the challenges sex offenders face when seeking housing, the results also demonstrate perceptions and gaps in current transitional housing practices. The efforts can be used to further the best practices literature on transitional housing, including program evaluations and housing policy development.

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Notes

1. At the beginning of each interview, offenders were given information regarding the study, assured confidentiality of their responses, and signed a consent form. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and pseudonyms assigned to each offender. An incentive of US\$20 for offenders was provided except to those offenders in prison.
2. There was one female in the sample who resided at the transitional facility (TF); however, she was excluded from the present analyses.

3. In Missouri, offenses with a child victim include those with persons under the age of 17, such as child molestation, endangerment of the welfare of a child, statutory rape, and statutory sodomy. Adult victims include offenses with persons 17 year of age and older, such as forcible rape, sodomy, sexual abuse, and sexual assault.
4. To improve the validity and reliability of the findings, two researchers separately coded the interviews into various themes and subthemes, then reached consensus on how to code ambiguous cases and consolidate the findings. Recognizing possible subjectivity in analysis, we took care to reach consensus during the analytic process and document reliability. Following the initial open coding scheme, we conducted independent subtheme coding and analysis. Comparing subsequent memos reflecting the coding, analysis, and findings demonstrated high agreement regarding the general experiences including standard pathways.
5. It is unknown exactly why Alan's home plan was initially approved and later denied, but it was not uncommon to hear stories of sex offenders who were denied home plans after the fact because of the changing boundaries related to day cares. Evidence from the state patrol demonstrated continual change in actively licensed day cares. This affected which areas were restricted for sex offenders and residence conditions could be changed during the community supervision period.

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