

The Influence of Gender on the Relationship Between Support Networks and Early Employment After Incarceration

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of informal social support specifically peer instrumental support, familial instrumental support, and familial emotional support in influencing short-term employment outcomes among formerly incarcerated individuals. This study investigates how informal social support, specifically familial emotional support, familial instrumental support, and peer instrumental support, influences employment outcomes during the critical three-month post-release period. Using data from Wave 2 of the federally funded Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), logistic regression analyses were conducted on a sample of 1,122 adult participants (80% male, 20% female). Findings reveal that gender significantly predicts employment outcomes, with men being 61% more likely than women to secure employment within three months of release ($OR = 1.61, p < 0.01$). Peer instrumental support emerged as a significant positive predictor of employment ($OR = 1.18, p < 0.05$), although its effect did not vary by gender. In contrast, both familial instrumental support ($OR = 1.08$) and familial emotional support ($OR = 0.83$) were not significantly associated with employment outcomes, and gender did not moderate their effects. Education strongly influenced employment success, with individuals holding a high school diploma being nearly twice as likely to be employed ($OR = 2.01, p < 0.01$). Racial disparities were also evident, as black participants were significantly less likely than white participants to be employed ($OR = 0.82, p < 0.1$). Additionally, years incarcerated showed a small but significant positive association with employment ($OR = 1.07, p < 0.05$), contrary to commonly held expectations. These results suggest that peer networks may play a more critical role than family in facilitating early employment success among formerly incarcerated individuals. At the same time, structural inequalities particularly those related to gender, race and socioeconomic status (Lawanson et al., 2025) continue to shape reentry outcomes and merit focused attention from policymakers and reentry service providers.

Keywords: Reentry, Incarceration, Social Support, Gender Differences, Employment, Familial Support, SVORI, Criminal Justice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the United States, over two million people including men, women, and children are incarcerated. California alone houses more than 167,000 individuals in its 33 adult prisons. While men remain significantly more likely to be incarcerated than women, the female prison population is the fastest-growing group. This increase is partly driven by disproportionately high arrest rates and harsher punishments for women involved in drug and property offenses (Frost et al., 2006). Research has shown that having a criminal record creates significant obstacles for formerly incarcerated men trying to find employment, as many employers hold negative biases against individuals with such histories (Pager, 2007). Furthermore, job seekers with criminal records face additional difficulties due to the growing practice among employers of asking about arrest and conviction histories and conducting background checks on top candidates. As the incarcerated population continues to grow, so does the number of individuals on probation and parole. Across the United States, more than five million men and women are currently under probation or parole supervision. Together, they make up the majority of the 7.2 million people under some form of criminal justice oversight. People of color are disproportionately represented among parolees, and there is a rising number of women and parents within this group. Individuals with a history of incarceration frequently encounter restricted employment opportunities (Waldfogel, 1994; Grogger, 1995; Western & Muller, 2013). The stigma associated with incarceration can create further obstacles, often contributing to psychological distress (Rose & Clear, 2003). As a result, individuals reentering society may begin to doubt their ability to succeed (Mears & Travis, 2004; Sullivan, 1989), which can lead to self-imposed isolation from others, essential resources, and their communities upon returning home (Rose & Clear, 2003). Given these obstacles, it is not surprising that a significant number of formerly incarcerated individuals are rearrested within a few years of release. An analysis across 30 states by Durose and colleagues (2014) revealed that 67.8% of individuals released from prison were rearrested. Specifically, among those released in 2005, about 49.7% were reincarcerated within three years due to parole or probation violations or new offenses. Over a five-year period, this figure rose to 55.1%. In many cases, these new arrests were closely tied to the difficulties individuals faced while trying to reintegrate into society (Durose, Cooper & Snyder, 2014). Studies show that men are more likely than women to return to criminal behavior after release. A review of individuals released from prison in fifteen states in 1994 analyzed rates of rearrest, reconviction, and incarceration, highlighting the differences in recidivism between genders. In a study examining gender differences in reentry challenges, Jones and colleagues (2002) found that men's successful reintegration was largely influenced by practical factors such as employment opportunities, education, and prior skills. In contrast, women's reentry experiences were more heavily shaped by relational factors and the strength of their support

networks. a finding that is consistent with research on other critical outcomes like housing stability (Ferdinand, 2025).

One potential explanation for these gender differences lies in the varying levels and types of social support that men and women receive upon release. Social support defined as the emotional and practical help offered by peers, networks, and communities is a key factor in the reintegration process (Taylor & Becke, 2015). It helps to alleviate the emotional distress and stigma associated with incarceration, thereby easing the transition back into society. Social support has been linked to greater success in securing stable housing and employment (Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, & Denver, 2011), and it has also been shown to reduce reoffending rates, even among high-risk populations such as sexual offenders (Wilson et al., 2009).

Despite existing research, a gap remains in understanding how social support may affect men and women differently during the reentry process, particularly in the critical domain of employment. While studies have explored its role in areas like health (Lawanson et al., 2025) and housing (Ferdinand, 2025), the gendered mechanisms linking support to employment are less clear. This study aims to address that gap by focusing specifically on informal social support namely, the support provided by family members, friends, and neighbors (Jiang & Winfree, 2006; McCoy & Miller, 2013; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). The analysis will concentrate on three key dimensions: familial emotional support, familial instrumental support, and peer instrumental support.

To evaluate how these forms of support influence the reduction of recidivism, the study will examine their effect on the likelihood of successful reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals. A central goal is to uncover the gender-based differences in how social support is provided and experienced, and how these differences shape post-release outcomes. By highlighting these distinctions, the study aims to inform relevant stakeholders and contribute to the development of targeted policies that enhance the reintegration experience for both men and women.

II. METHODS

The data for this study were drawn from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), a federally funded program developed to enhance the reintegration experiences of individuals transitioning from incarceration back into their communities. By the end of 2003, 69 agencies serving both adult and juvenile populations received grants ranging from \$500,000 to \$2 million to implement comprehensive reentry systems. These systems included diagnostic assessments, individualized reentry plans, and coordinated transition teams designed to offer support throughout the incarceration and reentry process.

This study specifically relied on data from Wave 2 of the SVORI evaluation, corresponding to the three-month follow-up period post-release. This timeframe is widely recognized as a critical window during which individuals face heightened risks and challenges, particularly concerning housing and employment stability. Focusing exclusively on Wave 2 allows for a concentrated examination of the immediate impact of familial and peer social support on short-term reentry outcomes, rather than the longer-term adjustments captured in subsequent waves. The emphasis on this initial post-release phase is grounded in existing research that highlights the first three months as pivotal for successful community reintegration.

The analytic sample consisted of 1,122 adult participants selected from the full SVORI dataset, which includes a total of 2,054 individuals—1,697 men (Part 1) and 337 women (Part 2). To be included in the analysis, participants had to be at least 18 years old at the time of the interview, enrolled in the SVORI program evaluation, and provide complete data for all relevant variables. The final sample was 80% male and 20% female. Racial and ethnic breakdowns showed that 51% identified as Black or African American, 36% as White, and 13% as Hispanic or another racial/ethnic category. Marital status data revealed that 90% of participants were unmarried at the time of the interview, a category encompassing individuals who were separated, divorced, widowed, or never married, consistent with the SVORI classification scheme. Additionally, 68% of participants reported having at least one child, and 48% had either completed a high school diploma or were actively enrolled in educational programs such as GED courses. The broader dataset includes detailed educational categorizations, including vocational training and other forms of schooling.

The study focused on two primary reentry outcomes: housing stability and employment status at the three-month mark. Housing stability was defined as residing in a single location during the reference period, or two locations if the move was intended to secure or improve housing conditions, following criteria established by Lattimore et al. (2012). Approximately 25% of participants ($SD = 0.43$) met this threshold for stable housing. Employment status was coded as a binary variable indicating whether participants were gainfully employed at the time of the Wave 2 interview. The average employment rate was 72.2% ($M = 0.72$, $SD = 0.45$), reflecting

a relatively high level of labor force participation shortly after release. By centering on these outcomes, the study aimed to assess how early social support from family and peers may influence critical indicators of short-term reentry success.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of three logistic regression models predicting post-release employment within three months was analysed to estimate whether gender moderates the relationship between peer instrumental support, familial instrumental support, and familial emotional support and the likelihood of securing employment within three months of release and the outcome reported in Table 1.

➤ Baseline Model (Model 1)

The first model in Table 1 estimates the direct effects of social support variables on employment outcomes while controlling for gender and other relevant factors. Results indicate that gender is a significant predictor of employment outcomes. Specifically, men are 61% more likely to secure employment within three months of release than women ($OR = 1.61$, $p < 0.01$).

Among the social support variables, peer instrumental support shows a small positive association with employment ($OR = 1.14$), but this effect is not statistically significant. Familial instrumental support is associated with a 7% increase in the likelihood of securing employment ($OR = 1.07$), although this relationship does not reach statistical significance. Similarly, familial emotional support shows a slight negative association with employment ($OR = 0.96$), but this effect is also not statistically significant.

The control variables provide additional insights. Having a high school diploma significantly improves employment outcomes, increasing the likelihood of securing employment ($OR = 2.01$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, Black individuals are less likely to secure employment than White participants ($OR = 0.82$, $p < 0.1$), highlighting persistent racial disparities in post-release employment opportunities. Years incarcerated shows a marginally significant relationship, with longer incarceration slightly increasing employment likelihood ($OR = 1.07$, $p < 0.1$).

Table 1 Logistic Regression Predicting Securing Employment within 3 Months of Release

	Model 1(Baseline)		Model 2(Peer Support Interaction)		Model 3(Familial Support Interaction)	
		OR	B	OR	B	OR
Gender (0= Female)	0.48**	1.61	0.47**	1.61	0.47**	1.61
Peer Instrumental Support	0.13	1.14	0.17*	1.18	0.17*	1.18
Family Instrumental Support	0.07	1.07	0.06	1.06	0.08	1.08
Family Emotional Support	-0.05	0.96	-0.05	0.95	-0.19	0.83

Gender *Peer Instrumental Support			0.05	1.05		
Gender*Family Instrumental Support					0.01	0.01
Gender*Family Emotional Support					0.19	1.21
Marital Status (1= partnered)	0.06	1.07	0.06	1.07	0.07	1.07
Children (1=yes)	0.16	1.17	0.16	1.17	0.17	1.18
High School Diploma (1=yes)	0.70**	2.01	0.69**	2	0.69**	1.99
Drug Offense (1=yes)	0	1	0	1	0	1
Gang Member (1=yes)	-0.19	0.83	-0.18	0.83	-0.2	0.82
Race (0= White)						
Black	-0.19+	0.82	-0.19+	0.83	-0.19+	0.83
Hisp/Other						
Years Incarcerated	0.06+	1.07	0.06+	1.07	0.07*	1.07
Family Criminal History(1=yes)	-0.33+	0.72	-0.33+	0.72	-0.33+	0.72
Peer Criminal History (1=yes)	0.11	1.12	0.12	1.12	0.12	1.13
Constant	0.56+	1.74	0.56+	1.74	0.53	1.7
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1	1122		1122		1122	

➤ Peer Instrumental Support Interaction (Model 2)

The second model in Table 1 introduces an interaction term between gender and peer instrumental support to determine whether peer support functions differently for men and women in employment outcomes. Results indicate that peer instrumental support becomes a significant predictor in this model. A one-unit increase in peer instrumental support is associated with an increase in employment likelihood (OR = 1.18, $p < 0.05$).

However, the interaction term between gender and peer instrumental support (OR = 1.05) is not statistically significant, suggesting that the effect of peer instrumental support on employment does not significantly differ between men and women. The control variables remain largely consistent, with education and race continuing to shape employment outcomes.

➤ Familial Support Interactions (Model 3)

The third model in Table 1 examines whether gender moderates the effects of familial instrumental and emotional support on employment outcomes. Results indicate that a one-unit increase in familial instrumental support is associated with an 8% increase in employment likelihood (OR = 1.08), but this effect remains statistically insignificant.

For familial emotional support, a one-unit increase corresponds to a 17% decrease in the likelihood of securing

employment (OR = 0.83), but this effect also fails to reach statistical significance. These findings suggest that familial support both instrumental and emotional does not play a decisive role in employment outcomes during the early reentry period. Regarding the interaction terms, neither the gender familial instrumental support (OR = 1.01) nor the gender familial emotional support (OR = 1.21) interactions are statistically significant, indicating no meaningful gender-based differences in the influence of familial support on employment.

Consistent with previous models, education remains a strong predictor, with high school graduates continuing to have significantly higher employment odds (OR = 1.99, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, years incarcerated becomes statistically significant (OR = 1.07, $p < 0.05$) in this model, suggesting that individuals who have been incarcerated longer may be slightly more likely to secure employment post-release.

The findings indicate that gender remains a significant predictor of employment, with men being more likely to secure jobs than women, suggesting that structural barriers may disproportionately affect formerly incarcerated women. Peer instrumental support is positively associated with employment, but this effect does not differ by gender, meaning both men and women benefit similarly from peer networks. In contrast, familial instrumental and emotional support do not significantly impact employment outcomes, and gender does not moderate

their effects. Education is a key determinant of employment, with individuals holding a high school diploma being more likely to find work, while racial disparities persist, with Black individuals facing greater challenges compared to White individuals. These findings highlight the importance of addressing structural barriers, particularly through skill development and job placement support, to improve employment outcomes, especially for women and racial minorities.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study provide critical insights into how informal social support influences short-term employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals and how these effects may differ across gender lines. Gender emerged as a significant factor, with men being substantially more likely than women to obtain employment within three months of release. However, while peer instrumental support was positively associated with employment, the benefits did not differ significantly between men and women. Surprisingly, familial support, whether emotional or instrumental did not have a statistically significant effect on employment outcomes during the early reentry period, nor did gender moderate these effects.

These results suggest that structural and systemic barriers, rather than differences in informal support systems alone, contribute to the gender gap in post-release employment. Education consistently proved to be a powerful predictor of employment success, and racial disparities persisted, particularly for Black individuals. Overall, the study highlights the complexity of reentry dynamics and the need for more nuanced approaches that account for intersecting factors such as gender, race, and education. Based on the findings of the study, the recommendations are as follows:

- Expand peer mentorship programs within reentry initiatives to leverage the proven benefits of peer instrumental support, especially in job placement and skills navigation.
- Develop gender-specific reentry strategies, particularly to support women who face heightened employment barriers, including child care responsibilities and stigmatization.
- Invest in education and vocational training pre- and post-release to improve employment readiness, focusing especially on high school completion and market-relevant skills.

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