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The Supervision to Aid Reentry (STAR) Program: Enhancing the Social Capital of Ex-Offenders

Caitlin J. Taylor

La Salle University, taylorc@lasalle.edu

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**The Supervision to Aid Reentry (STAR) program:
Enhancing the social capital of ex-offenders**

Introduction

With approximately 70,000 individuals exiting federal prison every year in the United States and many cycling in and out of prison multiple times, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive plan to help reintegrate offenders back into the community (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008). Recognizing the importance of ex-offender reintegration, the Federal Probation Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, USA, initiated a pilot program entitled the Supervision to Aid Reentry (STAR) in 2007. STAR program participants appear in court for a biweekly reentry court session and have access to a variety of services intended to support their successful return to the community.

As part of a long-term outcome evaluation, a process evaluation was first conducted to investigate successful components of the STAR program. In order to explore the key processes involved in making the STAR program successful, the analysis balanced both inductive and deductive analytical techniques. An inductive approach was used to identify key themes of the STAR program that emerged during interviews with program participants and court observations. The study also used a deductive analytic strategy to assess whether the process goals explicated by the reentry court workgroup and within program documents were being achieved in the STAR program based on observations and interviews with participants.

Although the wider investigation of the STAR program revealed several important processes that drive the reentry court's success, this paper will focus on just one of the key

processes uncovered by the analysis: the program's role in helping participants build social capital. The current study found that the reentry court helps ex-offenders build social capital by encouraging family involvement as well as the development of relationships among program participants. Including such individuals in their social networks allows participants to benefit from the social and emotional support of family members and other participants while also accessing employment opportunities through these personal connections. Family members and other ex-offenders appear to be valuable assets in securing gainful employment for reentry court participants. Before exploring this finding in more detail, this paper will first provide a brief overview of the STAR program and also summarize previous research on the role of social capital as part of a successful reentry process. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of this finding for the STAR program and other reentry programs.

The STAR program reentry court

In 2006, several criminal justice practitioners convened to develop a pilot reentry court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, which includes the City of Philadelphia (the fifth largest city in the United States). The first reentry court session was launched in September 2007 with twelve participants. By early 2011, there were over one hundred and twenty five current or former STAR program participants split between two Philadelphia reentry courts with two reentry court judges.

Those eligible for participation in the STAR program have served a sentence in federal prison and been recently released on probation (or 'supervised release') to the Philadelphia area. Eligible participants are generally medium to high risk offenders who were given split sentences, meaning that at the time of adjudication for their offenses, their original sentencing judge

sentenced these individuals to a certain number of years in prison and a certain number of years on probation following their release from prison.¹ Individuals returning from federal prison to Philadelphia on probation were presented with the opportunity to voluntarily participate in the reentry court. In addition to gaining access to a valuable array of services, probationers have another incentive for participating in the STAR program. If a participant completes fifty-two successful weeks of supervision, the reentry court judge will recommend to the original sentencing judge that the total term of the participant's supervised release be reduced by up to twelve months. Similar to the drug court model in its tolerance of potential setbacks, these fifty-two weeks do not need to be consecutive. A 'successful' week is earned if the participant appears in court (or notifies the court ahead of time of a valid reason for being absent) and continues to successfully follow the terms of his or her probation. If an individual fails to appear for a court session, gives a positive urinalysis test, or fails to follow the directions of the judge or probation officer, he or she will not receive 'credit' for that particular week.

In addition to meeting the regular requirements of probation, STAR program participants must also appear for regular reentry court sessions. There is one probation officer for each court who is responsible for all individuals in that court. Each court session is attended by all program participants assigned to a particular court day, the judge for that group, the probation officer for that group, an administrative assistant, a representative from the Federal Public Defender's Office, an Assistant U.S. Attorney and a reentry coordinator. The reentry coordinator is responsible for partnering with various community organizations and businesses in order to provide services to STAR program participants in both courts as well as helping participants to overcome a variety of obstacles to their successful reentry.

During a reentry court session, the judge calls each participant up to the front of the court and asks the individual to discuss successes and obstacles encountered during the process of reentry into the community. These successes and obstacles often include issues related to employment, education, family, health and personal matters. The judge praises individuals for successes and encourages individuals to continue with their reintegration efforts. When an individual reports a certain obstacle to their reentry (such as employment problems, ongoing substance abuse problems or other legal problems), the judge may refer the individual to a particular service provider or he may invite the reentry coordinator to suggest possible strategies for overcoming the obstacle. Typically, the reentry coordinator and the participant will converse further following the court session to plan a course of action for dealing with the obstacle.

When an individual voluntarily mentions a certain struggle to the judge, he or she is openly requesting help in addressing the problem. Some participants are hesitant to report any ongoing problems to the judge. In these circumstances, as a result of a pre-court meeting, the judge has often already been informed of any significant problems the participant is experiencing and can ask the individual about the issue. In the hour prior to each reentry court session, the judge meets with the participants' probation officer, the administrative assistant, the reentry coordinator and representatives from the Federal Defender's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office. During this workgroup meeting in the judge's chambers, the probation officer reviews the progress of each participant and identifies successes and problems that should be addressed by the judge in open court. The workgroup often decide collaboratively on the most appropriate response to a particular obstacle or success. Working with their probation officers and the reentry coordinator, program participants can be directed to a variety of appropriate services

including education, vocational training and placement, mentoring, drug abuse treatment, counseling, mental and physical healthcare, legal services, and housing assistance.

As of February 2011, forty eight reentry court participants have successfully completed twelve months and ‘graduated’ from the STAR program. During the graduation ceremony, motions to reduce the length of time on probation are presented to the original sentencing judges. If the original sentencing judge is not available to attend court, another federal judge will receive the motion. All STAR graduates have had their motions signed by a judge and have received a reduced probation sentence.

The current study focuses on participants involved in the program between May 2008 and February 2010. Approximately fifty individuals were involved in the program during this study period. The majority of participants were male, with only two female participants in the program. While participants ranged in age from their early twenties to their late forties, the mean age of program participants was thirty three. As an indication of the extent to which the program targets medium to high risk offenders, some participants had just been released after spending over a decade in prison. The mean length of incarceration was five and a half years. Nearly seventy five percent of participants were serving sentences for drug and/or firearms offenses. While approximately fifty percent of participants graduated with eighteen months of beginning the program, the mean length of time to graduate among those who did graduate was fourteen months.

Social capital and successful reentry

There is a growing body of research emphasizing the importance of social capital and social networks for individual reentry success (Clear, 2007; Farrall, 2004). Seemingly

recognizing this, the reentry court plays an important role in helping recently released individuals expand their social networks, which can increase their overall social capital. Before exploring the processes through which the reentry court accomplishes this, this section will detail some of the most relevant research on social capital and how it applies to ex-offender reentry.

Oftentimes, an individual's ability to successfully reintegrate is dependent upon his or her ability to tap into social networks that can provide job opportunities, emotional guidance and support, and other important resources. Unfortunately, recent prison releasees often struggle to restore their social networks following their release. Compared to the average citizen, releasees may have more difficulty utilizing the resources of their social networks because it is common for these networks to breakdown during their incarceration (Roberts, 2004; Clear, Rose and Ryder, 2001; Clear, 2007).

Clear (2007) aptly defined social capital as 'the capacity of a person to call upon personal ties (usually within social networks) in order to advance some personal interest' (80). In light of Coleman's (1988) classic work on social capital, such a definition is perhaps intentionally vague. Coleman clarified that 'social capital is defined by its function' (S98). In other words, the form of social capital depends on the desired outcome, such as emotional support or employment opportunities. Nonetheless, social capital has two key characteristics: it relies on 'some aspect of social structures' and it 'facilitate[s] certain actions of actors' (S98). Emphasizing the key role of social ties in spurring action, Coleman explained that social capital 'comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action' (S99). Similarly, Portes (1998) confirmed that 'the consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (6).

Acknowledging the multitude of perspectives on social capital, the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics relies on a definition of social capital that can be used consistently across governmental agencies. Based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) definition, the UK defines social capital as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (Harper, 2002; Cote and Healy 2001).

For an individual to tap into the benefits of social capital, the individual must rely upon social ties or social networks. Groupings of social ties can be defined as social networks or 'the array of relationships in which a person lives, works and engages in recreation' (Clear, 2007: 77). Clear's research on coercive mobility theory has argued that social networks are necessary for the development of social capital and that social capital can drastically improve an individual's likelihood of reentry success. Clear (2007) appropriately characterized ex-offenders' need to develop social ties and gain social capital as one of 'the most pressing tasks' for ex-offenders (78). Social ties and social capital can help ex-offenders 'marshal the new resources needed for a better life,' including 'a job, a place to live, and educational skills' (78).

Considering descriptions of social capital, there seems to be two distinct processes through which social capital can aid recently released individuals. First, social capital can increase the likelihood that an individual will be able to gain knowledge about particular opportunities. For example, a former prisoner may have an individual in his social network who works at a factory where there happens to be a job opening. The individual may learn about this job opening as a result of his tie to the factory worker. Such knowledge is a function of social capital. Second, social capital also increases the likelihood that individuals can actually access these services or opportunities. Personal connections can increase the likelihood that

opportunities can be materialized. Continuing with this example, the former prisoner may ask his friend to put in a good word for him at the factory or perhaps even help him to get an interview. Without the social capital gained through the individual's tie with his employed friend, he may never have learned about the job opening and / or may never have been able to get an interview.

Based on interviews with two hundred probationers, Farrall (2004) sought to explore the 'black box of social capital' (65). In other words, his work investigated how probationers 'activate' their social capital (68). The interviews revealed that it was common for probationers' family members to aid the probationer with employment by directly offering the recently released individual a job (if the family member was self-employed) or by asking friends to give the individual a job. While research on social capital has traditionally explored how social capital can help ex-offenders gain access to employment or other opportunities, Farrall (2004) also offered a valuable alternative perspective on the direction of the relationship between social capital and resources. Based on his interviews, Farrall discovered that certain resources or opportunities can reduce the likelihood of recidivism by further enhancing social capital. While social capital may be necessary to find employment, for example, employment can also increase 'an individual's stock of social capital' (60). Although obtaining employment may be an 'outcome' of social capital, employment may also be a 'precursor' for increasing an individual's social capital (61).

Considering that social capital plays such an important role in the successful reentry of formerly incarcerated individuals, Farrall (2004) argued that probation services should become more 'desistance-focused' (72) as opposed to primarily surveillance-focused. In recent years, probation and parole departments have devoted greater attention to detecting early signs of non-

compliance than to social services and support for individuals under correctional supervision (Piehl and LoBuglio, 2005; Lynch and Sabol, 2001; Petersilia, 2003). Farrall proposed that such an emphasis on surveillance is likely not the most effective method for encouraging desistance from crime. While some probationers in Farrall's study could rely on the social capital gained through ties with family members, it was also very common for interviewed probationers to have very low levels of social capital. Considering this, Farrall recommended that

‘the strengthening of social capital should become one of the aims of social and criminal justice policy and accordingly the focus of much of the work undertaken by probation services’ (71).

Incorporating Farrall's work and other research on the ‘social contexts of desistance,’ McNeill (2006) presented a framework for how probation departments could work from a desistance paradigm (50). Developing offenders' social capital was an important component of such a paradigm. As McNeill emphasized, “Vitality, it is social capital that is necessary to encourage desistance. It is not enough to build *capacities* for change where change depends on *opportunities* to exercise capacities” (50).

In light of the overwhelmingly large caseloads of most probation officers, expecting probation officers to have the time or resources to independently improve the levels of probationers' social capital may simply be unrealistic or even outside the realm of their responsibilities. However, with the extra manpower and resources provided by a reentry court program, such an aim may be more feasible.

Rebuilding ties with family members is often a first step toward developing social capital for individuals recently released from correctional facilities. Some qualitative evidence from reentry court programs has confirmed the crucial role of using family support to build social

capital. An examination of a federal reentry court in the District of Oregon revealed that ‘participants undergo assessment and ongoing support designed to leverage constructive family relationships’ (Close, Aubin and Alltucker, 2008). Additionally, key stakeholders in a reentry court program in Delaware reported that the reentry court was successful in encouraging family reintegration. Family members were encouraged to be actively involved in the participants’ reintegration by communicating with probation officers and showing their support by attending graduation ceremonies. This reentry court also encouraged participants to work on rebuilding relationships with family members (Lindquist, Hardison and Lattimore, 2003).

Clear’s (2007) work accurately drew attention to the fact that ‘reentry can be lonely, a process devoid of support systems and detached from social connections’ (79). Although reentry courts or other reentry programs may help to encourage releasees to rebuild positive social ties, releasees may have become estranged from family members due to the nature of their criminal activities or their removal from the social network via incarceration. Ex-offenders who have committed themselves to going straight are also likely to become distant from former friends who may still be involved in criminal activity. Such a situation may leave a void that can potentially be filled by other ex-offenders who are also determined to embrace pro-social lifestyles.

As the LIFERS (Long Incarcerated Fraternity Engaging Release Studies) organization at Graterford State Correctional Institution in Pennsylvania has powerfully advocated, transformed ex-offenders can play a valuable role in helping recently released individuals. One of a number of anti-crime initiatives undertaken by the organization, the LIFERS Public Safety Initiative (PSI) ‘was launched as a movement designed to help the public recognize the culture of crime and engage citizens to work toward eliminating it’ (LIFERS Public Safety Steering Committee,

2004: 49S). The PSI Steering Committee particularly stressed the insufficient involvement of ex-offenders in community crime control. Specifically, they proposed that when formerly incarcerated individuals return to their communities, they should devote themselves to ending what PSI has labeled the ‘culture of street crime.’ The involvement of ex-offenders in ending this culture of street crime is essential because they have ‘the experience, knowledge, insight, and expertise’ to help draw young people from the criminal lifestyle (65S). Ex-offenders become equipped to help others escape the culture of street crime not through externally-imposed rehabilitation while incarcerated, but rather through an internal process of transformation that powerfully alters how ex-offenders view the world and their role in it. Although transformation essentially comes from within, ‘the process that begins with the self ends with the transformation of others’ (64s).

It is these kinds of social ties between transformed ex-offenders and individuals still involved in the culture of street crime that may serve as an important platform for building social capital. When formerly incarcerated individuals have lost ties to family members or former criminal peers, other transformed ex-offenders may serve as valuable connections. Social networks of transformed ex-offenders who have committed to crime-free lifestyles can perhaps enhance the availability of social capital for other transformed ex-offenders and for releasees who may be undecided about reoffending.

Some evidence from specialized court programs has disclosed the role that ex-offenders can play in helping one another and expanding social networks. Interviews with key stakeholders involved in an Ohio reentry court revealed the importance of the group dynamics created by the program. Appearing before the judge as a group, participants were given the

opportunity to establish social ties with other participants while also ‘support[ing] one another (and keep[ing] tabs on one another)’ (Lindquist, Hardison and Lattimore, 2003: 40).

Clearly, re-establishing social networks and building social capital is an important endeavor for individuals recently released from prison. While social capital is an important mechanism for former prisoners to access employment opportunities and other resources, it is also valuable for providing individuals with the social and emotional support that can aid in their successful reintegration.

Research methods

Data were collected for the current study using a variety of research tools. An important benefit of using a variety of data collection strategies was the ability to investigate the STAR program from the multiple perspectives of program participants and workgroup members. These methods included interviews with participants and the workgroup; observations of pre-court workgroup meetings, court sessions and graduation ceremonies; and a documentary analysis.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants of the STAR program. At the beginning of a reentry court session, the judge allowed the researcher to address the participants and explain that she would like to talk with current participants to find out about their experiences in the STAR program. Interested participants were invited to write down their names and phone numbers so that the researcher could contact them to set up an interview appointment. Interviews were conducted during the summer of 2009. Most interviews took place before or after court sessions in an attorney conference room in the Federal Court Building.

All participants were invited to speak openly and honestly and assured that the interviews would be kept strictly confidential. While some participants were eager to guide the

conversation themselves, interview questions probed participants about their perceptions of the helpfulness of certain services; their relationships with probation officers, the reentry court judge, and other program participants; their reasoning behind their voluntary participation in the STAR program; their general experiences in the program; and their views on other psychological and emotional changes related to successful reintegration. These interviews lasted an average of thirty two minutes.

Interviews were also conducted with members of the reentry court workgroup, including both probation officers, both reentry court judges, a representative from the Federal Public Defender's Office, an Assistant U.S. Attorney and the reentry coordinator. The length of these interviews ranged from twenty minutes to over an hour. These interviews were conducted in the winter of 2009 and 2010. Interviews with the representative of the Federal Public Defender's Office and the U.S. Attorney were conducted over the phone and the other interviews took place in the offices of each respondent. Respondents were asked to describe the intended and actual processes and outcomes of the STAR program. Interview questions also encouraged workgroup members to explain what they saw as the most important components of the STAR program. They were also prompted to describe any limitations or challenges that the STAR program continued to face.

Observations

The reentry court workgroup openly invited the researcher to attend pre-court meetings, regular court sessions and graduation ceremonies. Detailed observation notes were collected from four pre-court meetings in the judges' chambers, twelve regular court sessions and four graduation ceremonies. The pre-court meetings last approximately forty five minutes to one hour. Regular court sessions tend to vary in length. According to interviews with the workgroup

and courtroom observations, reentry court sessions tend to last about sixty minutes in one judge's court, while in another judge's court, sessions tend to be longer and last about ninety minutes. Graduation ceremonies also vary in length, depending upon the current number of graduates and any outside speakers who may be attending the ceremony. All observations were conducted between May of 2008 and December of 2009.

During observations of pre-court meetings, the researcher sat at the table with the reentry court workgroup. During observations of regular court sessions and graduation ceremonies, the researcher sat in the jury box with other observers, including potential social service partners, representatives from the criminal justice system, and law students. The researcher recorded detailed field notes during all observations and captured direct quotations whenever possible. In addition to notes on verbal communication, notes were also recorded about physical movements, eye contact and the general courtroom environment.

Program documents

Several planning documents and initial reports were provided to the researcher by various members of the reentry court workgroup and the Chief of Federal Probation. These documents included a general overview of the program, the proposal for the pilot program and a new arrest protocol. The program overview detailed the intended processes of the reentry court and the desired outcomes. The proposal for the pilot provided reasons for beginning the program in Philadelphia, some lessons from other reentry court programs as well as the planned procedures for the program. The new arrest protocol specified the possible sanctions for supervision violations and detailed the conditions in which the judge or the probation officer could impose such sanctions.

Data analysis

All observation and interview notes were entered into the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti version 5.0., which allows researchers to sort and organize large qualitative data sets while also discovering and analyzing themes in the data. Thematic labels (or ‘codes’) were assigned to certain passages and notes (or ‘memos’) were attached to certain passages. Similar types of observations and interviews were sorted into different ‘families.’ Separate groupings or ‘families’ were made for interviews with participants, interviews with the workgroup, observations of pre-court meetings, observations of regular court sessions and observations of graduation ceremonies. The use of families allowed for an examination of themes both within and between different groups of data sources.

The analysis balanced both inductive and deductive analytical approaches. In the first round of coding, an open coding technique was used; key themes that repeatedly emerged from the data were identified and assigned thematic codes. The second round of coding relied heavily on characteristics of the STAR program that were highlighted in program documents, observations of pre-court meetings and during interviews with the reentry court workgroup. The researcher identified any program goals or characteristics that were detailed in program documents or that were explained by members of the workgroup. Observations and participant interviews were then coded for mention of these goals and characteristics.

Once the most common themes were identified, the analysis was continued in order to identify relationships between different themes. One method of this analysis was investigating ‘co-occurring codes.’ This tool detected passages where multiple codes were commonly assigned to the same statement. These passages were then compared with other similar passages with multiple codes in order to distinguish a possible relationship between themes. Another method for discovering relationships between themes relied on using the network view tool.

This tool allowed themes to be visually mapped and connections drawn between themes. When a relationship was identified between themes, these passages were then given a ‘super code,’ which characterized the larger theme or relationship.

The role of social capital in the STAR program

During the first round of inductive coding, several key themes related to social networks and social capital emerged. These themes are detailed in Table I below. One code was labeled ‘family involvement’ and was particularly common in observations of regular court proceedings and graduation ceremonies. Another code was characterized as ‘group dynamics,’ which was one of the most common codes across all data families. A subcode referred to as ‘networking for employment’ also emerged and was most commonly found in interviews with the workgroup. Yet another theme that emerged during the first round of coding was labeled ‘social and emotional support’ and was also common across all data families. The following section will

[INSERT TABLE I. ABOUT HERE]

demonstrate how family involvement, group dynamics, networking for employment and social and emotional support can be considered subcomponents of a ‘super code’ related to social networks and social capital.

Ex-offenders’ families can be a crucial component of their social networks and may act as an important precursor for accessing social capital. In recognition of this, the STAR program vehemently encouraged participants to value their family connections. As evidence of how common this theme was, the court’s encouragement of participants’ family involvement was found in two thirds of regular court observations and half of the graduation ceremony observations. Participants were encouraged to bring family members and romantic partners to reentry court sessions and graduations. On one occasion, the judge asked a participant, ‘Now am

I gonna get to meet your girlfriend sometime?’ The judge went on to explain that he ‘just want[s] to thank her’ for all she has done to help the participant stay on the right track. The reentry court judges also commonly inquired about participants’ family lives. They commonly asked about the birth of a child, child custody issues, ill parents and new fiancées.

Family members of at least one participant were present in over half of the observations of regular court proceedings. When a loved one accompanied the individual to reentry court, the judge often requested that the loved one also come up to the front of the courtroom with the participant. The judge emphasized that the loved one’s role in keeping the ex-offender on track is extremely important and that their love and support is invaluable for their successful reintegration. The judge commonly offered encouraging comments to loved ones such as, ‘what you do is way more important than anything we can do here.’

Although one member of the reentry court workgroup explained during an interview that most participants reconnect with family members ‘on their own,’ several other members of the workgroup emphasized the importance of the reentry court’s role in encouraging family ties. One of the judges noted that reconnecting with family is very much encouraged by the reentry court. The other judge agreed with the importance of family support by stating, ‘If these people [family members] aren’t backing them up, then they’re going to fail.’ One of the probation officers also admitted that the reentry court certainly brings the family issue to the ‘forefront’ more so than he would with a regular caseload. Despite recognizing that child care responsibilities can at least temporarily help participants stay on the right track, another probation officer noted that they need to be cautious about encouraging family reunification because many participants’ family members are often involved in criminal behaviors themselves.

Evidence of the reentry court's emphasis on family ties was also visible during graduation ceremonies. In all observations of graduation ceremonies, family members were present for at least one of the graduates. When submitting the motion to reduce the length of probation, the probation officer reads a list of the graduating participant's accomplishments to the sentencing judge. Such noteworthy accomplishments have included, 're-established ties with family.' During another graduation ceremony, the judge asked a graduate's family members to stand so that everyone in the courtroom could applaud them for their efforts in helping the graduate successfully reintegrate into the community. Speaking to the graduate, the judge described that ceremony as a 'happy occasion for you and for your family and loved ones who have travelled the journey with you.'

Clearly, the reentry court recognizes the important role that family support can play in successful reintegration. In addition to providing emotional support and encouragement for participants, family members also serve as an important resource for employment. During an interview, one of the reentry court judges emphasized that participants can really benefit from possible employment opportunities provided by family members. This judge explained that when a participant receives a job from a family member, it tends to be better work than when a participant finds a very basic job through the halfway house or another resource. Jobs from family members often offer more hours and tend to be much more stable positions with opportunities for advancement.

While the court encouraged participants to tap into social capital through networks with family members, the reentry court also created the opportunity for participants to build social capital through networks with other participants. The fact that all participants in a particular reentry court appear on the same day and at the same time seemed to create some important

group dynamics. When a participant is called up to the podium to converse with the judge, all other participants are also present in the courtroom and have the opportunity to listen to the successes and challenges faced by their fellow participants. Traditionally, when an individual is on probation, he or she will simply have a one-on-one relationship with his or her probation officer. In the STAR program, individuals on supervised release are not only involved in a one-on-one relationship with their probation officer or their reentry court judge, but they are also engaged in a network of relationships with other STAR program participants.

According to the program documents, these social processes were deliberately intended by the creators of the reentry court. The proposal for the pilot program asserted that,

‘All clients will be present for the entire session, so that everyone sees the court encouraging positive behavior, affirming the value of individual efforts, and, when necessary, sanctioning non-compliance with the program’s goals’ (7).

Such group dynamics appear to have important implications for providing emotional support or guidance and, perhaps most importantly, for providing access to a larger social network that can aid in the challenging task of obtaining employment. In other words, the social network created by participants’ membership in the reentry court also created social capital because participants can benefit from the social support and resources from other participants.

In terms of emotional support, nearly all STAR program participants who were interviewed indicated that it was helpful to listen to the experiences of other program participants. Several interview respondents mentioned that listening to others helps them to stay ‘focused.’ One participant explained that it ‘helps keep my mind on track’ and can even be ‘a little inspirational,’ especially when another participant succeeds or graduates. Conversely, some participants also seemed to be influenced by listening to other participants who were not

succeeding. One interview respondent expressed that after listening to the obstacles some other participants were facing, he actually feels motivated because his problems seem ‘not so bad.’

Some participants truly seemed to recognize and embrace the opportunity to positively influence and inspire other STAR participants. During the last reentry court session before an individual is scheduled to graduate, these successful participants often offered words of wisdom and encouragement to other participants. One soon-to-graduate individual encouraged participants to take advantage of the resources offered by the court, including the fact that there is always ‘someone here to give you moral support.’ This participant advised others to simply ‘do what you gotta do.’ As further evidence of participants valuing their positions as good role models, it was common during graduation ceremonies for graduates to express interest in returning to speak in court and update the court on their successes. One interview respondent highlighted the importance of group dynamics by stating, ‘we all stand together... when one messes up, we all look bad.’

As well as the emotional support and guidance provided by other participants, STAR participants also directly benefited from the social capital of other ex-offenders in the program by gaining access to felon-friendly employment opportunities. Although the STAR program provides participants with access to job training and job placement programs, court observations revealed that many participants who were able to find stable employment often do so through their relationships with family members and friends, including other STAR participants. Considering that many participants may struggle to access social capital through networks involving family members or friends, they can at the very minimum access social capital through a network of other STAR participants.

The reentry court judges appeared to recognize the importance of social networks for obtaining employment. When one participant who was struggling to find a job explained that he was asking friends for applications to their places of employment, the judge encouraged him to continue with this endeavor and stated, ‘stay on top of your friends... that’s how people get jobs, that’s how all of us get jobs... you need your networks.’

The reentry court judges also seem to appreciate the value of group dynamics by encouraging successful participants to help other participants. During one reentry session when a participant was describing a job opportunity he recently discovered for himself, the judge asked, ‘any other jobs there for our other friends?’ The participant promised to find out about any possible job openings. Court observations also revealed several occasions when the reentry court judge instructed one participant to speak after court with another participant who had experience in a particular trade or field of work. For example, when individuals have expressed interest in auto mechanic school or obtaining a commercial drivers’ license, the judge referred that individual to talk with another participant who had already been to auto mechanic school or earned a commercial drivers’ license.

Recently, the reentry court has also taken a more direct approach for encouraging participants to help other participants secure employment. Participants can earn two weeks of extra credit towards completing the program if they help find someone a job and the individual stays at the job for at least three weeks. Such an incentive encourages participants to not only help others identify employment opportunities, but also to play a role in supporting others in order to help them keep the job.

Interestingly, during data analysis, it was discovered that the codes for ‘emotional support’ and ‘networking for employment’ sometimes covaried, indicating that the same

passages were assigned both of these codes. For example, one of the passages from an interview with one of the reentry court judges included codes for both of these themes. According to this judge, the emotional support and guidance provided by other participants is the ‘single most important component’ for the success of the STAR program. As this judge explained, guidance from other participants is particularly important in terms of being able to find employment. When asked about what makes the reentry court work, this judge emphasized the importance of participants seeing ‘other guys having the same sorts of issues.’ Court participants can ‘listen to other guys who say, here’s how I got my job,’ which is helpful because they can learn valuable strategies for obtaining employment (i.e., networking) and also begin to understand that ‘they’re not alone’ (i.e., emotional support). Such strategies often involve tapping into social capital provided by social networks. This judge explained that listening to how other participants have obtained jobs is often the ‘first time in their lives they understand networking.’

Reentry court participants also appear to understand this connection between social support and networking for employment. Some participants take it upon themselves to help other participants obtain employment. During one court session, a participant openly expressed to the judge that he had spoken to several other participants and that he is currently working on finding positions for them at his current place of employment. Similarly, one interview respondent explained that he frequently tries to find jobs for other participants. He expressed that he would ‘love to be able to help someone out’ because one little thing he could do (such as ask about open positions) could make a big difference in someone else’s life.

As a result of being disconnected from friends and family while incarcerated, former prisoners face the particularly daunting challenge of rebuilding social networks and establishing social capital. The reentry court appears to encourage participants to re-establish ties with family

members as well as creating the opportunity for participants to build social ties with other participants. Social networks based on family members and other participants offer the platform needed to develop social capital. Such social capital is able to provide ex-offenders with an invaluable source of social and emotional support as well as access to employment opportunities.

Discussion

The STAR program's efforts to help participants expand their social networks and build social capital are rather unique for a Federal Probation Office and US District Court. Although the reentry court creates an environment for individuals under correctional supervision to learn from one another, for the workgroup to offer social support and for family involvement to be encouraged, these crucial processes generally end after a participant has graduated from the reentry court. Interestingly, in apparent recognition of the importance of this kind of support offered by the court, several participants recommended some type of follow-up period after a participant graduates. One participant asked, 'after here, what do you have?' Another participant suggested that the reentry court should 'every now and again, call a guy, see how he's doing' in order to find out if there is anything he or she needs. Yet another participant agreed that the program should 'try to keep in touch' with graduates because once the program is over, '[you are] out there on your own again.' In recognition of the social support provided by the program as well as the importance of the structure, one of the probation officers also suggested some kind of 'step down' system after graduation.

Several other reentry court programs have used a phase approach (see Linquist, Hardison and Lattimore, 2003). For example, in some reentry court programs, new participants are required to appear in court every two weeks. After a certain number of successful months, the

participant is only required to appear once every month. Then, after a year, the participant is only required to appear every other month. Such a phase model may address the concerns of participants and workgroup members in reference to the abrupt end of social support following graduation. Strategies to continue the social support and efforts to continue to aid recent releasees in building social capital may help to improve the future outcomes of STAR program participants.

Conclusion

Oftentimes, former prisoners' ability to successfully reintegrate is dependent upon their ability to tap into social networks that can provide them with job opportunities, emotional guidance and support, and other important resources (Clear, 2007; Farrall, 2004). The current study found that the reentry court helps participants build social capital by encouraging family involvement and relationships among program participants. Having such individuals in their social networks allows participants to benefit from the social and emotional support of family members and other participants while also accessing employment opportunities through these personal connections.

While the STAR program employs a variety of unique strategies for assisting individuals under correctional supervision, the program's emphasis on building social capital is arguably one of the most innovative. Despite the fact that the program is run by various agencies of the formal criminal justice system (including the US Probation Office and the US District Court), the program has clearly recognized the importance of participants' informal relationships. The STAR program represents an example of formal social control transcending its traditional boundaries by encouraging informal processes that act as mechanisms of social control.

Notes

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¹ As part of the ‘get tough on crime’ political agenda and the shift to determinate sentencing, the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 abolished parole in the federal system. As opposed to being released from prison on parole, federal offenders are instead sentenced to a certain number of years on probation following their release from prison (Petersilia, 1999; Adams and Roth, 1998).

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Table I. Themes Related to Social Networks and Building Social Capital

Code Name	Subcodes	Examples
Family involvement	Social and emotional support from family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judge to a family member: ‘what you do is way more important than anything we can do here’ • Accomplishment described during graduation ceremonies: ‘re-established ties with family’
	Employment opportunities from family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judge: jobs from family members tend to be more stable, offer longer hours and have better benefits
Group dynamics	Social and emotional support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant: listening to other participants ‘helps keep my mind on track’ and can be ‘inspirational’ • Participant: ‘we all stand together... when one messes up, we all look bad’
	Networking for employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judge: ‘any jobs there for our other friends?’ • Judge directs a participant interested in auto mechanic school to talk with another participant who already completed the program