

Multidimensional Social Support for Community Corrections Offenders in China

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Abstract: *This paper explores the role of multidimensional social support in the reintegration of community corrections offenders in China. While community corrections in China has expanded, offenders face significant challenges, such as stigma and limited resources. Social support plays a crucial role in overcoming these difficulties. The study distinguishes between structural social support, which involves social networks providing resources and connections, and functional social support, including emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support that impacts offenders' well-being. The paper reviews existing research on social support within the Chinese context and emphasizes the need for an integrated approach to support offenders. In conclusion, strengthening both structural and functional social support is essential for enhancing rehabilitation outcomes and reducing recidivism. Policy recommendations include improving social networks and expanding support services to aid offenders' successful reintegration into society.*

Keywords: Social Support, Community Corrections, Offenders.

1. Introduction

Community corrections encompass a wide range of supervision, rehabilitation, reintegration, control, restorative, and supportive programs for individuals who have violated criminal laws (Latessa & Smith, 2019). In China, community corrections were initiated in 2003 and underwent a nationwide trial implementation by 2009. Although the exact number of offenders under community correctional supervision is not specified on the official website of the Chinese Ministry of Justice, past reports indicate a steady increase in these numbers. By the end of 2014, China had approximately 2.237 million individuals in community corrections, with 1.505 million having completed their sentences, and 732,000 offenders remaining under supervision. As of 2019, the total number of offenders in the system had risen to 4.31 million, with 3.61 million discharged and 700,000 still under supervision. Each year, more than 500,000 new offenders are added to the community corrections system. The number of individuals in community corrections continues to grow and is projected to rise further (Zhang et al., 2019).

Community corrections offenders often face a range of challenges, such as labeling (Willis, 2018) and the difficulties of reentry. Reentry issues specifically manifest in areas like lack of housing (Bowman & Ely, 2020), unemployment (Holloway & Wiener, 2020), food insecurity (Dong et al., 2018), substance use, and mental health problems (Fearn et al., 2016). These challenges do not exist in isolation; they interact to form a vicious cycle. If these issues are not addressed and offenders do not receive adequate treatment, the problems will persist, potentially leading to recidivism. Recidivism, in turn, undermines societal stability.

Given this, finding solutions to address the difficulties faced by community corrections offenders is crucial. Social support is a key component of effective correctional interventions. Programs that focus on providing support are more likely to promote desistance from crime (Chouhy et al., 2020). Social support encompasses various forms, such as providing offenders with informational support (Kjellstrand et al., 2022), emotional support, and instrumental support (Bares & Mowen, 2020). Social support is at the core of the reentry process

(Bares & Mowen, 2020), protecting individuals from stress and promoting non-criminal coping strategies during stressful events (Chouhy et al., 2020). Due to its broad scope and numerous benefits, social support is a promising approach for community corrections offenders. However, research on this topic in China remains limited, particularly studies employing a multidimensional approach.

2. Research on Social Support in Community Corrections in China

There is limited research on community corrections offenders in China, and even less on systematic studies of social support for this group. While Chinese scholars recognize the effectiveness of social support in addressing the challenges faced by community corrections offenders, for example, Qi (2019) argues that higher levels of social support can help offenders mitigate the impact of negative emotions, better understand their own abilities, and develop a more optimistic outlook on life. Good social support can effectively resolve crisis situations. However, research on social support for community corrections offenders is scarce (Sun, 2020), and empirical studies on this topic are few. Existing research has not adequately addressed the diverse social support needs of community corrections offenders (Wang & Zhang, 2019), nor has there been sufficient attention to the mental health issues of offenders (Zhang et al., 2019). Community corrections offenders in China continue to face challenges such as poor social adaptation (Zhou et al., 2021), difficulties in social reintegration (Zhang et al., 2019), personality defects (Qi, 2019), and low self-esteem (Yang, 2019). Additionally, these offenders have limited social resources and face a disadvantaged position in terms of social support. They are often marginalized and stigmatized by mainstream society, making it difficult for them to reintegrate. This not only undermines the effectiveness of community corrections but may also become a potential factor for recidivism (Wang & Zhang, 2019).

Currently, there are several aspects of research on social support for community corrections offenders. Yang (2019) explains the social support situation of these offenders from the perspective of social support networks. Due to their

unique status, community corrections offenders are more likely to experience disruptions in their existing social relationships, which are difficult to restore once broken. The social ties, from kinship to work-related or neighborhood relationships, are often strained to a greater extent. In terms of the content of social support, Zhang & Xing (2019) analyze the needs of community corrections offenders and identify their demands for instrumental support, emotional support, and informational support. These needs are higher than those of non-punished offenders, likely because community corrections offenders lack these forms of support, which may contribute to their punishment. From the perspective of integrating social support into community corrections work, Wei (2021) proposes that social support can be applied in three stages: pre-correction, during correction, and post-correction. However, the specific intervention methods for each stage have not been thoroughly discussed. Specifically, multiple stakeholders can be involved to provide support for community corrections offenders (Wang & Zhou, 2022). Psychological support (Wang, 2020) can be provided, along with job skills training and counseling, aimed at improving offenders' family relationship networks, and collaborating with social forces to strengthen their social support networks and reduce barriers to reintegration (Yang, 2019). Zhang et al. (2021) focus on these support aspects in their study of female offenders. Focusing on emotional support for community corrections offenders can help expand their social interactions, promote their reintegration into society, stimulate the formation of new beliefs and values, and encourage positive behavior patterns in line with social norms (Wang & Zhang, 2019). From the literature, it is evident that Chinese scholars recognize the diversity of challenges faced by community corrections offenders and acknowledge that without providing them with adequate social support, recidivism may occur. This diversity in challenges calls for a multidimensional approach to social support.

3. Multidimensional Social Support for Community Corrections Offenders

Social support itself is not a unidimensional concept. There are two aspects of social support: structural and functional (Li & Wang, 2021). The structural aspect of social support refers to the presence and number of social relationships in an individual's social network; Indicators of structural social support include the number and density of one's social network as well as the frequency of social interactions (Li & Wang, 2021). This perspective is primarily an attempt to obtain quantitative information about the possible availability of support.

3.1 Structural Aspect: Social Networks

A social network can generally be defined as a web of social relationships surrounding an individual, and social support is a function of these relationships. Unlike the general belief that social support is beneficial for offenders (Bares & Mowen, 2020; Chouhy et al., 2020), social networks can have both positive and negative effects on offenders (Schaefer et al., 2021).

From a positive perspective, an offender's social network can play an important role in problem-solving. Generally

speaking, the larger an individual's network, the more support they will receive. Individuals with broader social support networks tend to have more coping strategies for both behavioral and emotional challenges, in addition to the potential for criminal involvement (Chouhy et al., 2020). Positive relationships with family and friends are often considered key factors in encouraging abstinence from criminal behavior and supporting efforts to "turn one's life around." Therefore, social networks provide positive support in various ways for offenders and those attempting to desist from crime (Schaefer et al., 2021).

However, the support from social networks is not always positive. While families often provide the most supportive encouragement in terms of direction, advice, motivation, and emotional backing, support from friends and family can sometimes have negative effects. These negative impacts often stem from past abuse, encouragement of illegal behavior, or strained relationships. For some individuals, distancing themselves from family members may be more beneficial for maintaining health and a constructive path during reentry (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). At times, unrealistic expectations from family members can lead young people into self-fulfilling prophecies, which can have a detrimental effect on their progress (Bares & Mowen, 2020).

3.2 Functional Aspect: Perceived Social Support

3.2.1 Appraisal support

affirmations (e.g., "you're doing a great job"), constructive feedback, or social comparisons (House, 1981). Positive affirmations are statements designed to encourage positive outcomes by instilling confidence and ambition in the recipient (Schaefer et al., 2021). While these affirmations often reflect current behaviors (such as praising an offender's existing efforts), their primary aim is to motivate ideal future behaviors (Bares & Mowen, 2020).

3.2.2 Emotional support

Emotional support refers to the care provided through affection, understanding, empathy, and reassurance, signaling that the individual is valued by the support provider. It includes shared experiences or a sense of belonging, such as providing care, love, trust, concern, listening, or comfort (House, 1981). Emotional support is one of the most prominent forms of social support for community corrections offenders, characterized by a willingness to discuss feelings and affirm to loved ones that they are not alone throughout the correctional process (Schaefer et al., 2021). Feeling supported or simply being heard can enhance an individual's social and emotional well-being, promote social integration, and reduce certain offenders' alcohol use (Bares & Mowen, 2020).

3.2.3 Informational support

Informational support involves addressing personal or environmental challenges by providing advice, suggestions, guidance, or connections to services and resources (House, 1981). This type of support functions straightforwardly: others provide information and recommendations that help participants address issues they face during reentry, learn

essential skills, and connect with critical resources (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). Informational support is especially valuable for offenders in areas such as sobriety, self-care, education, financial management, and interpersonal relationships (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). This support can foster positive energy, encourage individuals to seek out engaging activities, and enable reflection and understanding of life experiences (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). For example, in anger management classes, tools and skills developed within intervention programs can help participants understand and work through their emotions. Similarly, a participant interested in returning to school might receive relevant information and support from a mentor (Kjellstrand et al., 2022).

3.2.4 Instrumental support

Instrumental support refers to direct assistance or tangible aid, such as money, labor, transportation, and child care (House, 1981). Through instrumental support, individuals receive concrete resources or services like housing, financial assistance, transportation, or essential goods (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). Positive instrumental support from relatives and friends can take many forms, including help with employment, housing, transportation, financial aid, childcare, and sobriety support—all of which contribute to the individual's path to independence (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). Similarly, instrumental support from parole officers, police, social service agency staff, and other professionals may involve assistance with employment, housing, transition planning, health insurance or social security benefits, educational aid, transportation, and legal help (Kjellstrand et al., 2022).

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of multidimensional social support in community corrections for offenders in China, highlighting its importance in facilitating offenders' reintegration and adaptation into society. Through a comprehensive examination of the development of community corrections in China, the challenges faced by offenders, and the growing role of social support, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how social networks and perceived support can affect correctional outcomes.

Firstly, the development of community corrections in China was outlined, emphasizing the evolution of the system and the increasing number of offenders under community supervision. Despite its growth, community corrections offenders in China face significant challenges, including stigma, lack of resources, and limited access to social services. These obstacles underscore the need for a strong and supportive social network to aid in their rehabilitation and reintegration.

Secondly, the research on social support within China's community corrections system was reviewed. Studies from Chinese scholars have highlighted the various challenges faced by offenders and pointed to the potential of social support in mitigating these difficulties. However, more empirical research is needed to fully explore how different dimensions of social support—such as structural and functional aspects—can be leveraged in the context of community corrections.

Finally, this paper examined multidimensional social support in community corrections, distinguishing between the structural aspect (social networks) and the functional aspect (perceived social support). The analysis revealed that social networks play a pivotal role in providing offenders with the resources and connections necessary for successful reintegration. Moreover, perceived social support, encompassing emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, significantly influences offenders' psychological well-being and their ability to adapt to life after conviction. These diverse forms of support are crucial in addressing the complex needs of offenders and promoting their successful reintegration into society.

In conclusion, multidimensional social support is essential for the successful rehabilitation of community corrections offenders in China. It not only aids in reducing the stigma and challenges faced by offenders but also enhances their overall social adaptation, thereby contributing to lower recidivism rates and promoting safer communities. Future research should further explore the integration of social support within community corrections, with a focus on developing tailored interventions that consider the specific needs of offenders at various stages of their reintegration. Policymakers and practitioners should recognize the importance of building robust social networks and fostering the development of functional support systems to ensure that offenders receive the necessary assistance throughout their rehabilitation journey.

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