

The Effects of Social Support on Prisoner Reentry Outcomes in Emerging Adulthood

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CJUS 4701: Honors Thesis in Criminal Justice

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April 25, 2025

Abstract

The United States is the world leader in incarceration with nearly a quarter of the global prison population. However, high recidivism rates demonstrate a lack of adequate support in successfully reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals back into society. Additionally, despite well-documented links between age and crime as well as social support and rehabilitation, research on social support and reentry outcomes typically neglects an age group breakdown. Emerging adulthood, which describes a distinct developmental period characterized by self-discovery, change, and exploration in ages 18-25, has not been subject to comprehensive criminological research, particularly with regard to incarceration and reentry. The current study examines the relationship between age, social support, and prisoner reentry outcomes. Specifically, the research asks whether individuals aged 18-25 are more likely to recidivate than those in other age categories and whether social support influences this likelihood. Through analysis of a cross-sectional data set collected from previously incarcerated individuals, the findings indicated that individuals aged 18-25 were significantly more likely to experience rearrest and reincarceration. This study also found social support to be a significant factor in predicting rearrest, though it was not significant in predicting reincarceration. These results add to the growing body of literature on the factors that predict successful reentry to hopefully improve reentry programming.

The Effects of Social Support on Prisoner Reentry Outcomes in Emerging Adulthood

Introduction

The United States is currently the world leader in incarceration among developed countries, accounting for 25 percent of the global prison population with over 1.2 million people incarcerated in state or federal prisons (Kang-Brown, et al. 2023). Of those 1.2 million, approximately 600,000 people will be released each year (Sawyer, 2022). Critics argue that the modern system fails to provide adequate support to successfully reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals back into society, resulting in high recidivism rates. In fact, studies show an average of two-thirds of released individuals will be rearrested and half will be reincarcerated (Leverentz et al. 2020). A comprehensive understanding of what constitutes successful reentry among incarcerated individuals is the key to reducing these high recidivism rates, ensuring broader community safety, and offender rehabilitation. Over the past few decades, criminological research has sought to extensively explore the variables involved in successful reentry outcomes, as the needs of each incarcerated individual requires exhaustive analysis.

Given the well-documented link between age and crime (Farrington, 1986; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffitt, 1993; Piquero et al., 2003; Sweeten et al., 2013), young adults are often at the center of the discussion around re-entry outcomes. The precarious transition between adolescence and adulthood has garnered recognition within criminology. The time period has been termed emerging adulthood and originated in 2000 from a developmental psychologist named Jeffery Arnett (2000). Emerging adulthood is defined as ages 18 to 25, and is argued to be a period of unique experiences that people undergo that is distinct from those of adolescents (13-17) and adults (26+). Emerging adulthood marks a transitional period in which individuals are seeking increased autonomy, particularly with finances and housing, redefining existing

relationships or establishing new relationships, and exploring one's identity (Nader & Davies, 2023). Because of the notable changes in both existing and new relationships, social support during emerging adulthood can fluctuate significantly, potentially decreasing for lengthy periods.

In addition to decreased social support, the instability in this age group presents a time period characterized by an increase in deviant behavior. Despite making up 10 percent of the population, emerging adults are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, accounting for nearly a quarter of arrests (Perker & Chester, 2017; OJJDP, 2020). Young adults also recidivate at slightly higher rate than other age groups; a national study of 24 states found that 75 percent of those under 24 released in 2008 were rearrested within 3 years, compared to 68.7 percent of those between 25 and 39 (Antenangeli & Durose, 2021).

Recidivism rates, including rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration, are typically viewed as a measure of prisoner reentry outcomes, which describe the process by which incarcerated individuals return to the community following release from prison. Successful reentry can also be measured by desistance from crime, as well as prosocial behaviors and perceptions, such as abstaining from substance use, obtaining employment, and improvements in mental and emotional wellbeing (Middlemass & Smiley 2019). The drastic contrast between prison life and community life, along with the abrupt shift, necessitates significant support and resources in order for incarcerated individuals to successfully reintegrate into society. Individuals who are incarcerated during emerging adulthood require even more assistance following release as this period consists of precarious transitions, which are exacerbated by diminished conventional opportunities and positive, consistent social support (Harding & Harris, 2020).

The current study aims to add to the growing body of literature on the factors that predict successful reentry. In particular, this study will focus on the factors that impact younger

individuals returning home from a period of incarceration and the relationship between social support and prisoner reentry outcomes. Specifically, the study will examine the impact of social support on re-entry outcomes among individuals ages 18-25.

Literature Review

Emerging Adulthood

Coined by developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in 2000, emerging adulthood defines a transitional phase from when a person is in their late teens and early twenties. Much of the research focuses on ages 18 to 25, which is characterized as a period of self-discovery, change, and exploration. Arnett (2000) argues that emerging adulthood is a distinct period as individuals have left the dependency of adolescence, yet have not fully progressed to the responsibilities of adulthood. In emerging adulthood, parental supervision and normative expectations are diminished, offering emerging adults the freedom to explore their identity and make choices that may be discouraged in other age groups.

Arnett (2000) proposed five characteristics of emerging adulthood: identity explorations, self-focus, feeling in-between, instability, a sense of possibilities. He argues that while these characteristics can still be found in other age groups, they are the most prominent in emerging adulthood. First, a key feature of emerging adulthood is the opportunity for identity exploration, particularly in the areas of love, work, and worldviews. These areas typically begin in adolescence but increase in significance during emerging adulthood. With regard to love, dating in adolescence is typically recreational, part of a school-based peer culture, and does not often result in long-term, serious relationships. In emerging adulthood, romantic relationships become more intimate, as more focus is on the couple themselves instead of shared recreation; with thoughts of cohabitation, marriage, and children becoming more likely to occur than in

adolescence. Similarly, work in adolescence is generally a means of earning money for recreational activities, whereas in emerging adulthood, it is a means of obtaining necessities, such as housing and food, and cultivating a sense of purpose. Finally, worldviews often change during this period as college and other life experiences can introduce emerging adults to a variety of different perspectives (Arnett, 2000).

Second, emerging adulthood is a self-focused period. Demographic changes during this period, such as moving out of one's parental home and the increased median age of marriage and first child, demonstrate self-reliance that is less typical for other age groups. Emerging adulthood marks a period in which individuals are less reliant on parents, but long-term commitments in love and work are typically still being explored. Because of this, social support may falter during emerging adulthood as ties to parents decrease while personal relationships may be unstable. During these years, emerging adults are focused on themselves and the knowledge, skills, and understanding they need in order to make independent decisions and achieve their personal goals (Arnett, 2000).

Third, emerging adulthood is a period in which individuals feel that they are not adolescents but not fully adults either. When asked, "do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" the majority of Americans in emerging adulthood responded ambiguously, with the answer "in some ways yes, in some ways no." In contrast, the age groups of 26 to 35 and 36 to 55 had a clear majority of "yes" responses and very few ambiguous "yes and no" responses. This reflects a subjective sense of an in-between period during ages 18 to 25. Research has shown this subjective feeling has little to do with demographic transitions, as Arnett (2000) finds that factors such as "finishing education, settling into a career, marriage, and parenthood rank at the bottom in importance among possible criteria considered necessary for the attainment of adulthood" (p.

472). Accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent are the top ranked criteria. This reflects the idea that emerging adulthood is a transitional period in which emerging adults feel the need to become a self-sufficient person in order to feel as though they have fully transitioned into adulthood, rather than complete conventional milestones (Arnett, 2000).

Fourth, as emerging adults explore their identity and their life possibilities, they encounter frequent changes in their lives. Most notably, emerging adults have the highest rates of residential change of any age group, as most Americans leave their parental home by age 18 or 19 (Arnett, 2000). The next several years may be spent in college housing, independent housing, cohabitation with romantic partners, roommates, friends, or family, and typically some combination of these various living situations. Similarly, job changes are frequent during this age group as the average American holds eight different jobs from ages 18-29 (Arnett, 2015). Relationships can also often present instability in an emerging adult's life, as parental closeness diminishes and focus is shifted to romantic relationships and friendships.

Finally, though emerging adults are often pessimistic about the future of their society, they are highly optimistic about their futures and achieving their goals. In a poll of 18 to 24 year old Americans, 96 percent agreed with the statement, "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life." The freedom to explore one's identity, their relationships, and have full authority over their lives with minimal supervision during emerging adulthood leads to an increased optimism about one's future and what their lives may look like (Arnett, 2000).

Current Standing of Emerging Adulthood

Though Arnett's (2000) theory is widely accepted, critics argue that there are several limitations to the concept of emerging adulthood. There is growing concern over the acceptance

of the theory as a scientific, evidence-based developmental range, as one researcher calls for a distinction between Arnett's formulation of emerging adulthood and a term that describes an age period (Côté, 2014). Additionally, Arnett (2000) neglected to explain the methodology used in his initial survey data, which calls into question the validity of the data. Critics also question the idea that emerging adulthood is a time of serious exploration in love and work, as emerging adults may approach these areas in ways specifically aimed at avoiding long-term commitment (Nelson, 2021).

The most notable criticism of emerging adulthood is its generalizability. In his original article, Arnett (2000) acknowledged the "forgotten half" including young people who do not attend college after high school, especially because of their financial situation. Arnett (2000) recognized that limitations in educational and occupational opportunities can impact the ways in which one may experience emerging adulthood, though he believed these disparities resulted in minimal variability among emerging adults. Some argue that the variation is actually significant. One study suggests that emerging adulthood may be limited to individuals with more education and a middle class financial background (Smith et al., 2015).

Criticisms notwithstanding, Arnett's (2000) conceptualization of emerging adulthood has been largely accepted as a viable theory, with his article being cited thousands of times, the concept being used in numerous publications across disciplines, and the term being used as the title of an international journal (Côté, 2014). While some suggest further research is needed to establish emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period, significant changes in historical trends between adolescence and adulthood have further demonstrated the need for emerging adulthood to be researched as a critical time in the life course, particularly as it relates to individuals who have experienced periods of incarceration during this time.

Crime in Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a crucial period within criminology due to the well-documented correlation between age and crime (Farrington, 1986; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffitt, 1993; Piquero et al., 2003; Sweeten et al., 2013). A key finding in criminology, the age-crime curve shows that criminal involvement peaks during late adolescence and early adulthood, before declining as individuals mature. This pattern remains consistent across various economic statuses and cultural contexts, suggesting that the cause of increased offending lies within the developmental period itself (Shulman, 2013).

Several theoretical perspectives attempt to shed light on the relationship between age and crime. In 1993, psychologist Terrie Moffitt introduced a dual taxonomy, categorizing juveniles who commit crime as either life-course persistent or adolescence-limited. Moffitt described that individual biological traits combined with one's social environment would lead to classification in one of the two groups (Moffitt, 1993). Revising this theory, Robert J. Sampson and John Laub (2005) developed the age-graded life-course theory, which views offending as less predictable and influenced by change. According to Sampson and Laub (2005), life transitions significantly impact one's social capital and conformity, leading to variations in criminal behavior over time. Further research has supported this theory, along with other developmental theories, finding that crime rate changes between adolescence and adulthood can mostly be attributed to psychological and sociological factors (Sweeten, et al., 2013). Researchers explain that because of the precarious transitions in emerging adulthood, experiencing incarceration during this time period considerably reduces opportunities for a conventional way of life.

Among these factors, developmental psychologists have studied brain behavior in adolescents and emerging adults. Contrary to previous thought, the brain is not fully developed

by the end of adolescence; instead, on average, the brain is still developing well into the mid-to-late 20s and beyond (Steinberg, 2008). This can complicate the ability to calculate risks and delay gratifications; additionally, the median ages of onset for multiple mental disorders fall during emerging adulthood, such as anxiety or impulse-control disorders (Taber-Thomas & Perez-Edgar, 2016).

This period of heightened risk-taking helps explain the overrepresentation of emerging adults in the criminal justice system. However, it also raises the question of whether punitive measures are effective in deterring emerging adults from committing crime. In one study of 524 violent and nonviolent male parolees in California Youth Authority institutions, researchers found that the nonviolent group had a significant decline in arrest records, suggesting that they were already on a trajectory towards desistance. Though the nonviolent group had the sharpest decline, the trend was consistent for violent offenders as well (Piquero et al., 2002). These findings raise doubts about long-term incarceration for emerging adults as offenders in this age group may already be on the path to avoiding further criminal behavior, and harsh punitive measures may further exacerbate criminality.

The age-crime curve can be explained by several theories, developmental factors, and heightened risk-taking between adolescence and adulthood. In assessing the age-crime curve, it is essential to discuss the role that social bonds, such as relationships with family and peers as well as adherence to a conventional way of life, play in predicting and explaining criminality.

Because emerging adulthood is a vulnerable period that comes with precarious transitions, including new and evolving relationships, maturation, and increased responsibilities, social support during this age group is essential. In one study assessing desistance from crime among adolescents, researchers found that increases in social support, particularly from parents,

as well as less time spent around delinquent peers had a significant impact on reducing delinquent involvement. Furthermore, researchers discussed that this demonstrates a need to view criminality as more than an individual decision, ensuring social ties and identity changes are adequately factored in (Copp et al., 2020).

While this study is not a direct test of a criminological theory, it is important to recognize that several criminological theories focus on social support as a way to predict criminality and explain desistance or persistence from crime. One of the most popular explanations for crime and delinquency, control theories attempt to explain criminal behavior by analyzing the social environment surrounding an individual. The modern formulation of control can largely be traced back to *Causes of Delinquency*, in which criminologist Travis Hirschi posited his version of social control theory (Hirschi, 1969; Britt & Gottfredson, 2003).

Hirschi's Social Control Theory

Developed by American criminologist Travis Hirschi in the 1960s, social control theory examines the role that social bonds play in preventing individuals from participating in criminal behavior. Within this social control model, the social bond consists of four main elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Hirschi theorized that criminality results when one or more of these social bonds are weak or absent and that offenders differ from non-offenders based on the strength of their social bonds. Hirschi assumed that all individuals see benefits in committing crime and that everyone is equally motivated to offend because of the natural human desire for immediate gratification. Generally, the stronger each bond is, the more likely an individual is able to resist these deviant impulses. The variation in social bond strength across individuals explains the variation in criminal propensity, and the four elements reinforce one another as aspects of a continuum (Hirschi, 1969).

Attachment

Deemed the most important bond by Hirschi, attachment describes the emotional and psychological ties that individuals have with their social environment. Attachment is typically measured by connection to parents, peers, and teachers; however, Hirschi's initial hypothesis focused on children's attachment to their parents. Hirschi tested his hypothesis by assessing based on virtual supervision, intimate communication, and affectional identification. He found that children were less likely to participate in delinquency when they believed their parents were aware of their behaviors, had positive and frequent communication with them, and affectionately identified with them. Importantly, individuals with high levels of attachment develop a fear of disappointing these figures, which acts as a deterrent from deviant behavior. These factors can be direct or indirect controls in determining likelihood of delinquency, and they tend to begin in childhood and extend to adulthood as these norms are internalized (Hirschi, 1969).

Commitment

Commitment describes the degree to which an individual is dedicated and interested in achieving conventional goals. Typically, these goals manifest as educational and occupational goals, such as graduating high school or acquiring a high-paying job. For commitment to be strong, it is crucial that the individual not only has these goals but is actively working towards achieving them. Similar to the attachment element, the stronger an individual's commitment to conventional goals, the more fear they have of ruining their future. This element contrasts Robert K. Merton's strain theory, which maintains that strains prevent people from achieving their goals (Merton, 1938). Hirschi argues the opposite, as goals are viewed as restraints on delinquency (Hirschi, 1969).

Involvement

Involvement refers to the amount of time that an individual spends on structural conventional activities. With this element, Hirschi hypothesized that the more free time an individual has at their disposal, the more time they have to act on criminal inclination. Individuals who are more involved in conventional activities, such as playing sports or holding a job, have a decreased likelihood of delinquency as there are decreased criminal opportunities. Put simply, individuals with significant involvement have a lack of time and resources to act on the natural impulse to offend (Hirschi, 1969).

Belief

Belief is the extent to which moral order is embraced by an individual. This element coincides with attachment as it involves an external deterrence; however, attachment corresponds with interpersonal relationships whereas belief corresponds with authority and the law. Individuals with high levels of belief view the law as legitimate and therefore are more willing to conform to it. Conversely, when an individual denies the validity of rules and laws, they have an increased likelihood of offending. In practice, belief can manifest as trust in actors of the justice system or an internalization of societal norms (Hirschi, 1969).

Social Control Theory in Emerging Adulthood

Although Hirschi's original test of social control theory in *Causes of Delinquency* concentrated on juvenile criminality, there is evidence that social bonds are still relevant for emerging adults. In one study analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, researchers examined whether social bonds and traditional turning points, such as employment or marriage, influenced criminal behavior in emerging adulthood, and if it was distinct from adolescence and other age groups. They found that both social bonds and turning points were still relevant and significant for emerging adults in reducing likelihood of

criminal behavior, citing Laub and Sampson's age-graded theory life-course theory and Hirschi's social control theory as viable explanations for predicting criminal offending in emerging adults (Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012). In particular, this study, along with others, have found that religious participation, job satisfaction, parental attachment, marriage, parenthood, and strong non-delinquent peer relationships are all associated with lower levels of offending (F-Dufour et al., 2023; Copp et al., 2020; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012).

One study from 2023 further developed this finding by conducting in-depth interviews with 30 young adults between 18 to 32 with prior criminal involvement to explore how emerging adults identify and define social bonds that are essential in their transition into adulthood. Through these interviews, researchers developed two reconceptualized bonds for emerging adults, distinct from Hirschi's original theory: attachment and commitment through involvement. Attachment in emerging adulthood is similar to the traditional bond but is unique in that it accounts for distinct social ties (e.g. children and romantic relationships), the desire to be recognized as mature among emerging adults, and important factors that do not necessarily apply in adolescence (e.g. clear financial support). Commitment through involvement combines two traditional bonds as commitment facilitates how emerging adults spend their free time, contrasting adolescence in which commitment and involvement are independent of each other. This reconceptualized bond considers the idea that emerging adults integrate commitment and involvement and aim to find meaning and fulfillment in non-recreational activities such as employment and education (Nader & Davies, 2023).

Proposed in 1969, Travis Hirschi's social control theory has since remained a key subject of scholarly work and empirical studies within criminology, advancing a plausible hypothesis of the causes of criminality. In particular, the clearly stated and specific nature of Hirschi's social

control model, combined with the well-documented standing of social control theory, presents an effective guide in promoting desistance among formerly incarcerated individuals and can be integrated into prisoner reentry programming to improve current outcomes.

Prisoner Reentry

Though US incarceration rates are the highest of any country in the world, 95 percent of individuals will eventually be released (Travis, 2005). However, studies suggest that up to three-quarters of these individuals may be rearrested within five years (Durose, et al., 2014). Prisoner reentry, which defines the process by which individuals are released from incarceration and reintegrate into the broader community, is one way of measuring incarceration outcomes. Prisoner reentry is not a one-time event, but rather a complex, ongoing process involving incarcerated individuals as well as their families and correctional and community institutions (Middlemass, 2020). Though recidivism rates are the most common measure of reentry outcomes, recidivism alone may not adequately capture the complexities of the reentry process. Formerly incarcerated individuals themselves cite financial stability and independence, a prosocial and healthy lifestyle, positive contributions to family and community, and content with their life as factors of successful reentry (Kjellstrand et al., 2023). While high recidivism rates can be an effective tool to evaluate incarceration efficacy, the interdependent nature of the prisoner reentry process warrants programming that is tailored to the needs of the individual.

Social Support During Reentry

In addition to practical support, such as employment assistance and educational programming, social support is essential in reentry programming. In one study measuring the effectiveness of a peer mentoring reentry program, participants discussed the importance of companionship in supporting their reentry, as well as the emotional, informational, and

instrumental support that the peer mentor offered (Kjellstrand et al., 2023). Another study describes four pathways in which social support is fundamental in the desistance process. First, in analyzing Sampson and Laub's (2005) age-graded theory, marriage and employment act as social bonds and protective factors that prevent criminality. Second, desisting individuals will construct a "redemption script", an optimistic view of their own ability to avoid a life of crime and a strong feeling of control over their future, which is often informed by social support from friends, family, and community support. Third, correctional support in the form of social services and programming, as well as social support from fellow inmates and prison staff, has been shown to improve prison outcomes by reducing victimization and levels of misconduct. Finally, interpersonal social support can reduce the likelihood that individuals experience strain, while also reinforcing resilience and encouraging positive coping mechanisms for life challenges (Cecilia, et al., 2020). Because social support has been proven to be crucial in the desistance process, it is essential that reentry programming incorporates opportunities for increased social support.

Challenges Within Prisoner Reentry

In the past two decades, prisoner reentry programming has gained traction among criminal justice scholars and public policy officials alike. This attention has resulted in improvements in reentry services; however, barriers still exist in easily accessing available support. Due to policies preventing convicted felons from accessing public housing, returning individuals often find themselves in precarious housing situations or completely homeless (Middlemass, 2017). One study surveyed individuals who have committed lower-level offenses who served shorter stays in jail; of 388 respondents, they found that nearly a quarter were completely homeless returning from jail, and most respondents had trouble finding housing or

were completely homeless within the last year (Reece & Link, 2023). Additionally, housing and employment are interdependent, given that it is difficult to secure stable employment without an address. Many reentry programs also offer educational and vocational programs under the assumption that this will help with employment outcomes, though this is often not enough to offset a conviction. These obstacles are compounded by other reintegration factors, such as health care, mental health or substance abuse treatment, family unification, and stigma from the community (Middlemass, 2017).

Within the prison system, more than two-thirds of individuals meet criteria for substance abuse or dependence. Although research has demonstrated that individuals who participate in community-based substance abuse programs after release experience lower rates of recidivism and substance use, returning individuals with substance use concerns often experience lack of access to these programs. Additionally, the stressful nature of the reentry process poses a high risk of relapse for returning individuals (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013). Substance abuse often accompanies severe mental illness (eg. depression, PTSD, etc.) and in conjunction, these disorders are strongly associated with relapse and recidivism and when left untreated can compound reentry challenges, such as finding and maintaining employment. These barriers may be due to state correctional budget cuts, which decrease program availability, as well as conviction-based bans or lack of insurance. Stigma is also another barrier to overcome as the few community-based programs that are available to returning individuals may be unwilling to provide services for those with a history of incarceration (Baillargeon, et al., 2010; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013).

Various racial and ethnic groups also experience additional barriers in the reentry process. Due to overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, Black individuals often have to

overcome racial discrimination and stereotypes during reentry, specifically with employment discrimination (Thompson, 2008). Certain racial and ethnic groups may also have cultural expectations; for example, Black men struggle with family support and reintegration as they may feel a lack of household authority. As noted by Arditti and Parkman (2011), the “developmental paradox” describes the conflict that returning Black men have with regards to reentry. Believing they should be the main provider for their family, it can be an additional obstacle to depend on others, which is critical for successful reentry (Arditti & Parkman, 2011). The Hispanic population is another group that experiences specific obstacles; according to Gunnison & Helfgott (2013), Hispanics have the “fastest rate of imprisonment of all groups,” largely due to recent immigration rhetoric (p. 93). In addition to racial stereotyping, this population may have to navigate language and cultural barriers. Both groups may experience challenges within their communities as many return to disadvantaged neighborhoods with low social control, which creates an environment conducive to crime and substance abuse with little support from neighbors, peers, and community-based programming (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013).

With individuals that experienced incarceration during youth and emerging adulthood, similar barriers can hinder successful reentry. Low educational attainment within this population can magnify low unemployment rates; on average, less than 20 percent of formerly incarcerated youth will earn a high school diploma or equivalent (Abrams & Terry, 2017). Similar to issues with race, youth and young adults are often returning to disadvantaged neighborhoods with high unemployment, poverty, and crime rates (Harding & Harris, 2020). Additionally, the median age of onset for many mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, or substance abuse, fall within emerging adulthood in the United States (Taber-Thomas & Perez-Edgar, 2016). Arguably the biggest challenge with this population, however, is navigating both the process of reentry as

well as the transition into adulthood. Formerly incarcerated emerging adults have to balance new responsibilities, such as work, higher education, parenthood, alongside the trial and error that accompanies a traditional transition to adulthood (Abrams & Terry, 2017). This is compounded by missed opportunities for convention as formative years are spent behind bars and critical social support is weakened.

The Study

The current study examines the impact of social support on re-entry outcomes among a group of men ages 18-25 who were recently released from prison. The study adds to the current literature by examining outcomes among a group of men who experienced a precarious transition (prison) during the period of emerging adulthood. These individuals are hypothesized to experience even more difficulty during their re-entry into the community and need enhanced levels of social support. This study will answer the following questions:

- Are individuals aged 18-25 more likely to experience rearrest or reincarceration than those in other age categories?
- Does perceived social support among those who are 18-25 influence the likelihood of rearrest or reincarceration in the community?

Method

Sample

Data for this study were collected as part of a cross-sectional study of recently released adult male inmates who served time in Ohio prisons and were placed in Ohio halfway houses. In terms of response rate, there were 2,315 eligible participants. However, not all of the former inmates were able to be contacted and introduced to the study for a variety of reasons (e.g., some were released or terminated before they could be contacted). Of the eligible participants, the

interviewers were able to reach 1,709 to introduce the study. Of those 1,709 participants contacted, 1,616 agreed to participate and 93 refused, for a response rate of 95%. For all eligible participants, the overall response rate was 70%. The final sample included 1,616 participants. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews at various halfway house locations during 2006 and 2007. The study aimed to contact participants within 6 months of release with an average time from release to interview of 52.7 days. Interviews lasted, on average, 60 to 90 minutes, consisting of a structured interview and several standardized questionnaires that gathered demographic information as well as assessed participants' prison experiences, emotional well-being, and social support (Johnson et al., 2010).

Sample

Characteristics

The full sample demographics are summarized in Table 1. As indicated 46.8% of the participants were White. The mean age was 35 years and 85.8% were single. Of the total sample, 70.4% had at least one child younger than 18. When examining education, 24.5% of the sample had less than a high school diploma. Approximately half of the sample participated in treatment while on parole. With regard to mental illness, 17.8% of the sample was diagnosed with a mental illness while incarcerated. Finally, 62.8% of the participants had served time in prison before their current period of incarceration.

Table 2 illustrates the sample characteristics by age breakdown. The 18-25 age group consisted of 354 participants, with the remaining 1,252 participants being over the age of 26. With regard to race, the sample was nearly evenly split between White and Non-White participants for both the 18-25 age group and the 26+ age group. The average age of the 18-25 age group was 23 years, while the average age of the 26+ age group was 38. Less than half (48%) of the 18-25 age group had at least one child and the majority of both age groups were not

married. With regard to education, 30.7% of the 18-25 age group had less than a high school diploma. In terms of treatment, 53.1% of participants over 26 participated in treatment compared to 40.1% of those 18 to 25. Finally, 41.9% of the 18-25 age group had been in prison prior to the current period.

Table 1: Percentage and frequency distribution for total sample

Characteristics	N	Percentage
<i>Race</i>		
White	751	46.8%
Non-white	855	53.2%
Mean Age		35
Children: Yes	1128	70.4%
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	225	14.2%
Not married	1356	85.8%
<i>Education</i>		
Less than high school	393	24.5%
High school	437	27.2%
GED	384	23.9%
Some college	362	22.5%
Bachelor's degree	27	1.7%
Graduate degree	4	0.2%
Median number of months in prison		14
Participated in treatment (yes)	785	50.2%
Mental illness diagnosis (yes)	283	17.8%
Prior prison (yes)	1013	62.8%

Table 2: Percentage and frequency distribution of sample characteristics by age

Characteristics	N	Age		
		18-25 Percentage	N	26+ Percentage
<i>Race</i>				
White	167	47.2%	584	46.6%
Non-white	187	52.8%	668	53.4%
<i>Age category</i>				
18-25	354		0	
26+	0		1,252	
Mean Age		23		38
Children: Yes*	170	48.0%	958	76.8%
X ² =109.339; p=.001				
<i>Marital status*</i>				
Married	21	6.1%	204	16.5%
Not married	326	93.9%	1030	83.5%
X ² =12.547; p=.001				
<i>Education*</i>				
Less than high school	109	30.7%	284	22.7%
High school	93	26.2%	344	27.5%
GED	91	25.6%	293	23.4%
Some college	60	16.9%	302	24.1%
Bachelor's degree	2	0.6%	25	2.0%
Graduate degree	0	0%	4	0.3%
X ² =18.935; p=.002				
Median number of months in prison		13		15
Participated in treatment (yes)*	139	40.1%	646	53.1%
X ² =18.320; p=.001				
Mental illness diagnosis (yes)*	50	14.1%	233	18.8%
X ² =4.106; p=.043				

Prior prison (yes)*	149	41.9%	864	68.8%
$\chi^2=86.185$; $p=.001$				

Measures

Data were collected in two ways. First, during the face-to-face interviews, participants were asked an array of questions regarding their criminal history, reentry expectations, and retrospective perceptions of the prison environment while in prison. Second, community adjustment data for the study were collected from official sources from the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.

Independent Variables

Age. Age was measured on a continuous scale and represents the respondent's reported age at the time of the interview. Age was dichotomized into 1 = emerging adulthood, 18-25, and 0 = outside of emerging adulthood, 26 and older. It is hypothesized that those in emerging adulthood experience increased difficulty in reentering the community due to missed conventional opportunities during incarceration.

Social support. Social support was measured using the short form of the *Social Support Questionnaire* (SSQ), also known as the SSQ6 (Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987). According to Sarason et al. (1987), although the short form contains only 6 questions compared to the 27 questions included in the original longer form of the SSQ, the two scales are highly correlated (see Appendix A for items included in the social support scale). The current study relied on the reported satisfaction level of available social supports with 1 representing "very satisfied" with supports, and 6 representing "very dissatisfied" with supports.

Control Variables

Race. *Race* was dichotomized into white and non-white categories, where a 1 represented white and a 0 represented non-white. Research has shown that non-white males may experience additional challenges during reentry, due to cultural expectations and barriers as well as having to overcome added stereotypes with regard to racial and ethnic discrimination (Thompson, 2008; Arditti & Parkman, 2011; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013).

Children. *Children* measured whether participants had children, coded 1 if yes, 0 if no. As with marital status, it is assumed that parenthood may act as a protective factor and a child/children might offer an important source of social support for inmates. Being a parent has also been associated with lower levels of offending (F-Dufour et al., 2023; Copp et al., 2020; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012).

Marital status. *Marital status* was measured as a dichotomous variable in which married was coded as 1 and not married (single, widowed, divorced, etc.) was coded as 0. Because marriage can be a potentially significant source of social support, it is assumed that incarcerated individuals who are married may experience higher levels of social support and greater satisfaction with available support. In Sampson and Laub's (2005) age-graded theory and research evaluating social control theory for emerging adults, marriage acts as an important social bond and protective factor in preventing criminality (Nader & Davies, 2023). Research has also found that marriage is associated with lower levels of offending (F-Dufour et al., 2023; Copp et al., 2020; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012).

Education. *Education* was dichotomized into 1 = less than high school and 0 = more than high school (including high school graduate). According to Hirschi (1969), a commitment to achieving educational goals, as well as active involvement in conventional educational activities, act as a strong social bond. Education also offers multiple sources of social support through peers

and educators. Thus, those with less than a high school diploma may experience lower levels of social support and decreased satisfaction with available supports.

Months in prison. *Months in prison* represents the number of months a respondent had been in prison during their last period of incarceration. As with prior prison, it was assumed that the longer one had been in prison, the fewer social bonds one would have due to missed conventional opportunities.

Participate in treatment. *Participate in treatment* measures whether the respondent participated in any treatment programs while on parole (1 = participated in treatment; 0 = did not participate in treatment). Participation in a treatment program has been shown to provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, resulting in lower rates of victimization and misconduct (Kjellstrand et al., 2023; Cecilia, et al., 2020).

Mental illness. *Mental illness* measured whether respondents were diagnosed as having a mental disorder at the time of admission to prison. Receiving a mental health diagnosis was assigned a score of 1, while no diagnosis was assigned a score of 0. Mental illness diagnoses are often accompanied by substance abuse, which is strongly associated with recidivism (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013). The median age of onset for many mental health disorders also typically falls within emerging adulthood (Taber-Thomas & Perez-Edgar, 2016). Finally, it is assumed that those with diagnosed mental illness may have greater difficulty in maintaining stable and meaningful relationships and/or securing employment.

Prior prison. *Prior prison* measures whether a respondent had been in prison before their most recent incarceration. Respondents who had been in prison before were assigned a value of 1, while those who had not been in prison before were assigned a 0. It is assumed that prior prison experience in emerging adulthood would have adversely impacted involvement in

conventional opportunities, such as education or employment, resulting in decreased social bonds.

Dependent Variables

Arrest. The first dependent variable utilized to examine the impact of age and social supports on community adjustment is arrest. Arrest was dichotomized into 1 = yes and 0 = no and included any non-traffic-related offense that occurred during the 2.5-year follow-up period. Arrest data were collected through parole officer case notes and on-line record checks through the county-level clerk of courts offices. The arrest data were collected between August 2008 and August 2009. For the group as a whole, the average time to failure was 966 days (2.6 years).

Reincarceration. The second dependent variable is reincarceration. Reincarceration (1 = yes) could come as a result of technical violations or a new charge that occurred during the follow-up period. Data was collected by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections. The variable measured any reincarceration from entry to the halfway house to September 2009. For the group as a whole, the average follow-up period was 1,025 days (2.8 years).

Findings

Table 3 shows the frequency of reincarceration and rearrest by age breakdown during the study period. Of the sample, 55.1% of those in the 18-25 age group experienced reincarceration compared to 38.2% of those aged 26 and older. Less than half (44.6%) of the 26+ age group were arrested during the study period, while 59.4% of the 18-25 age group experienced rearrest.

Table 3: Percentage and frequency distribution of reincarceration and rearrest by age

Characteristics	Age			
	18-25		26+	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Age category				
18-25	350		0	
26+	0		1,240	
Reincarceration*				
Yes	193	55.1%	474	38.2%
No	157	44.9%	766	61.8%
X²=32.078; p=.001				
Age category				
18-25	345		0	
26+	0		1,203	
Rearrest*				
Yes	205	59.4%	537	44.6%
No	140	40.6%	666	55.4%
X²=23.473; p=.001				

The reported satisfaction levels from the Social Support Questionnaire by age breakdown are shown in Table 4. Across the six questions, the majority of responses from both age groups indicate participants are “very satisfied” with available social supports. The mean satisfaction for each question is also recorded in Table 4. The difference between groups for Question 12 was found to be statistically significant.

Table 4: Percentage and frequency distribution of social support satisfaction by age

Characteristics	Age			
	18-25		26+	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
SSQ2				
Very satisfied	238	75.6%	825	73.9%
Fairly satisfied	56	17.8%	210	18.8%

A little satisfied	12	3.8%	33	3.0%
A little dissatisfied	4	1.3%	13	1.2%
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0%	7	0.6%
Very dissatisfied	5	1.6%	29	2.6%
Mean satisfaction	1.37		1.44	
SSQ4				
Very satisfied	236	76.1%	812	75.3%
Fairly satisfied	52	16.8%	173	16%
A little satisfied	10	3.2%	27	2.5%
A little dissatisfied	2	0.6%	5	0.5%
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0%	14	1.3%
Very dissatisfied	10	3.2%	48	4.4%
Mean satisfaction	1.41		1.50	
SSQ6				
Very satisfied	240	75.2%	825	72.9%
Fairly satisfied	52	16.3%	225	19.9%
A little satisfied	14	4.4%	41	3.6%
A little dissatisfied	4	1.3%	7	0.6%
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0%	7	0.6%
Very dissatisfied	9	2.8%	27	2.4%
Mean satisfaction	1.43		1.43	
SSQ8				
Very satisfied	261	80.8%	889	77.4%
Fairly satisfied	48	14.9%	199	17.3%
A little satisfied	10	3.1%	22	1.9%
A little dissatisfied	1	0.3%	10	0.9%
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0%	6	0.5%
Very dissatisfied	3	0.9%	23	2%
Mean satisfaction	1.27		1.36	
SSQ10				
Very satisfied	257	81.6%	854	77.1%
Fairly satisfied	42	13.3%	176	15.9%
A little satisfied	7	2.2%	28	2.5%
A little dissatisfied	3	1%	7	0.6%
Fairly dissatisfied	0	0%	7	0.6%

Very dissatisfied	6	1.9%	36	3.2%
Mean satisfaction	1.30		1.42	
SSQ12*				
Very satisfied	253	80.8%	843	77.4%
Fairly satisfied	45	14.4%	161	14.8%
A little satisfied	7	2.2%	31	2.8%
A little dissatisfied	2	0.6%	9	0.8%
Fairly dissatisfied	1	0.3%	5	0.5%
Very dissatisfied	5	1.6%	40	3.7%
Mean satisfaction	1.30		1.43	

*p < .05.

Results from the multivariate logistic regression analysis of rearrest are summarized in Table 5. For Table 5, the model chi-square is 55.796, which is statistically significant. The analysis indicates that emerging adulthood and social support are significant predictors of rearrest. When examining the odds ratio, those who were in the 18-25 age group were 2.005 times more likely to be rearrested than those in the 26+ age group. When examining control variables, prior prison and race were found to be statistically significant. Those with prior prison experience were 1.696 times more likely to be rearrested than those who were not previously incarcerated.

Table 5: Regression equation predicting rearrest (N = 1,297)

Variable	B	SE	Wald	Exp(B)
Emerging adulthood	.695**	.151	21.197	2.005
Race	-.261*	.117	4.972	.771
Children	-.041	.133	.093	.960
Marital status	-.289	.201	2.057	.749
Education	-.132	.133	.984	.876
Months in prison	.000	.001	.025	1.000
Treatment participation	-.098	.118	.696	.907
Mental illness diagnosis	.294	.154	3.653	1.341
Prior prison	.528**	.125	17.994	1.696

Social support	-.290*	.141	4.244	.749
(Constant)	.019	.268	.005	1.019

*p < .05. **p < .001.

Table 6 presents the multivariate logistic regression analysis of reincarceration. The model chi-square for Table 4 is 50.796, which is statistically significant. The data found emerging adulthood to be a significant predictor of reincarceration. Those who were in the 18-25 age group were 2.218 times more likely to be reincarcerated than those in the 26+ age group. With regard to control variables, prior prison was found to be statistically significant. Those with prior prison experience were 1.646 times more likely to be reincarcerated than those who were not previously incarcerated. In contrast to the analysis of rearrest, neither race nor social support were found to be significant predictors of reincarceration.

Table 6: Regression equation predicting reincarceration (N = 1,328)

Variable	B	SE	Wald	Exp(B)
Emerging adulthood	.797**	.149	28.497	2.218
Race	.115	.117	.974	1.122
Children	.040	.133	.092	1.041
Marital status	-.291	.208	1.953	.747
Education	.040	.133	.089	1.040
Months in prison	-.003	.002	3.313	.997
Treatment participation	-.005	.118	.002	.995
Mental illness diagnosis	.114	.153	.551	1.120
Prior prison	.499**	.125	15.868	1.646
Social support	-.157	.139	1.274	.855
(Constant)	-.643	.268	5.756	.526

**p < .001.

Discussion

The findings showed that individuals aged 18-25 were significantly more likely to experience rearrest and reincarceration compared to those over 26. This is in agreement with

official sources which show that emerging adults are overrepresented in arrest and recidivism data (Perker & Chester, 2017; OJJDP, 2020; Antenangeli & Durose, 2021). The findings of this study are supported by previous literature which assert that emerging adulthood is a precarious transitional period which may involve higher risk-taking and criminal involvement (Piquero et al., 2002; Sweeten et al., 2013; Craig & Piquero, 2014). It is important to note that this result was still supported even when controlling for other factors known to be related to rearrest and reincarceration. Overall, this study indicates that there is a significant association between emerging adults and increased recidivism rates which illustrates the need for continued focus on this population.

With regard to social support, reported satisfaction levels did not vary significantly across age groups, with both age groups reporting high satisfaction rates. This contrasts literature which suggest emerging adults involved in the criminal justice system will experience more difficulties in obtaining beneficial social support compared to other age groups (F-Dufour et al., 2023; Kang, 2019; Abrams & Terry, 2017; Harding & Harris, 2020). The study did find that social support was statistically significant in predicting rearrest, though it was not found to be significant in predicting reincarceration. This discrepancy could potentially be explained by the specific offenses emerging adults most often engage in (eg. property crime, drug and alcohol offenses) which may not escalate to incarceration, although charge was not examined (Willoughby et al., 2021). Although social support was not found to be significant in predicting reincarceration, the relationship between social support and rearrest is in line with previous studies that have found positive and consistent social support to have a significant impact on reducing criminal involvement (Copp et al., 2020; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012; F-Dufour et al., 2023). Furthermore, while this study was not a direct test of Hirschi's social control theory, the theory

provided a framework for determining the importance of social support in reducing recidivism, with this study finding partial support for the hypothesis that stronger social bonds will increase one's ability to resist deviance (Hirschi, 1969).

There are limitations to this study. The data set included only male participants residing in halfway houses in Ohio. Additionally, the population of interest (the 18-25 age group) had significantly fewer participants than that of the 26+ age group. While there were advantages to studying this population, the generalizability of these findings must be considered within this context. Additionally, while literature mainly focuses on emerging adulthood as being ages 18 to 25, there are some that suggest it should be expanded to ages 18 to 29, 18 to 26, or limited to 18 to 24 (Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012; Nice & Joseph, 2023; Hill et al., 2016). Other studies have found that adults in older age groups also experience the key features of emerging adulthood, suggesting they are not as developmentally distinctive as theorized (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). The inconsistencies in the ages that constitute emerging adulthood, specifically when the features are most distinctive, warrants further investigation. Future research should consider a more extensive age breakdown to address this discrepancy.

The measurement of the social support variable is another potential limitation. While social support shows strong content validity and reliability, it may only be capturing one aspect of social support by asking about the level of satisfaction with available supports. The SSQ scale utilized does not indicate the source of the social supports or the quality of the social supports. Social support networks may include family, friends, correctional officers, other staff members, counselors, or other incarcerated individuals. It is not measured where each source of support is coming from and whether these sources are law-abiding, which is important given the association between delinquent peer relationships and higher levels of offending (Confer et al.,

2024; Copp et al., 2020; Walters, 2018). Future research should collect additional data on the sources of social support and their quality, particularly with regard to recidivism and reentry outcomes.

Policy Implications

The limitations notwithstanding, this study demonstrates that age and social support are important for understanding arrest rates among individuals recently released from incarceration. The findings of this study suggest an increased need for assisting incarcerated individuals, particularly those within emerging adulthood, in obtaining and/or strengthening social support to effectively navigate the reentry process. Using Hirschi's (1969) social control theory as a theoretical framework, the four social bond elements offer opportunities to increase support in the community.

First, criminal justice agencies can foster attachment by facilitating regular visits with family, as well as establishing peer-based programs such as mentorship or support groups. As attachment was deemed to be the most important bond, these opportunities should promote identification with positive authority figures, thus deterring further criminal behavior. With regard to commitment, agencies should encourage individuals to aspire towards conventional goals and offer support to achieve those goals. Specifically, providing educational and job resources, such as vocational training and access to higher education, plus comprehensive reentry support for other needs such as housing and healthcare will demonstrate a realistic path towards these conventional goals. Agencies can promote involvement through recreational activities, such as sports or arts programs, and community service opportunities, which can encourage prosocial behaviors. Finally, belief can be strengthened with options such as faith-based programs, behavioral counseling, and conflict resolution workshops; these initiatives may

improve the extent to which moral order is embraced by incarcerated individuals. By providing reentry programming that addresses these four bonds, criminal justice agencies can significantly bolster individuals' abilities to successfully reenter society and their confidence in maintaining convention.

This study, along with previous literature, proposes that certain factors, specifically age and social support, influence successful reentry. This study is unique in that it examines an emerging adult population that has already served time in prison. This sub-population is a high-risk group, even more so than traditional groups who may be committing crimes but have not yet been sent to prison. Criminal justice agencies and institutions should improve reentry programming by incorporating increased, positive, and consistent social support sources for individuals, particularly emerging adults. The current study suggests that this will act as a protective factor in aiding desistance, thus reducing recidivism rates.

Finally, staff support has been found to be critical in facilitating reintegration, as individuals who feel their parole officer is supportive are more likely to communicate their needs and believe the officer can guide them toward a prosocial life (Liu et al., 2023). Training should be offered to staff to promote strategies that integrate support into surveillance and rehabilitation. For example, parole officers should be engaged with clients' families and communities to ensure individuals have a stable environment that facilitates reintegration (Liu et al., 2023). Finally, parole officers should advocate for their clients and connect them with resource support (eg. housing and employment assistance, mental health and substance abuse services, childcare, etc.) to ensure they receive the services they need. Emerging adults who have already been involved in the prison system are at a high risk of turning to a life of crime; therefore, criminal justice agencies and parole agencies need to dedicate services to this group to interrupt their criminal

career and restore a life of convention.

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Appendix A
Six Items Used in Social Support Scale

(Responses are counts 0 to highest number of people.)

1. How many can you count on to be dependable?
2. How satisfied are you with the people mentioned above?
3. How many can you count on to help you relax?
4. How satisfied are you with the people mentioned above?
5. How many accept you totally?
6. How satisfied are you with the people mentioned above?
7. How many can you count on to care about you?
8. How satisfied are you with the people mentioned above?
9. How many can you count on to help you feel better?
10. How satisfied are you with the people mentioned above?
11. How many can you count on to console you?
12. How satisfied are you with the people mentioned above?