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A Strengths-Based Approach to Prisoner Reentry: The Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Program

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Abstract

Scholars have called for a strengths-based approach to prisoner reentry, yet there are few available program models that outline how to integrate this approach into the current reentry program landscape. The present paper highlights a strengths-based prisoner reentry program that provided services to men both pre- and post-release from prison to the community in the United States. Qualitative findings from focus groups provide preliminary support for the strengths-based approach and highlight men's strengths and needs as well as challenges related to the program's implementation. The reentry program then drew from participants' reports to inform program development activities. Implications and recommendations for integrating strengths-based approaches into prisoner reentry interventions are discussed.

Keywords

Strengths-based; prisoner reentry; program development; prisoner risks; prisoner needs

In the United States, more than 600,000 individuals return from prison to the community each year (Hughes & Wilson, 2003) and more than two-thirds of those released will return to prison or jail (Langan & Levin, 2002). Given the high rates of incarcerated persons transitioning from prison to the community, there is a growing need to establish interventions designed to support both successful prisoner reentry and reintegration. As such, scholars have identified best-practice guidelines and theoretical positions on which to base reentry program development (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). For example, prisoner reentry interventions should encompass a “seamless set of systems that span the boundaries of prison and community” and “are as close to the community as possible” (p. 308, Travis & Petersilia, 2001). Despite these guidelines, there are few resources available that document

how to develop and implement interventions that bridge the transition between correctional facilities and community-based organizations to facilitate prisoner reentry and reintegration.

Prisoner reentry is a process that all individuals transitioning from prison to the community experience (Travis, 2005). The reentry process has been differentiated from community reintegration, as reintegration requires a connection to the community through employment, education, stable housing, involvement with community-based organizations, and no additional contact with the criminal justice system (Travis, 2005). In spite of efforts to support community reentry, high recidivism rates indicate that reintegration is difficult. As such, barriers to successful reintegration include limited educational attainment and employment opportunities; unstable housing; substance abuse; physical and mental health concerns; family difficulties; and previous criminal history (Iwamoto, Gordon, Oliveros, Perez-Cabello, Brabham, Lanza & Dyson, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Petersilia, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, Solomon & Waul, 2001; Travis, 2005; van Olphen, Freudenberg, Fortin & Galea, 2006; van Olphen, Eliason, Freudenberg & Barnes, 2009; Visser, Kachnowski, Vigne & Travis, 2004). These barriers to successful reentry frequently overlap and interact to limit chances for successful reintegration.

Prisoner reentry is a precursor to successful community reintegration (Petersilia, 2004; Travis, 2001), yet; there are few interventions that have demonstrated success to meet the overwhelming needs of individuals leaving correctional facilities during their transition from prison to the community. In this context, there is a need for programs to integrate individual-, family-, and community-level interventions to address barriers and facilitate success for individuals as they reenter and move toward reintegration (Clear, Rose, & Ryder, 2001; Seiter & Kadela, 2003; Travis & Petersilia, 2001; Visser, et al., 2004). Specifically, researchers have recommended applying evidence-based correctional assessment and treatment strategies to community-based reentry interventions (Listwan, Cullen & Latessa, 2006).

The dominant model for evidence-based offender assessment and classification is the Risk, Needs, Responsivity framework (RNR; Andrews, Bonta & Hoge, 1990). Adherence to this model has demonstrated significant reductions in recidivism rates (i.e. Lowenkamp, Latessa & Holsinger, 2006). The *Risk Principle* refers to criminogenic variables that have been shown to increase the likelihood of re-offense, such as a juvenile arrest record and a history of multiple arrests. The *Needs Principle* refers to deficits that may include such basic needs as housing, education, and job skills, as well as mental health and substance abuse treatment. The *Responsivity Principle* refers to the ability to respond to the identified risks and needs of each offender with effective, evidence-based treatment interventions. Recently, researchers have called for the RNR model to be incorporated into reentry program development and implementation (Listwan, et al., 2006; Visser, 2007); however, research has yet to demonstrate the translation of RNR principles to community-based reentry programs.

While there is empirical support for and documented benefits to the RNR model, there are also limitations to this approach. For example, offender assessment and treatment in correctional settings is often lacking (Lowenkamp, et al., 2006; Taxman, Cropsey, Young & Wexler, 2007), which may be at least partially attributed to the training and funding needed

to use evidence-based approaches. Furthermore, the evidence-based assessments most often used to identify risks and needs rarely assess criminal justice involved persons' positive qualities, or strengths, and often only target needs that are directly linked to recidivism reduction (Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Ward & Stewart, 2003). Although the theoretical foundation for the RNR framework does include strengths (Andrews, Bonta & Wormith, 2011), these strengths are conceptualized as the absence of risks or needs and are therefore not explicit. As such, scholars have called for the integration of a strengths-based approach to prisoner reentry (Maruna & LeBel, 2003; O'Brien, 2001; van Wormer, 1999; Ward & Stewart, 2003; Woods, Lanza, Dyson & Gordon, 2013).

Towards a Strengths Based Approach

Strengths-based models to treatment and case management have flourished across disciplines such as social work (Saleebey, 1996) and education and are a central tenet of both community and positive psychology (Seligman, 2002). In contrast to traditional, deficit-driven approaches to disease and illness in which individuals are viewed as lacking appropriate skills or abilities needed to address and overcome challenges, strengths-based models focus on identifying assets and building on those assets to promote positive change. As such, individuals' and communities' have pre-existing qualities that can be nurtured to achieve goals (Saleebey, 1996). Strengths-based case management, therefore, expects case managers to identify clients' priorities and take an active role in helping clients achieve their goals. To accomplish these goals, case managers avoid speaking about pathology, and focus on resilience, transformation, empowerment, and civic engagement (Saleebey, 1996). Further research articulated three central components to the strengths-based case management approach, including 1) promoting connections and use of informal helping networks; 2) engaging in assertive community involvement facilitated by case managers; and 3) emphasizing the importance of the strength of the relation between the client and case manager (Brun & Rapp, 2001). In this context, strengths based case management begins with an assessment that identifies client's goals, capabilities, and assets that can be used to overcome challenges and incorporates the assessment material into a client-focused treatment plan that is tailored to the strengths and needs of the individual (Brun & Rapp, 2001). Throughout the assessment and treatment plan process, case managers act as a bridge to internal and external resources that are needed for individuals to achieve positive change. Strengths-based case management has been used with individuals who were on parole and had substance abuse histories (Prendergast & Cartier, 2008) and is oriented to enabling prisoner's community reintegration by participating in activities that place them in a helping role (see Burnett & Maruna, 2006).

For criminal justice populations, researchers have called for comprehensive interventions that span correctional systems and the community to build on prisoners' strengths while attending to the risks and needs that impact successful community reintegration (Austin, 2001; Clear, et al., 2001; Petersilia, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001; Visser, et al., 2004). In this context, strengths-based approaches allow for identifying offender strengths and positive attributes while humanizing the individual (Maruna & LeBel, 2003; van Wormer, 1999). Scholars have noted that a strengths-based approach allows offenders to recognize that they are of value and can positively contribute to the community and larger society (Maruna &

LeBel, 2003; O'Brien, 2001). Characteristics of a strengths-based approach include identifying strengths and assets through assessment, working with clients to identify goals and create a treatment plan; assisting them in 'giving back' to others and the greater community; and providing opportunities to participate in activities of everyday community life. Nevertheless, there is a need to document the mechanisms by which a strengths-based case management approach can be implemented within community-based programs to inform prisoner reentry and reintegration.

The Good Lives Model (GLM) is one theoretical framework that conceptualizes offender treatment from a strengths-based perspective (Ward & Stewart, 2003). In brief, this model posits that offenders' strive to lead 'good lives' and need to be supported in their efforts to do so (Ward & Stewart, 2003). Inherent in this framework is the idea that case managers can use constructive and collaborative ways to work with offenders to help them achieve prosocial and meaningful lives. The underlying emphasis of the GLM is that risk can be managed by promoting knowledge, strengths, skills and access to internal and external resources. From a strengths-based perspective, the GLM focuses on offenders' values and priorities while equipping them with the knowledge, skills, opportunities, and resources that are needed to achieve their goals (Purvis, Ward & Willis, 2011). Ward (2002) asserted that this model compliments the RNR framework, as both models work to prevent crime and promote public safety. Steps to implement the GLM in case management mirror the process of strengths based case management, as both require that case managers and offenders collaboratively assess, identify, analyze, document, and create a plan that promotes offenders' goals and overall well-being. Several studies document the implementation of the Good Lives Model, specifically with sex offenders in prison and community-based programs (Purvis, Ward & Shaw, 2013; Ward & Marshall, 2004; Willis, Ward & Levenson, 2013), violent offenders (Whitehead, Ward & Collie, 2007) as well as with forensic populations (Barnao, Robertson & Ward, 2011). However, there is limited evidence to document how correctional systems and community-based programs can collaborate to implement a strengths based approach in programs that support general prisoner reentry and reintegration.

As prisoners exit correctional institutions, it is important to provide a seamless set of services to ease their transition to the community. From a theoretical perspective, the RNR and GLM may be drawn from to support the development of interventions that encompass criminal justice involved persons' risks, needs, and strengths (Ward, Melser & Yates, 2007). Furthermore, these approaches may move beyond individually-focused treatment services to include families, programs, and community organizations. Despite the call for programs designed to span individual, family, and community systems, there are few reports that outline the ways in which programs can integrate these models into practice. Therefore, the goal of the present paper is to describe the Community Reentry Initiative, a state level intervention that provided pre- and post- release services for men transitioning from prison to the community. We further introduce the Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Program, which drew from the GLM to implement a strengths-based case management approach to service provision. Finally, we provide preliminary qualitative support for the strengths-based approach both pre- and post-release from prison to the community.

Community Reentry Initiative

The Community Reentry Initiative (CRI) was developed to facilitate men's transition from Connecticut's correctional system to the community through collaboration between the Department of Correction and community-based programs in three large urban areas. These urban areas had been identified as the communities where the largest proportion of prisoners returned following incarceration. The CRI had two overarching goals: 1) to provide continuous support to men re-entering the community through increased access to substance abuse treatment, behavioral health services (including case management), employment, entitlements, housing, community connections, and health care and; 2) to reduce the recidivism rate for men following their release from prison (see Woods, Iwamoto, Lanza & Gordon, 2013).

The collaboration between the state correctional system and community-based organizations allowed for the early identification of men preparing for release from prison to the designated communities. The Department of Correction identified men who were eligible for release within three to six months, and relayed this information to the community-based reentry programs to facilitate men's enrollment in the program. This identification process sometimes included moving men from one prison to another based on the geographical location that the men had identified as 'home.' Once identified as eligible for the program, men were given the option to enroll and consented to be part of the ongoing program evaluation.

Procedure for Program Enrollment

Participants were recruited from three correctional institutions located in Connecticut. Correctional staff identified men who met program criteria which included: 1) returning to the specified community; 2) within three to six months of release; and 3) age 18 or older. Identified candidates were referred to an orientation session, in which Fresh Start staff members and an evaluation team representative described the intent, purpose, and goals of the program, informed consent procedures, and answered relevant questions. Candidates were fully informed that non-participation would result in no negative consequences to their legal status. Subsequently, candidates were offered the opportunity to enroll in the program and the program evaluation, and participated in a baseline interview with a member of the evaluation team. During this interview, which took between one and two hours, the evaluation team member read each question to the interviewee, and attempted to build rapport and encourage program participation. The baseline interview included a validated risk assessment in addition to strengths and needs inventory. Participants were not reimbursed for the initial interview but were promised gift cards as an incentive to participate in follow-up interviews upon release and every six months thereafter across a two year period.

Following participation in the baseline interview, the evaluator shared information relevant to participants' reentry process with program staff in order to best address their unique needs. Specifically, within one week of completing the baseline interview, a summary of each participant's risks, strengths and needs was generated and provided to Fresh Start staff.

Within 30 days of receiving the summary, case managers were required to work with their clients to complete the ReEntry Plan, which reflected the clients' strengths, goals, and identified needs. Thus, each participant had a treatment plan that drew on their strengths and addressed their needs prior to exiting the correctional facility.

Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Program

The Fresh Start Reentry Program was one of the three community-based programs that were part of the CRI. Fresh Start was designed to be consistent with best practices literature. Case managers adhered to the principles of strengths-based case management, which included: focusing on individual strengths rather than deficits; building a strong and essential case manager-client relationship; delivering interventions that were based on the clients' self-determination; using assertive outreach interventions; promoting client's continued learning, growth and change; and actively mobilizing community resources to support client's strengths and needs (Rapp & Wintersteen, 1989). Critically, case managers served as a natural bridge for individuals transitioning from prison to a large, urban community. This bridge sought to: 1) enhance the motivation and engagement of men involved; 2) establish clear collaboration between the criminal justice system, treatment providers, and community supports in planning and implementing transition services; 3) establish a continuity of care from prison to the community; and 4) provide pre- and post-release supports to individuals, thus resulting in successful community transitions.

Fresh Start included both pre- and post-release intervention services. Pre-release services began with early identification of potential clients. Upon enrollment into the program, clients completed a strengths based assessment that evaluated strengths, needs, and goals in education, employment, housing, financial resources, formal and informal supports, mental and physical health, substance abuse, and recidivism risk. The results of the intensive assessment were used by case managers to facilitate ReEntry Planning, and to build a supportive relationship with clients. The ReEntry Plan focused on three essential areas: preparation for release to the community; what can be done to prepare the client, family, and community for the clients' return; and how to support successful reentry once the client is in the community. Case managers coordinated planning for release and engaged and motivated clients to build on their strengths and address the needs and risks that could negatively impact their successful transition from prison to the community. Clients were expected to be involved in the goal setting and planning for their community reentry and reintegration. Case managers met with men on a weekly basis individually and in groups until men were released to the community.

Post-release services built on the client-case manager relationship that had been established prior to release from prison. At release, client's strengths, needs, and goals were re-assessed and the ReEntry Plan was updated as needed. In-house reentry programming targeted dynamic criminogenic risk factors, such as antisocial attitudes and relationships, substance abuse, maladaptive personality characteristics, impulsivity, maladaptive family and interpersonal relationships, employment, education, and criminal history. Thus, individual and group treatment modalities included risk assessment (initially, the program assessed known risk factors, such as age at first arrest, prior probation/parole violations, number of

times arrested, etc., but then moved toward evidence based risk assessment with the Level of Service Inventory-Revised); motivational interviewing, Thinking for a Change and/or The Cognitive Self Change Program; Getting it Right: Transitioning to the Community; Reasoning and Rehabilitation; Substance Abuse Assessment, Treatment, and Relapse Prevention; Domestic Violence ReEducation for Offenders; Anger Management and Emotional Regulation; Parenting Education and Co-Parenting; and individual, couple, and family therapy using cognitive-behavioral strategies. In addition, Fresh Start created a comprehensive employment readiness and placement program in collaboration with local employment services. This program focused on building employment readiness skills, job seeking, performance, and retention. Case managers also coordinated with local parole offices to facilitate clients' compliance with parole and treatment stipulations, and coordinated with additional community providers for additional community-based services.

Program Participants

Between July 1, 2006 and May 1, 2011, 296 men enrolled in the Fresh Start program. Participants were primarily African American ($N = 191$; 64.50%) and Latino ($N = 97$; 32.78%). Participants' average age was 31.23 years ($SD = 8.34$) and the average length of current incarceration was 22.77 months ($SD = 29.22$; Median = 15.00). Most participants had never been married ($N = 234$; 79.10%) and had not completed high school ($N = 183$; 61.82%). The majority of participants did not have a current driver's license ($N = 174$; 58.80%) and had overwhelmingly never voted ($N = 211$; 71.30%). The demographics for these men were consistent with characteristics of incarcerated men from urban areas (Sabol, West & Cooper, 2010). See Table 1 for program participant's detailed demographic information.

In the overall sample, strengths and needs were assessed by the Strengths and Needs Inventory (Prendergast & Cartier, 2008), which spanned the following areas: education, employment, housing, financial resources, formal and informal supports, mental and physical health, substance abuse, and recidivism risk. The most frequently reported strength areas were in family 'maintained positive family interactions ($N = 197$; 66.6%); formal supports 'able to complete paperwork ($N = 170$; 57.4%), and employment 'receive personal satisfaction from work activities ($N = 152$; 51.4%)'. The most frequently reported needs/barriers areas were in substance abuse, 'didn't feel that I need help ($N = 68$; 23.0%), informal supports, 'have few positive friends ($N = 129$; 43.6%)', and housing, 'can't afford rent ($N = 102$; 34.5%).'

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted with a subset of men who had enrolled in the Fresh Start program. The purpose of these focus groups was to obtain feedback about the program pre- and post- release. As such, one focus group occurred in prison ($N = 12$) and the other took place in the community at the program site ($N = 12$). Each focus group had 12 participants, and was facilitated by the last author. A focus group protocol was developed to target specific question areas, such as overall program impressions and what worked and was not working for program participants. Focus group transcripts were transcribed verbatim and

content was analyzed for inclusion in the present paper. Focus group participation was included in the university-approved IRB application and community-based participants were compensated with a \$20 gift certificate to a local grocery store.

Focus Group Responses

Focus group data were analyzed for content and themes that reflected a strengths-based approach to prisoner reentry and highlighted challenges to this approach and overall program implementation. Directed content analysis was used to analyze the focus group data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This analysis allowed for a better understanding of how program participants experienced the strengths-based, comprehensive prisoner reentry program. Themes related to the strengths-based approach and the Fresh Start program were identified by the first author, and were confirmed by the last author. Disagreements in themes were discussed until a consensus was attained.

Pre-release

Results from the focus groups provide an overarching view of barriers and strengths associated with reentry and reintegration while highlighting challenges faced by program staff for program implementation. For example, one participant who was incarcerated emphasized the initial mistrust he perceived upon program entry:

I wanted to be heard. I wanted to be represented. I was someone who spent a decade in prison, grew up in prison. It's a different perspective. It was something I wanted to be a part of, but I didn't think Fresh Start could help me at all. I was like I haven't gotten out of prison yet, haven't gotten parole, haven't had nothing come my way.

However, the participant further stated, "But as it was happening, I thought it was a good thing. I got involved, cause I'm going to need it when I'm out." Accordingly, several men believed that the program could help them overcome the challenges they would face upon release. One participant described:

When I first signed up the most attractive part of it, is that it was a continuation of aftercare for the most part. And, I've been in and out for the most part, and what I've always thought is that when you get out, you run into a wall. You've paid your debt to society, but your pain still comes up and blocks you. I know the pain in what I did. One of the most attractive parts is that when you get out of here, its like, we'll stay in contact with you.

Men further articulated specific ways that program staff had helped them. For example, one participant reported that Fresh Start staff had made contact with his family, which helped to solidify his reentry plan. He also highlighted how much he enjoyed receiving a certificate for the in-prison programming he had completed:

... that meant something, because when you look at it on paper and you see I'm taking these steps, and your family is a part of it too. And the fact that my family was involved, and they felt involved, made a difference for me, because they were

encouraged. And for me, not just me by myself, my family is there too. And, if I can include them too, I know things will work out.

Case managers made specific efforts to help men identify and work toward their goals. One participant reported, “It’s about what *you* want to do with your future, it’s all about moving on. I’m going out there, I want to go to school, and I want to go to a trade school.” Participants identified supportive characteristics of program staff that included their polite and respectful dispositions, encouragement toward individual goals, honesty, and accountability. Program staff were often viewed as ‘role models’ and because they maintained positive attitude in their efforts to help program participants. One participant indicated that he saw the program as a way to help others, “You can help a lot of others with this program, you can show others. And Fresh Start will make others [want to] join.”

Despite the overall positive comments about the program, men also voiced several frustrations that were specific to their pre-release status. The two most common themes were that men had difficulty seeing what their life would look like outside of the prison walls, and if the program supports would be enough to help them overcome the challenges associated with reentry. In addition, one participant noted his frustration with program staff when they were late for weekly groups, even though delays were often due to traffic and challenges accessing the prison when administrative lockdowns were in effect.

Post-release

Men who were in the community and participated in the focus groups expanded on the sentiments outlined above. Men viewed the program as “a way out,” and “a support network.” One respondent noted that he had been referred by a friend who received help from Fresh Start, “A friend of mine went, tried it out, and he explained it to me. Told me what it was all about, so I thought I’d try it out. So, I went down there, got into it.” Men were able to see the program follow-through in helping them achieve their goals. For example, one respondent indicated, “Whatever you want to do, they’ll help you find the best resource to get what you need. That’s what attracted me to it, and it’s working out, you know.” In this context, men were able to recognize that the program staff worked with them to achieve their goals:

And they give yourself chance, because to speak from a personal standpoint, I don’t always give myself a chance. Fresh Start offers you that choice, because they come down here and they just made me feel like they were really interested in what I was trying to accomplish, and what I could accomplish. And at every turn, there were certain things they could handle and certain things they couldn’t handle, and I understand that. But I think my chances of success are better having gone through Fresh Start.

Participants remarked how important program accountability was for their reentry process, “It takes you step by step; it seems like everything they said it would be, the follow through, no bullshit.” Along these lines, they mentioned how the program was responsive to their needs and made all attempts to connect them to available resources. For example, one respondent noted:

The resources are here, if you're looking for something in particular. It fits with your needs to, it all depends on what your needs are, if you need a substance abuse program, or education, or whatever it may be, they point you in that direction. And, it's not just a word of mouth, lip service, and its action. Action.

The program continued to create a culture that embodied respect and helpfulness in the community. This culture was conducive to facilitating relationship development between case managers and clients. For example, one participant stated, "Every one of these brothers offered unlimited help, it was like, whatever you need. You know, they build me up because they're like, I like the way you keep coming in here." Participants also reported that program staff listened to them to the extent that they felt heard. This characteristic created an environment that laid the foundation for trust and support in difficult times. For example, one respondent said, "Because, the bumps in the road, if I can't overcome them, if I don't see a way around them, I feel comfortable coming to these guys."

Program Fidelity and Implementation

The program and evaluation design allowed for the Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Program to add program services based on participants' stated risks, needs, strengths, and goals. In response to the need for employment, Fresh Start developed an entrepreneurial training and employment component called Fresh Start Enterprises. Participants had the opportunity, through Fresh Start Enterprises, to build on their employment readiness skills and earn stable and competitive wages upon release from prison. Fresh Start Enterprises provided program participants with post-release training on how to safely use power tools and construction equipment such as power washing devices and ladders. Materials handling training courses included graffiti removal and how to use green products. Training sessions engaged local business owners and community members as they were facilitated by professional contractors and commercial representatives.

To address the need for housing and to build on participants' desire to maintain positive living arrangements upon release to the community, Fresh Start opened an eight-bed residential housing facility. Fresh Start also offered participants the opportunity to participate in community service activities as well as leadership trainings designed to address, discuss and promote self-awareness and self-esteem, positive coping skills, communication, teamwork and cooperation, decision making and problem solving, managing conflict, community leadership, and developing a personal plan for becoming a leader and mentor.

Discussion

The present study explored how the Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Program used a strengths-based approach to provide pre and post-release reentry services to men who were returning from prison to the community in the United States. The program design bridged services that began while participants were incarcerated, and continued throughout the reentry and reintegration processes, which is consistent with literature on successful prisoner reentry programs (Clear, et al., 2001; Seiter & Kadela, 2003). Through this iterative program design, summaries of participants' risks, strengths and needs were reported to case managers, who

then created ReEntry plans and targeted treatment interventions to build on participants' self-identified strengths to help them achieve their goals.

The Strengths based assessment provided a starting point for case managers to work with clients prior to their release from prison to the community. Case managers were able to build on strong family interactions by contacting family members to prepare them for release while working with the client to facilitate the transition.

Focus group responses provided insight into the program's strength-based approach to reentry as participants both pre- and post- release articulated characteristics of a strengths-based program. Initially, participants who were still incarcerated were cautious about what services the program would deliver. However, this was overcome by the respectfulness and honesty of the case managers, who made every effort to work with men and help them identify their strengths and work toward their goals. When this included reaching out to family members, program staff did not hesitate. Family support can support the reentry process (Visser et al., 2004) and may thereby reduce recidivism. The Fresh Start program model sought to build upon men's pre-existing assets to help facilitate the reentry process.

Men who participated in the focus groups upon release from prison echoed the sentiments expressed by the men who had been incarcerated. They reported that the program followed-through to help them achieve their goals and was responsive to their needs. Participants highlighted the trust and respect that they felt for program staff and were supported as they worked toward their goals. Successful program strategies described by participants included the program culture, responsiveness to needs, and the focus on strengths. Although participants' risks were assessed prior to their release from prison, these were not the primary foci of service delivery. Rather, case managers maintained an awareness of risk while working with men to build on their identified strengths. This is consistent with the GLM in that building strengths may help to reduce risk, as offenders are seen as being human and worthy of investment, with the ability to change. Therefore, findings from the focus groups lend support to the strengths-based approach to prisoner reentry as demonstrated through the Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Program.

On a program level, Fresh Start initiated services based on participants' evaluated risks, needs, strengths, and goals. Fresh Start Enterprises, community services opportunities, housing, and leadership trainings were developed, in part, as participants' expressed needs, strengths and goals in those areas. In addition, when the Fresh Start program services were not sufficient to meet participants' needs, referrals were made to other resources in the community. The Fresh Start program served as a criminal justice-community planned intervention (Austin, 2001; Clear, et al., 2001; Petersilia, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001; Visser, et al., 2004), as it provided continuous support to participants throughout the community reentry and reintegration processes. As such, the Fresh Start program model is consistent with best practices related to the provision of continued, comprehensive services both pre-release and upon reentry to the community.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations to be addressed. First, it is possible that men who enrolled in the study had more strengths and supports than men who declined enrollment in the program. Because the focus groups only included men who were actively participating in the program, more research is needed to understand factors that contribute to program drop-out, and whether the characteristics found in this study hold true across successful participants and non-participants. Future research should ensure to include comparison groups in order to evaluate the larger program impact. Second, the design and analysis in this study do not allow for causal claims related to program effectiveness, but, rather, a mere description of the program and participants' experiences in the program. Research should continue to examine, with more rigorous, longitudinal designs, how strengths-based characteristics contribute to program effectiveness. Finally, the current paper does not examine the strengths-based approach in the context of recidivism outcomes. A next step is to examine if strengths add to the current risk assessment approach through quantitative analysis of recidivism over time.

Future Directions

The findings from this study support the need for research on evidence-based components of community-based reentry programs. It also appears important for treatment strategies to incorporate a comprehensive, strength-based approach. Asking participants about their strengths engages participants in interventions, promotes a sense of self-worth, and demonstrates their value to the community and larger society (Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Van Wormer, 1999). Strengths-based approaches to prisoner reentry may also inform program development, as the program may learn from participants' experiences during the reintegration and reentry processes. In sum, a strengths-based approach to prisoner reentry and reintegration has the potential to support successful prisoner reentry and reintegration.

Recommendations

Prisoner reentry programs can use aspects of the Fresh Start program to integrate a strengths-based approach into their program design. As such, several recommendations for practice are warranted.

1. Move from a risk-evaluation framework towards a strengths-based assessment model—Incorporating questions to assess criminal justice involved persons' strengths provides a starting point for identifying client goals and can increase motivation to change. Moreover, this approach creates a sense of hope among program participants, while creating a program culture that embodies respect and support. Finally, ensuring that program staff are accountable to both clients and the program can help to build strong relationships both pre- and post-release.

2. Coordinate with family and community resources—From a strengths-based perspective, families and communities have assets that can be drawn from to support the reentry process. Programs should connect with positive family supports when possible to facilitate rebuilding family relationships. Furthermore, programs could coordinate with local

community partners to ensure that clients whose needs are great are connected to appropriate services.

3. Build a flexible and responsive program—Fresh Start has been successful in responding to their clients' needs by establishing an employment program and a housing program. These services were developed as a response to both the needs of their clients and the lack of employment and housing programs. In addition, Fresh Start continuously sought innovative methods to respond to needs. For example, their employment program provides immediate employment to act as a starting point for community reintegration.

In sum, the Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry program drew from the best practice literature to implement a responsive program that both identified offenders' risks and built on their strengths. The strengths-based program culture allowed for a flexible program model that was modified to build on offenders' assets and meet their needs in the community. As large numbers of individuals return from prison to the community in the United States, future research on effective, integrated treatment strategies for community based reentry programs is needed to determine the impact of this approach on recidivism over time. This study provides a first step in identifying program components and individual perceptions of a strengths-based approach to reentry in the United States.

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Table 1

Fresh Start Participant Demographics

Variable	N	%
Ethnicity		
African American	191	64.53
White/Caucasian	70	23.65
Other	34	11.49
Hispanic/Latino	97	32.77
Educational Level		
<=8th grade	28	9.46
9th grade	43	14.53
10th grade	50	16.89
11th grade	62	20.95
12th grade	56	18.92
Some college	49	16.55
Vocational training	7	2.36
College degree	1	0.34
Marital Status		
Never married	234	79.1
Legally married	30	10.1
Living as married	5	1.7
Separated	3	1.0
Divorced	24	8.1

N = 296