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Cross-agency coordination of offender reentry: Testing collaboration outcomes

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A B S T R A C T

Successful offender reentry is arguably one of the most challenging contemporary issues, with policymakers calling for more effective coordination between criminal justice and social service agencies. Evidence linking cross-agency coordination to reentry outcomes is limited and underdeveloped. The theory of relational coordination was used to develop hypotheses regarding the impact of cross-agency coordination on reentry outcomes in "reentry hot spots" and to test those hypotheses. Results pointed to some differences in cross-agency coordination between cities that were part of reentry policy efforts and those that were not. Results also revealed that relationships between criminal justice agencies were relatively strong, while their relationships with employment providers were comparatively weaker, but the impacts of these relationships on reentry outcomes were limited at best. Findings support using relational coordination to understand reentry collaboration, to identify strengths and weaknesses of collaborative ties, and to measure their impact on reentry outcomes.

Introduction

The private sector has given substantial attention to cross-agency collaboration (Best & Forrant, 2001; Forrant, 2001; Miles & Miles, 1999; Nadler & Tushman, 1997), and there is growing recognition of the need for collaboration in the public sector as well (Kurland & Zeder, 2001; Maguire & King, 2004; Provan & Milward, 2001; Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al., 2001; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Cross-agency coordination of work refers to assembling individual agency services to deliver services to an individual or group systematically (Clairborne & Lawson, 2005). Collaboration has been successfully documented in myriad contexts including hospitals (Gittell & Weiss, 2004; Young et al., 1998), municipalities (Alter & Hage, 1993; Labonte, 1997), occupational health agencies (Kriebel, Geiser, & Crumbley, 2001), economic development agencies (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), and substance abuse treatment agencies (Florin, Mitchell, Stevenson, & Klein, 2000; Taxman, 1998; Wandersman, Goodman, & Butterfoss, 1997). Research on collaboration in the public sector is growing, although funding remains limited and academic attention is in its infancy (Bouffard & Bergeron, 2006; Visher, Lindquist, & Brumbaugh, 2007).

Pressures to identify and address community priorities has prompted collaboration among organizations in public settings (Kurland & Zeder, 2001) and by demands from taxpayers, government officials, politicians, and other stakeholders to improve efficiency and outcomes (Greene, 2000; Halal, 2005; Kurland & Zeder, 2001; Provan & Milward, 2001; Sridharan & Gillespie, 2004; Wolff, 2001b). As a result, practitioners are changing the way work is accomplished by giving greater attention to cross-agency collaboration. Documented benefits of collaboration include improved service delivery (Provan & Milward, 2001; Wandersman et al., 1997); improved quality and efficiency of service delivery (Gittell et al., 2000); improved resource sharing (Provan & Milward, 2001); stakeholder empowerment (Bond & Keys, 1993); knowledge exchange (Alter & Hage, 1993); and increased social capital (Provan & Milward, 2001). In addition, Roussos and Fawcett (2000) noted, "…under some conditions, implementation of collaborative partnerships is associated with improvements in population-level outcomes" (p. 375) and in community-level proficiencies such as problem-solving capacity (Huxham, 1996; Sridharan & Gillespie, 2004). Practitioners benefit from increased learning (Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson, & Sparks, 1998) and from the ability to better leverage resources (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001). One perspective on collaboration posits that collaborative relationships serve as an effective coping response to environmental pressures. When organizations or groups respond to adversity by sustaining or strengthening their working relationships, they improve their collective capacity to respond (Burke, 2002; Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

A wave of state and federal policies mandating collaborative approaches to offender reentry have emerged in the past decade (Byrne, Taxman, & Young, 2001; Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al., 2001) as a result of increased offender releases (Petersilia, 2000; Sabol, Couture, & Harrison, 2007; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Traditionally, criminal justice and social service agencies operate in

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isolation because they often compete for resources or lack trusting relationships with one another. Evidence has revealed, however, that the physical, psychological, and social needs of offenders span across multiple organizational boundaries (Belenko, Peugh, Califano, Usdansky, & Foster, 1998; Hagan & Coleman, 2001; Petersilia, 2000; Taxman, 1998). Research has further suggested that successful offender reentry depends on a continuum or system of services (Hagan & Coleman, 2001; Taxman, Byrne, & Young, 2002; Taxman, 1998) that are delivered soon after release (Langan & Levin, 2002). This finding reinforced the importance of collaboration to achieve outcomes in this context.

This article documents collaborative relationships in the criminal justice context, where cross-agency collaboration has grown in response to the call for comprehensive approaches to safety (Goldstein, 1990; Kelling & Coles, 1996). Previous research has found limited results on the effectiveness of multi-agency approaches in general (Berkowitz, 2001; Larsson et al., 1998; Maguire & King, 2004; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000) and still fewer studies examining coordination in the context of reentry (Taxman, Young, & Byrne, 2001; Visher et al., 2007). This article, therefore, adds to existing knowledge regarding cross-agency collaboration as a vehicle for successful reentry and also presents the impact of collaborative relationships on recidivism in a number of reentry hot spot communities.

Collaboration and its challenges

Two definitions from the literature are offered to focus this discussion of collaboration. First, Clairborne and Lawson (2005) stated, "Collaboration is a form of collective action, involving multiple agencies working together in response to special mutually dependent needs and complex problems. Agencies come together to collaborate because no one alone can achieve its missions and goals, improve results, and realize desired benefits without the contributions of the others" (p. 2). Second, Himmelman (2001) referred to collaboration as "an exchange of information for mutual benefit (networking); an altering of activities (cooperating); a sharing of resources (coordinating); and working to build the capacity of others" (pp. 277-278).

While many have noted the benefits of collaboration, challenges to achieve it are also evident. These include limited resources, conflicting beliefs (e.g., philosophical and/or political), and confidentiality concerns (Florin et al., 2000; Hammett, Roberts, & Kennedy, 2001; Mitchell & Shortell, 2000). Issues of territoriality, conflicting goals, lack of trust, and differences in perceived status have also been identified (Gittell & Weiss, 2004; Himmelman, 2001; Sherman, 2004; Wolff, 2001a), as well as differences in decision-making styles and performance assessment (Berkowitz, 2001; Florin et al., 2000; Mitchell & Shortell, 2000; Provan & Milward, 2001). At the practitioner level, these challenges are primarily institutional restrictions (e.g., time constraints, staff turnover, or limited funding) that impede the ability to work collaboratively to address common problems (Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al., 2001). Conversely, at the policy level, it is not uncommon for funder or government edicts to mandate collaboration with little understanding of the challenges that practitioners face (Wandersman et al., 1997; Wolff, 2001b).

These challenges often center on relational issues. Successful collaboration appears to require establishing interconnected and supportive relationships in which trust enables joint problem-solving and conflict resolution in pursuit of a shared vision and goals (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Gittell, 2000; Shortell et al., 2002; Wolff, 2001a; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Relationships are key "human processes" (Wolff, 2001a, p. 186) which, depending on their quality, can either support open and honest communication or undermine it (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Gittell, 2002; Smith, Carroll, & Ashford, 1995). Communication, in turn, is "the lifeblood of a coalition" (Wolff, 2001a, p. 179), critical for achieving collaboration outcomes (Gittell & Weiss, 2004; Smith et al., 1995). In addressing reentry, practitioners must overcome these challenges to share resources and information for offender and community outcomes.

A relational approach

Relational coordination is an emerging theory for understanding the relational underpinnings of collaboration. Increasingly, coordination is understood to be a relational process (Crowston & Kammerer, 1998; Faraj & Sproull, 2000; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Gittell, 2000; Weick & Roberts, 1993) that involves not only the management of interdependencies between tasks (Malone & Crowston, 1994), but also the management of interdependencies among the people who perform these tasks. According to the theory of relational coordination, coordination that occurs through frequent, high-quality communication supported by relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect enables organizations to better achieve their desired outcomes (see Fig. 1). Specifically, Gittell (2002) found "relational coordination is a mutually reinforcing process of interaction between communication and relationships carried out for the purpose of task integration" (p. 301). Scholars in the field of communication have argued that relationships influence the frequency and quality of communication, and the frequency and quality of communication, in turn, influence the quality of relationships. For example, communications scholar Theodore Newcomb (1956) argued that frequent, high-quality communication is rewarding for those who engage in it, and thus develops the basis for trusting and respectful relations. Others have argued for the reverse causal path, namely, that strong group member relations form the basis for effective communication (Keyton, 1999; Rubenstein, Barth, & Douds, 1971). This mutual influence between communication and relationships lies at the heart of relational coordination.

This theory differs from other relational perspectives on coordination by specifying three dimensions of relationships that are vital to coordinating work: shared knowledge, shared goals, and mutual respect (Gittell, 2002, p. 301). It also differs by focusing on relationships between roles rather than between specific individuals. Role identities include expectations regarding the nature of one's relationships with others in a work context (Broderick, 1999; Daley, 2008; Lopata, 1991). Social psychological theorists have contrasted role-based or identity-based relationships with bond-based or personal relationships and argued that the former are both more predictive of performance and more sustainable over time (Janis, 1963; Turner, 1985). Role-based relationships, like personal relationships, can be either functional or dysfunctional. Relational coordination's focus on role-based relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect is of interest here given the multi-agency phenomena of offender reentry, and given that "poor interagency coordination" is believed to be one of the top barriers to implementing offender reentry policies (Visher et al., 2007, p. 93).

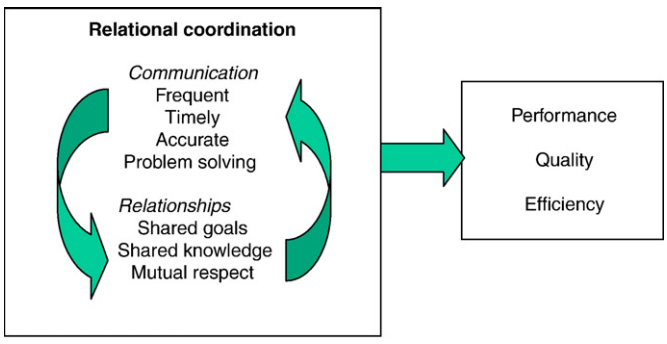

Fig. 1. Model of relational coordination (Gittell, 2001).

Developed and tested in the airline, health care, and long-term care industries (Gittell, 2001, 2002; Gittell et al., 2000; Gittell, Weinberg, Pfefferle, & Bishop, 2008), relational coordination theory is expected to generalize to work processes where multiple providers carry out highly interdependent tasks under conditions of uncertainty and time constraints. Offender reintegration meets all three criteria. Multiple providers are involved in carrying out the specialized tasks involved in offender reintegration, with the output of some tasks serving as input to other tasks and vice versa (e.g., employment counseling, housing assistance, and substance abuse treatment), which introduces interdependencies into the process. Given unpredictable differences between individual offenders, and differences in the families and communities to which they are returning, the process is characterized by uncertainty. Offender reintegration also operates under time constraints given that offenders must access services across numerous organizations soon after release or face increasing risks of recidivating (Petersilia, 2000). Collaboration is therefore expected to be an effective mechanism for addressing these pressures (Clairborne & Lawson, 2005), and relational coordination is expected to be a significant factor in achieving successful offender reintegration.

Collaborating for offender reentry

In 2002, there were 1.4 million adults in U.S. state and federal prisons (Langan & Levin, 2002). At the close of 2006, this number increased to more than 1.5 million (Sabol et al., 2007). Due in part to sentencing policy changes in the final decades of the twentieth century, many communities are seeing an increase in offenders returning from prison (Travis, 2005; Travis et al., 2001). Most offenders return to urban, concentrated areas (Travis, 2005). These "reentry hot spots" characterize communities that bear the burden of high numbers of returning offenders. More than half of these offenders will commit a new crime or violate their release conditions within three years, most within the first year (Petersilia, 2000); thus, reentry presents significant challenges at individual, community, and societal levels.

Research has shown that offenders have myriad economic, social, physical, and mental health needs that require services from several social service providers and public agencies. Successful reentry, it has been argued, requires a systematic assembly of criminal justice and social service providers to address the complex needs of offenders and their communities (Travis, 2005; Visher et al., 2007). Specifically, Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al. (2001) stated that reentry should entail planned transitions, offender participation, and transforming the systems that interact with offenders. Yet, moving an offender from prison to the community is complicated by the unique and sometimes capricious offender; the criminal and social service system factors relative to release guidelines; service needs; and level of public safety risk. These factors are weighed in relation to equally idiosyncratic community conditions.

In the reentry context, as in other contexts, conflicts over turf, hierarchy, and resource sharing are ubiquitous (Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al., 2001). Until recently, agents of the criminal justice system did not view themselves as collective problem-solvers whose job was to ensure successful offender reentry and public safety (Hagan & Coleman, 2001). Increasing awareness that offenders do not operate within jurisdictional boundaries, and that offender needs cut across agency capabilities, however, has changed how criminal justice and social services address complex issues. Considering the process of reentry coordination has become an important area of focus (Taxman, 2004).

According to research on reentry partnerships (Byrne et al., 2001; Taxman, Young, & Byrne, 2001), a successful reentry system requires equal participation of key criminal justice, employment, and social service agencies in planning and implementing transitions as part of a service continuum, much like requirements for successfully discharging a hospital patient (Gittell & Weiss, 2004). In the reentry context, however, agencies at both the local and state levels are involved, creating challenges across levels of government. Reentry research showed that while some partnership elements varied, common success factors included resource sharing, joint problem-solving, interagency support, and willingness to change (Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al., 2001).

In step with growing research on reentry, policymakers have mandated inter-agency collaboration (Visher et al., 2007). Beginning in 1999 with the U.S. Department of Justice Reentry Partnership Initiative (RPI) and followed by the congressionally authorized Offender Reentry and Community Safety Act of 2001, officials have encouraged coordinated, cost efficient reentry strategies for public safety and offender transition (Offender Reentry and Community Safety Act of 2001, 2002; Taxman, Young, Byrne, Holsinger, et al., 2001). Policy efforts continued with state and national efforts in 2007 (Moore, 2007). In early efforts, state and federal funding mandated that practitioners build relationships among criminal justice, health, and social service providers. As a result of participating in the RPI, the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) established the Public Safety Transition Program as part of the Lower Security Preparation Program Policy. The policy covered institutional preparation, risk reduction planning, transition classes, and post-release planning and supervision. In 2002, the DOC received federal funds under the Serious Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI). Through cross-agency collaboration, SVORI was expected to improve offender quality of life and access to employment, housing, and community resources and health and behavioral health status, while decreasing criminality via increased supervision.

For these policy actions to succeed in the future, a deeper understanding of the relational underpinnings of collaboration is needed. This study, therefore, explored patterns of relational coordination among agencies involved in offender reentry in "hot spot" communities in Massachusetts and answered the following questions:

1. What are the patterns of relational coordination found among agencies involved in reintegrating offenders?
2. Do communities involved in the Serious Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), having received federal funds to support partnerships, show higher levels of relational coordination among reentry agencies than non-SVORI communities?
3. Does relational coordination among reentry agencies positively influence community recidivism outcomes?
4. Is offender reentry an appropriate context for the future testing of relational coordination as a predictor of collaboration effectiveness?

Research design and analyses

Sample selection

Consistent with national trends, most offenders in Massachusetts return to physically, economically, and socially strapped urban centers (Brooks, Solomon, Keegan, Kohl, & Lahue, 2005). Cities were selected for this study based on their population and because together they host more than 50 percent of the state's returning offenders each year (Brooks et al., 2005). Further, the social and economic characteristics of these communities were representative of those dealing with reentry at the national level (Travis, 2005). Table 1 presents the characteristics of these "reentry hot spot" communities.

Within these communities, data (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Maxfield & Babbie, 2001) were collected from administrators or managers representing probation, parole, police, employment, and substance abuse service agencies.[1] As a leader of an urban agency concerned with offender reentry issues, the administrator or manager was well positioned (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Malhotra & Grover, 1998) to

Table 1
Community demographic data

City	Population		Median household income ($)		Family poverty (%)		Unemployment (%)	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1997	2002
Boston	574,283	589,141	29,180	39,629	15.2	15.5	4.2	5.8
Brockton	92,788	94,304	31,712	39,507	11.8	12.0	5.4	6.6
Fall River	92,703	91,938	22,452	29,014	12.4	14.2	8.5	7.7
Lawrence	70,207	72,049	22,183	27,983	25.7	21.2	8.9	14.1
Lowell	103,439	105,167	29,351	39,192	15.3	13.8	5.1	8.2
Lynn	81,245	89,060	28,553	37,364	13.9	13.2	4.8	6.3
New Bedford	99,922	93,768	22,647	27,569	14.7	17.5	9.3	9.5
Springfield	156,983	152,082	25,656	30,417	17.9	19.5	5.7	7.5
Worcester	169,759	172,648	28,955	35,623	12.3	14.3	4.1	6.7

speak about relationships across organizations. The need to ensure consistency across position-types was paramount in sampling.

Data collection

A confidential, self-administered survey was distributed to administrators (N = 45), with a 77 percent return rate. The survey was comprised of questions about organizational change and relational coordination in the context of offender reentry. Relational coordination was the focal point of this study. Respondents were asked several questions about their agency's connections to other agencies in the planning and implementation of reentry strategies, as well as involvement in the SVORI policy initiative. Visher et al. (2007) used an analogous sample, citing their knowledge of reentry policy. To explore the applicability of relational coordination (RC) to reentry, the survey included seven questions to measure RC, adapted from a previously validated survey (Gittell, 2001; Gittell et al., 2000) and piloted with a representative group. The survey explored communication and relationships among agencies involved in offender reentry rather than asking subjects to recall specific incidents (Gittell, 2002).

Independent variables

Relational coordination was measured along seven dimensions: (1) frequency of communication; (2) timeliness of communication; (3) accuracy of communication; (4) problem-solving focus of communication; (5) relationships of shared goals; (6) relationships of shared knowledge; and (7) mutual respect (Gittell, 2002). Respondents were asked the following questions with respect to each of five specific agencies: "How frequently do you communicate with these agencies about offender reentry in your community?" "Do these agencies communicate with you in a timely way about offender reentry issues?" "Do these agencies communicate with you accurately about offender reentry issues?" "When problems arise regarding offender reentry, do these agencies work with you to solve the problems?" "How much do these agencies know about the role your agency plays in offender reentry?" "How much do these agencies respect the role your agency plays in offender reentry activities?" "How much do these agencies share your agency's goals for returning offenders?" Response options were provided on a five-point scale (Gittell, 2002).

Other collaboration measures were developed based on the reentry literature. Respondents were asked to report the level of change their agency had experienced in the past three to five years as a result of reentry trends; whether or not their agency participated in the Department of Correction's SVORI initiative (yes, no, don't know); their involvement with outside agencies in planning for reentry policies or programs; and the use of monitoring and outcome data from reentry policy/program implementation to make changes within their own organization or to notify outside agencies of a need for change.

Dependent variables

Data used to test the expected outcomes of coordinated reentry practices included recidivism[2] data collected from Massachusetts Department of Correction records (Maxfield & Babbie, 2001) for offenders returning to the sample communities in 1997 (N = 1,341) and 2002 (N = 1,687). Table 2 presents the dependent variables; the community recidivism change rate between 1997 and 2002; and the 2002[3] community recidivism rate.[4]

Analyses

Descriptive statistics were calculated for organizational measures and for each dimension of relational coordination (RC). An overall RC index was then created by equally weighting the seven dimensions of RC (Gittell, 2002). An RC score was created for each agency and each community. No survey data were collected from DOC staff because they are a centralized state agency and do not staff community-based offices (e.g., institutional constraints). Qualitative data were collected from DOC officials in telephone interviews to complement survey

Table 2
Recidivism change rates

City	1997 Recidivism rate %	1997 Recidivism ranking	2002 Recidivism rate %	2002 Recidivism ranking	Change rate 95% CI
Boston†	19.53	5	17.86	8	-1.67 (-6.73, 3.39)
Brockton	30.25	13	15.53	7	-14.72 (-26.06, -3.19*)
Fall River†	17.95	3	18.84	9	+.89 (-14.36, 16.14)
Lawrence	22.33	8	22.83	13	+.50 (-11.26, 12.25)
Lowell†	17.70	2	20.51	11	+2.81 (-8.47, 14.10)
Lynn	29.55	12	14.86	6	-14.69 (-27.66, -1.70*)
New Bedford	20.00	6	19.05	10	-.95 (-15.28, 13.38)
Springfield†	17.81	4	7.38	4	-10.43 (-19.39, -3.28*)
Worcester†	23.55	9	22.71	12	-.84 (-8.68, 6.98)

Notes: recidivism rate = percentage of the released population who were reconvicted of a new crime; change rate = positive of negative improvements to the recidivism rate when comparing 2002 to 1997.
† Communities participating in the U.S. Department of Justice Serious Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) with the Massachusetts Department of Corrections.
* Statistically significant change rate.

responses. Further, within-agency responses were excluded because this analysis focused on cross-agency relationships, which are a primary goal of state and national reentry policy. Descriptive statistics illustrate response patterns across agencies and communities.

Cronbach's alpha (Bernard, 2000; O'Leary-Kelly & Vokurka, 1998) was calculated to test the reliability of the overall relational coordination index and its subindices. Acceptable values for the Cronbach's alpha are .60 for a newly developed index and .80 for a well-established index (Nunnally, 1978). Based on past studies, Cronbach's alpha for relational coordination was expected to be between .85 and .90. An analysis of variance was conducted to determine differences across groups; in this case, whether RC differed significantly between SVORI and non-SVORI communities. Analyses included the overall strength of RC and the strength of RC with specific agencies. Due to the restricted number of within-agency responses, tests such as hierarchical linear modeling were not possible. This study's tests yielded valuable information regarding the patterns of relational coordination among agencies.

For the purposes of the predictive analyses, relational coordination measures were established for each agency and aggregated to the community level to ensure consistency with recidivism analyses.[5] Preliminary analyses tested recidivism against a number of community-level variables but revealed no relationships.[6] Unadjusted linear regressions were conducted, testing associations between the 2002 community recidivism rates and 1997-2002 recidivism change rates[7] on one hand, and against each of the dimensions of relational coordination, relational coordination with each agency, and overall relational coordination on the other. Due to a low response rate from Boston, tests were conducted both with and without Boston responses.[8]

Results

Administrators or managers constituted 97 percent of respondents, and one respondent served a dual role as both staff and manager. Table 3 depicts distributions by agency. There was one respondent per agency. Responses indicated a higher return rate from criminal justice agencies compared to employment and substance abuse agencies.

As noted, each respondent worked for an agency within a reentry hot spot community. Police are a municipal-level agency, whereas probation, parole, and employment are state-level agencies with staff assigned geographically. Substance abuse agencies were all nonprofit agencies, but received state (but not necessarily SVORI) funds for offender services.

Reliability results revealed higher Cronbach's alphas across RC dimensions with a particular agency than across RC dimensions with all agencies (see Table 4). These results were anticipated. Specifically, when a respondent had high quality communication or high quality relationships with an agency, one would expect his or her scores to be high across each RC dimension for that specific agency. On the other hand, one would expect the quality of communication and relationships to differ between different agencies. These findings supported the notion that the communication and relationship ties that exist between specific agencies tend to be mutually reinforcing due to the dynamics described above.

Eighty-three percent of respondents had been working with the offender population for more than ten years. Ninety-four percent of respondents indicated their agencies, a notable percentage, had undergone moderate or fundamental changes since 2000 in response to emerging reentry trends. When planning for these new reentry activities, 78 percent of respondents either always or frequently involved other organizations, while just 55 percent reported monitoring implementation in order to inform other organizations that changes might be needed to reentry strategies. For some, collaboration included participating in the Massachusetts SVORI efforts. Only 37 percent indicated they were part of SVORI; 47 percent said they were not; 11 percent did not know, and 5 percent did not answer. According to DOC reports, 55 percent of these communities were a part of the SVORI initiative, revealing a disconnect between implementing policy and awareness among providers.

Table 5 represents the distributions of the relational coordination (RC) dimensions by agency as rated by respondents from other agencies. On all RC dimensions, criminal justice agencies had the highest scores as rated by others, with parole ranked within the top three scores on all seven dimensions. Employment agencies had lower scores on all dimensions of RC when compared to other agencies, suggesting that other agencies report weak links to employment agencies involved in offender reentry.

Table 6 shows the strength of relational coordination dimensions by agency. In this case, however, each respondent reported his or her perspective on relationship ties with other agencies. It appears that employment and parole reported the highest overall RC; parole reported less deviation in response. It is encouraging that the two agencies central to reentry (i.e., parole and employment) reported high levels of relational coordination with others, with a mean RC of 3.9 and 3.8 respectively on a five-point scale. The police and substance abuse agencies, however, reported the lowest levels of RC with others. Given that these two agencies are expected to play important roles in offender service and successful transition, their relational coordination with other agencies has not reached an optimal level. Looking in more detail at the underlying RC dimensions, police and substance abuse agencies received notably low scores across most of the RC dimensions, including both communication and relationship dimensions, suggesting that the weaknesses are, indeed, multidimensional. The study then compared the strength of RC between communities. These results are presented in Table 7.

The next step was to compare RC between specific agencies in SVORI and non-SVORI sites. A significant difference ($p = .018$) in RC with employment agencies was identified, suggesting SVORI sites supported stronger ties with employment agencies than non-SVORI sites. These results are shown in Table 8. Aside from ties with employment agencies, SVORI and non-SVORI sites did not differ significantly in their levels of relational coordination.

Table 3
Distribution of responses by agency (N = 35)

Organization	N	Percent
Parole	8	22.86
Probation	8	22.86
Police	8	22.86
Substance abuse service	6	17.14
Employment service	5	14.29

Table 4
Overall reliability results

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Cronbach's alpha
RC w/Department of Correction	35	3.37959	1.11571	0.662323
RC w/employment agency	30	2.93809	1.21257	
RC w/House of Correction	35	3.77959	1.00260	
RC w/parole	27	3.89417	0.86133	
RC w/police	27	3.66666	1.05945	
RC w/probation	27	3.87301	0.89243	
RC w/substance abuse agency	29	3.46600	1.11148	
Frequent communication	35	3.77619	0.73424	0.830715
Timely communication	35	3.64285	0.70421	
Accurate communication	35	3.82571	0.68083	
Problem solving communication	35	3.53428	0.79526	
Shared goals	35	3.49047	0.88556	
Shared knowledge	35	3.55238	0.75707	
Mutual respect	35	3.42857	0.95767	
RC total	35	3.58883	0.58093	

Notes: N = those who responded, excluding representatives of the focus organization; RC = relational coordination (scale of 1-5); RC total = the variable that summarizes all agencies across all RC dimensions.

Table 5
Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha for relational coordination measures as reported by others

RC measure	Department of Correction (n = 35)	Employment agency (n = 30)	House of Correction (n = 35)	Parole (n = 27)	Police (n = 27)	Probation (n = 27)	Substance abuse agency (N = 29)	Cronbach's alpha
Accurate communication	3.66667 (1.24164)*	2.96429 (1.31887)*	4.00000 (1.13759)	4.23077 (0.76460)*	4.11538 (0.86380)*	4.11538 (0.86380)*	3.53571 (1.40059)*	0.642061
Frequent communication	3.51429 (1.24550)	3.23333 (1.38174)	3.94286 (1.10992)	3.88889 (1.12090)	3.88889 (1.12090)	4.22222 (1.05003)	3.82759 (1.25553)	0.705671
Timely communication	3.63636 (1.16775)*	2.86207 (1.38162)*	3.85714 (1.14128)	3.88462 (1.10732)*	3.59259 (1.30853)	4.03846 (0.95836)*	3.64286 (1.25357)*	0.706867
Problem solving communication	3.06061 (1.29758)*	3.07143 (1.30323)*	3.57143 (1.31251)	3.96154 (0.72004)*	3.62963 (1.44510)	3.88462 (0.81618)*	3.46429 (1.29048)*	0.757062
Mutual respect	3.17143 (1.40348)	3.06667 (1.36289)	3.62857 (1.37382)	3.74074 (1.22765)	3.55556 (1.33973)	3.55556 (1.31071)	3.34483 (1.28940)	0.837793
Shared knowledge	3.57143 (1.33473)	2.70000 (1.34293)	3.74286 (1.06668)	4.11111 (1.01274)	3.51852 (1.18874)	4.00000 (1.07417)	3.27586 (1.22172)	0.739387
Shared goals	3.45714 (1.35783)	3.00000 (1.46217)	3.71429 (1.36277)	3.77778 (1.25064)	3.48148 (1.39698)	3.62963 (1.27545)	3.37931 (1.54489)	0.759366
Cronbach's alpha	0.910571	0.943765	0.920735	0.840200	0.919224	0.866742	0.921186	

Note: RC measure = relational coordination measure (scale of 1-5).
* n is less than stated due to missing data.

As noted, predictive analyses with and without Boston were presented using a significance level of .10. Results presented in Table 9 suggest there are associations between shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect as well as changes in recidivism rates between 1997 and 2002 for tests that both included and excluded Boston.

The direction of the relationship was unexpected. It was anticipated that increases in relational coordination would result in decreased recidivism over time, yet results showed increased recidivism. Similarly, results revealed an association between relational coordination with employment and substance abuse service providers and recidivism change rates. The predictive tests yielded the expected association between relational coordination with the House of Corrections (HOC) and recidivism change rates, but only when Boston was excluded. These results indicated that as relational coordination with the HOC increased, recidivism change rates among DOC released offenders decreased by 10.05 points. In the models that included Boston, the results changed, showing no significant association between HOC and recidivism change.

Table 10 presents the results of the models that tested RC against 2002 recidivism only. Results regarding RC with HOC were constant, with significant associations revealed both when including and excluding Boston. The problem-solving dimension was significant at the .10 level and in the expected direction, when excluding Boston.

Discussion

This study examined relationships between agencies involved in offender reentry, using the concept of relational coordination—defined as coordinating work through relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. Findings included identifying weak and strong ties among Massachusetts' agencies in both SVORI and non-SVORI communities. Significantly higher levels of relational coordination were identified with employment agencies in SVORI communities relative to non-SVORI communities. In the case of criminal justice and substance abuse agencies, however, SVORI participation did not predict significantly higher levels of collaboration. The findings also highlighted associations between recidivism and some of the relational coordination dimensions, but not always in the predicted direction. In some, but not all of the models, higher levels of relational coordination were associated with increased, rather than reduced recidivism rates. Some specific dimensions of relational coordination were associated with reduced rates of recidivism. Lastly, the concept of relational coordination was introduced to the reentry collaboration

Table 6
Means and standard deviations for relational coordination measures by agency type

	Parole (n = 8)		Probation (n = 8)		Police (n = 8)		Substance abuse agency (n = 6)		Employment agency (n = 5)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
RC w/Department of Correction	4.12500	0.56340	2.10714	0.98012	3.64285	0.91632	3.02380	0.91436	4.22857	0.50101
RC w/employment agency	3.75000	0.53315	3.21428	1.05808	2.16071	1.23938	2.52380	1.43617	–	–
RC w/House of Correction	4.01785	0.57365	3.75000	1.28401	3.67857	1.17988	3.09512	0.91992	4.42857	0.47380
RC w/parole	–	–	3.67857	1.22355	3.89285	0.65576	4.11904	0.50642	3.97142	0.97624
RC w/police	3.64285	0.84687	4.28571	0.64342	–	–	3.09523	1.19066	3.40000	1.48255
RC w/probation	3.35714	1.07448	–	–	4.33928	0.61534	3.97619	0.35475	3.82857	1.16233
RC w/substance abuse agency	4.08928	0.57619	3.85000	0.90566	2.32142	0.94991	–	–	3.68571	1.14017
Accurate communication	3.89583	0.15268	3.74583	0.61021	3.63333	0.91512	3.70000	0.58689	4.30000	0.97467
Frequent communication	4.43750	0.25099	3.56250	0.84015	3.50000	0.48335	3.63888	0.77040	3.70000	0.95306
Timely communication	4.10416	0.34431	3.61666	0.34179	3.46666	0.56004	3.16666	0.80277	3.8000	1.26051
Problem solving communication	3.77083	0.60380	3.76666	0.59681	3.09166	0.83888	3.02777	0.75584	4.10000	0.87876
Mutual respect	3.43750	1.01940	3.45833	0.54736	3.20833	1.46858	3.19444	0.54177	4.00000	0.84983
Shared knowledge	3.45833	1.04558	3.50000	0.51176	3.50000	0.57735	3.30555	0.79872	4.16666	0.72648
Shared goal	3.89583	0.33258	3.68750	0.58714	3.16666	1.07275	3.19444	0.54177	3.40000	1.65243
RC total	3.84935	0.33940	3.55574	0.39030	3.35993	0.65081	3.31165	0.55988	3.92380	0.87698

Note: RC = relational coordination (scale of 1-5); RC total = the variable that summarizes all agencies across all RC dimensions.

Table 7
Means, standard deviations for relational coordination measures by community

	Boston (n=2)**		Brockton (n=5)		Fall River (n=5)**		Lawrence (n=3)		Lowell (n=5)**		Lynn (n=4)		New Bedford (n=3)		Springfield (n=4)**		Worcester (n=4)**	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
RC w/Department of Correction	2.85714	1.81827	3.22857	0.90124	3.74285	0.81064	2.90476	1.72220	4.08571	0.68957	3.00000	1.58650	3.90476	0.45922	3.28571	1.59506	3.21428	0.77810
RC w/employment agency	3.85714	0.60609	2.46428	1.52696	3.96428	1.43035	2.61904	0.78679	3.64285	0.34006	1.78571	0.93677	2.71428	1.64750	2.90476	0.67511	2.76190	1.40213
RC w/House of Correction	4.64585	0.50507	3.68571	1.00203	3.85714	0.70710	3.42857	1.73793	2.97142	1.41204	4.50000	0.44160	3.90476	0.81232	4.28571	0.70950	3.32142	0.65335
RC w/parole	3.92857	0.10101	4.03571	0.71309	4.21428	0.86110	4.92857	0.10101	3.75000	0.51342	2.47619	1.37271	4.35714	0.30304	4.28571	0.51507	3.47619	0.29738
RC w/police	4.04285	*	3.50000	1.73597	3.35714	0.77810	4.47619	0.45922	4.35714	0.77810	3.42857	0.71428	2.85714	0.40406	3.14285	1.93253	3.71428	0.51507
RC w/probation	4.57142	*	4.10714	0.69375	4.42857	0.40406	3.64285	0.70710	3.64285	0.82889	4.33333	0.59476	4.23809	0.29738	3.14285	1.92194	2.95238	0.50169
RC w/substance abuse agency	3.50000	0.50507	3.57142	1.74963	4.28571	1.08169	3.92857	0.30304	3.75000	0.65335	2.26666	0.75934	3.50000	1.31319	3.17857	0.83605	3.17857	1.50904
Accurate communication	3.65000	0.21213	3.74000	0.95841	4.23333	0.49441	3.55555	0.67367	4.20000	0.79407	3.79166	0.91666	4.07777	0.29122	3.79166	0.25000	3.12500	0.49767
Frequent communication	3.66666	0.23570	3.83333	0.88975	4.13333	0.50552	4.00000	0.60092	3.63333	0.92345	3.33333	1.17851	4.00000	0.76376	3.83333	0.40824	3.54166	0.82043
Timely communication	3.80000	0.28284	3.81333	1.04312	4.06666	0.60781	3.66666	0.86602	3.53333	0.46248	3.16666	0.82777	3.88888	0.25458	3.91666	0.16666	2.95833	0.79785
Problem solving communication	3.65000	0.21213	3.50000	1.48136	3.33333	10.19605	3.44444	0.53575	3.76666	0.38369	3.75000	0.87665	3.24444	0.21430	3.79166	0.31549	3.29166	0.73755
Mutual respect	4.08333	1.29636	3.03333	1.44529	4.00000	0.58925	3.55555	0.48112	3.73333	0.56025	3.20833	0.62915	3.38888	0.09622	3.12500	1.36082	2.95833	1.34284
Shared knowledge	4.16666	0.70710	3.53333	1.06978	4.06666	0.52704	3.66666	0.33333	3.60000	0.40138	3.00000	0.52704	3.61111	0.50917	3.00000	1.36082	3.41666	0.31914
Shared goals	4.00000	0.00000	3.30000	1.53839	3.83333	0.78173	3.50000	0.88191	3.63333	0.67082	3.12500	0.53359	3.66666	0.33333	3.25000	1.52449	3.33333	0.57735
RC total	3.85622	0.30434	3.52369	1.05436	3.96666	0.57896	3.62698	0.61644	3.72857	0.37252	3.21313	0.47701	3.69444	0.21962	3.51419	0.33907	3.23214	0.59041

Note: RC = relational coordination (scale of 1-5); RC total = the variable that summarizes all agencies across all RC dimensions.
* Data missing.
** Communities involved in SVORI.

Table 8
Means and standard deviations for relational coordination measures by agency comparing SVORI to non-SVORI communities

	SVORI	Non-SVORI	p-value
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
RC w/Department of Correction	3.46 (1.10)	3.24 (1.17)	0.8779
RC w/Employment agency	3.45 (1.02)*	2.36 (1.18)	0.0183
RC w/House of Correction	3.69 (1.01)	3.90 (1.01)	0.8773
RC w/parole	3.94 (0.59)	3.83 (1.18)	0.9711
RC w/police	3.70 (1.03)	3.62 (1.14)	0.6653
RC w/probation	3.68 (1.07)	4.12 (0.56)	0.4279
RC w/substance abuse agency	3.59 (1.01)	3.27 (1.28)	0.5288
RC total	3.65 (0.50)	3.50 (0.68)	0.4352

Notes: SVORI = Serious Violent Offender Reentry Initiative; RC = relational coordination (scale of 1-5); RC total = the variable that summarizes all agencies across all RC dimensions.
* $p<0.05$.

context, offering it as a relevant model through which to explore communication and coordination and as a framework for future analysis. These results are discussed in the next several sections.

Patterns of relational coordination among agencies

Visher et al. (2007) identified the significant challenges of working with multiple organizations, including lack of involvement among agencies that are needed for reentry (e.g., law enforcement, family, and faith-based services), and accurate and timely release notification. When asked about connections with other agencies, SVORI program directors from the Visher et al. (2007) survey reported more involvement and major contributions to reentry by pre- and post-release supervision agencies (i.e., probation and parole). Results from the current study were similar and offer important insights. For example, parole reported stronger relationships with the DOC and the county HOC than with other agencies such as employment, substance abuse, and police. This finding may reflect the fact that Massachusetts' sentencing policies direct many offenders to be released to parole supervision or that parole had received funds to establish community-based reentry centers. In addition, DOC has limited resources to engage in community-level work. Parole appears to play the role of

Table 9
Unadjusted regression models testing change in recidivism rates, 2002 versus 1997 against relational coordination in 2005

Variable	Models excluding Boston		Models including Boston	
Mutual respect	B	12.96421	β	10.14654
	se (β)	6.27029	se (β)	5.01770
	P	0.0842~	p	0.0829~
Shared knowledge	B	12.93158	β	10.54717
	se (β)	5.89449	se (β)	4.83818
	P	0.0707~	p	0.0656~
Shared goals	B	24.38939	β	17.01916
	se (β)	7.30865	se (β)	6.32486
	P	0.0157*	p	0.0310*
RC w/employment agency	B	7.51903	β	6.54658
	se (β)	3.16082	se (β)	2.68490
	P	0.0549~	p	0.0449*
RC w/House of Correction	B	-10.05103	β	
	se (β)	4.28878	se (β)	
	P	0.0576~	p	
RC w/substance abuse agency	B	8.02200	β	8.06106
	se (β)	3.68650	se (β)	3.46280
	P	0.0725~	p	0.0528~
	P		P	

Note: RC = relational coordination.
* $p<.05$.
~ $p<.10$.

Table 10
Unadjusted regression models testing recidivism rates in 2002 against relational coordination in 2005

Variable	Models excluding Boston		Models including Boston	
Problem solving communication	β		β	-12.93502
	se (β)		se (β)	6.76673
	p		p	0.0975~
RC w/House of Correction	β	-7.39143	β	-5.22265
	se (β)	2.80889	se (β)	2.54749
	p	0.0390*	p	0.0795~

Note: RC = relational coordination.
* p<.05.
~ p<.10.

connecting the DOC to the community. As noted by one DOC official surveyed for this study, "The DOC has limited resources to be out in the community, although we would like to be. Parole serves as our primary community-based contact and there are good relationships among key DOC and Parole staff who work in this area." This finding may extend the "boundary spanner" idea from the individual level (Bond & Keys, 1993; Byrne et al., 2001; Gittell & Weiss, 2004) to the organizational level, introducing the concept of the "boundary spanning organization," an organization that facilitates relational coordination across agencies in pursuing a common goal.

Probation reported stronger relationships with police and substance abuse providers than with DOC staff. This perhaps reflects the fact that in most cases, probation officers work with offenders as a form of community corrections *before or in place of incarceration* rather than after release (Clear & Dammer, 2000). Lastly, both police and substance abuse providers reported weak relationships with employment agencies, suggesting that these agencies have not fully embraced the evidence on multidisciplinary systems for successful reentry (Petersilia, 2000; Travis, 2005). Similar findings arose in the Visher et al. (2007) study, showing weak relationships with police. A police official from the current study stated, "The average police department has little to do with reentry other than attempt to keep track of the released individual. If the subject is on parole or probation, the interest level of the police department is much higher." The results here and from other studies suggested that the role and involvement of police in the reentry process remains indefinable.

Table 6 shows that employment agencies reported an *overall* strong RC with others (3.92), yet respondents from other agencies did not perceive their relationships with employment agencies to be as strong. This differs from reports by SVORI program directors who revealed strong involvement and contributions from employment agencies (Visher et al., 2007). In the current study, employment agencies reported an RC of 3.40 with police, but police reported an RC with employment at a low of 2.16. Reexamining the data in Table 5 revealed that "shared goals" scores were particularly weak. While employment agencies have long embraced the challenges and benefits of offender placement (Travis, 2005), other agencies may not see their connection to employment agencies as clearly. Interview data corroborated this disconnect among affected agencies regarding the importance of collaboration and the broader role each plays in reentry as a public safety issue. For example, one employment agency respondent noted that "reintegrating prisoners successfully means therefore assisting not just individuals, but whole communities."

The results of these relationship analyses can be explained through role theory. Role theory suggests that an individual's actions are intended to fulfill the expectations of his or her role within an organization, which in turn supports his or her organization's mission (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Blau, 1991; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Lopata, 1991). If partners in a reentry collaborative know and understand each other's roles in the reentry service continuum, then their actions fulfill these expectations, strengthening the relationship. This may explain the strong relationship between the DOC and parole. If partners have a limited view of their role or the organization's role in a given relationship (i.e., reentry collaborative), however, they are less likely to fulfill the expectations of the remaining partners, as the police representative comment shows.

The results noted above represent relationships between organizations, specifically for relationships between individuals who serve in certain administrative or managerial roles. This is important given that the intent of the RC questions was to elicit perceptions of how the agency in general collaborated with other agencies on reentry. In truth, "one of the most difficult choices in implementing organizational surveys is to choose the one person in each organization who is best positioned to provide the information needed" (Sridharan & Gillespie, 2004, p. 233). Logically, one must choose the person who is most knowledgeable about the issue and who can assess the collaborative work, not individual experiences. Asking respondents to report on relationships with other organizations provides insight into the connection between the two organizations. This means that an individual from organization "1" can report on his or her relationship with organization "2" and another individual in organization "2" then reports on his or her relationship with organization "1." Results speak to "asymmetrical relationships between organizations" (Sridharan & Gillespie, 2004, p. 232), shedding light on the strength of relationships between collaborators and the overall collaboration. Targeting individuals most knowledgeable of reentry policies and practices, who also have a history of working with offenders, fulfills this supposition.

Differences between SVORI and non-SVORI communities

The Serious Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) was an unprecedented, national effort by the U.S. Departments of Justice, Labor, and Health and Human Services. It was designed to increase collaboration between criminal justice and social service agencies for reduced offender recidivism. Visher et al. (2007) noted, "One goal of SVORI was to achieve systems level change through multi-agency collaboration and case management" (p. 96). Using relational coordination as the framework, this study sought to identify differences in coordination and communication when comparing SVORI to non-SVORI communities.

Results revealed no systematic differences in relational coordination for SVORI versus non-SVORI communities. In some cases, notable relationships in coordination existed across select agencies. For example, the finding that coordination with employment agencies was stronger in SVORI communities supported the intent of the national SVORI policy, primarily as it related to expanding reentry partnerships beyond criminal justice. This can be explained by the fact that employment was one of SVORI's primary objectives, whereas other program components were not dictated by reentry policy. Funding and policy mandates required local administrators to work with employment agencies. If reentry outcomes are believed to be influenced by coordination, one might expect better results in this area. One employment agency respondent recognized this and noted, "One of the overall goals of SVORI was to build broad-based governmental and community support for reentry and establish or strengthen a collaborative infrastructure at state and local levels among correctional agencies, law enforcement, parole, probation, community corrections, human service providers, and other community and faith-based organizations. We have made great progress; however, there is still much to be done, and we need to continue to collaborate on every level—state, local and federal."

Another positive but limited result surfaced when looking at community levels of relational coordination. Agencies in only one SVORI community (Lowell) reported a strong relationship with DOC, although agencies in three of the five SVORI communities reported strong relationships with parole. This finding might be explained by the

fact that agencies in Lowell began their relationship with DOC relatively early in 1999 when Massachusetts was part of the formal, national Reentry Partnership Initiative, and relationships had a chance to develop over time. Moreover, the finding that not all agency respondents correctly identified their community as a SVORI site added to the questions about the imprint of a centralized, state policy in a local context. These insights supported the idea that policies can facilitate collaboration, though changing how strategies are implemented are still complex and lengthy processes (Burke, 2002). Evidence previously documented the challenges organizations faced that must operate across national, state, and local policy levels (Finstad, 1998), which seemed to characterize the DOC in this context. As noted, parole often serves as the public face of DOC and acts as the "boundary spanning organization" in SVORI communities, which may account for these findings. In light of the importance of collaboration among key agencies, however, one might expect stronger relations between the DOC, the SVORI lead agency, and other agencies in SVORI sites.

Testing relational coordination effects on recidivism

Relationships between agencies are vital to reintegrating offenders and to understanding organizational influences in pursuing desired outcomes. Tests of relational coordination across agencies and communities revealed unexpected results. Specifically, employment and substance abuse service providers are believed to be key agents in successful reentry. It was anticipated that higher relational coordination would reduce recidivism over time. The results of the regression models showed an association between relational coordination with these two agencies and *increased* rates of recidivism over time. The theory of organizational "resilience" (Gittell et al., 2006; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) might offer an answer to this puzzling finding. This theory suggests that relationships serve as resources in times of stress and are used as coping mechanisms to respond to "environmental jolts" (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003, p. 96), such that relationships can become stronger in the face of adversity. This theory was recently explored in the health care industry, where relational coordination was found to increase under pressure from managed care, ultimately leading to better organizational performance (Gittell, 2008). Conceivably, political and community demands to reduce recidivism may provide a source of pressure akin to what hospitals have experienced from managed care penetrating their markets. This explanation is particularly compelling given that this study measured relational coordination three years after the recidivism outcomes were measured, making it plausible that observed levels of relational coordination were, in this case, a *response* to changes in offender reentry rather than a *cause*.

Taking this idea one step further, it might be that the "threat or jolt" posed by potential higher rates of recidivism, and increased political and social pressure to prevent additional crime, facilitated the development of stronger relationships, resulting in increased accountability for compliance among returning offenders. Going forward, these strengthened relationships may actually lead to increased and more diligent offender supervision. This study's results supported this explanation, which revealed significant associations between the three relational dimensions of relational coordination—shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect—and increased rates of recidivism. This phenomenon was seen elsewhere, specifically in the case of "Operation Ceasefire," a collaborative youth violence initiative in the 1990s (Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996), and with the reentry program named "Project Greenlight," where participants had higher rates of recidivism compared to nonparticipants (Wilson et al., 2005). It is also common in community corrections that intense surveillance and increased contacts among offenders and authorities actually increase incarceration (Bouffard & Bergeron, 2006; Petersilia & Turner, 1993). The current study's surprising results and the potential explanations stirred up new questions regarding the desired outcome (s) of reentry collaboration. Are agencies and communities working to decrease re-offending or to respond better to re-offending?

A particularly curious association was found between relational coordination with the House of Correction and changes in 2002 versus 1997 recidivism. This was attention grabbing because this study's outcome data were for DOC offenders, not House of Correction offenders. This can be explained by Massachusetts' policy where there are higher incarceration and release rates for House of Correction offenders, who serve shorter terms than longer-termed DOC offenders. A quick review of the data showed that communities and agencies seemed to have higher relational coordination with the House of Correction than with the DOC, excluding Lowell and Worcester. While both Lowell and Worcester are SVORI sites, recognizing that parole serves as the public face of the DOC explains the low RC with DOC.

Finally, when examining recidivism rates for 2002 only, the results changed substantially. Relational coordination with the House of Correction was significantly associated with decreased DOC offender recidivism in 2002 in the models that both included and excluded Boston. This might suggest increased attention to the larger House of Correction population as a reasonable strategy. Additionally, while associations between recidivism and shared goals and shared knowledge and mutual respect disappeared, the problem-solving dimension emerged as significant. Both results were in the expected direction. While evidence exists to support the importance of community level problem-solving (Goldstein, 1990; Sridharan & Gillespie, 2004), it is unclear why problem-solving did not also show up as predicting changes in recidivism between 1997 and 2002, in addition to predicting 2002 recidivism rates. It remains unclear why increased relational coordination with the House of Correction would impact DOC recidivism rates, considering these were two different populations. Are agencies behaving differently depending upon the offender population, or were relationships and interactions between the agencies—DOC and HOC—responsible for these outcomes?

Usefulness of relational coordination model in the criminal justice context

Introducing the relational coordination model (Gittell, 2002) into the criminal justice context appeared appropriate given arguments that cross-agency approaches are necessary for successful reentry (Taxman, 1998). The data from this study demonstrated that collaborative relationships among agencies involved in offender reentry could be measured using this model. The conditions in which the relational coordination model had been previously tested—the airline (Gittell, 2001), health care (Gittell & Weiss, 2004), and long-term care (Gittell et al., 2008) industries—are similar to those of reentry, where multiple service providers perform tasks that must be integrated to achieve desired outcomes. Relational coordination is a fitting model in the multidimensional reentry context given that, now, more than ever, reentry is seen as both an individual *and* a community problem, and reduced recidivism may not be the only measure of success (Maxwell, 2005). As this article suggests, more evidence is needed on the outcomes and structure (Provan, Veazie, Staten, & Teufel-Shone, 2005) of collaborative relationships to inform policy and practice. Nonetheless, this study began to unravel the patterns of relational coordination that existed among agencies operating in reentry hot spot communities, and showed the disconnects between key criminal justice and service provider agencies. These disconnects in relationships may impede a smooth transition for released offenders—a process that requires a coordinated, continuum of service from prison to the community (Taxman et al., 2002). Research from health care (Gittell & Weiss, 2004) confirmed the usefulness of a structured continuum, but in reentry an even more compelling need exists for relationships across organizations because often no formal systems are in place.

While current evidence has suggested the benefits of collaboration, implementing collaboration across local and state agencies remains challenging. One respondent communicated this challenge by saying, "All agencies need to be on the same page and work together, as we all serve the same population. But there is often a mentality that we need to keep to ourselves." By helping to identify the strong and weak ties among the agencies involved in offender reentry, the relational coordination model may help agencies improve their collaborative efforts and affect recidivism and public safety outcomes.

Implications and future directions

This study shed light on relationships in a collaborative reentry environment and suggested that the concept of relational coordination was relevant to the reentry context. Having served as a test site for national reentry efforts, Massachusetts introduced significant policy and practitioner mandates. This study revealed that even in this innovative and open-minded environment, implementing cross-agency reentry policy remains a challenge.

Results showed that while key agencies involved in reentry are making efforts to collaborate, a collaborative approach has not yet been fully achieved in reentry hot spot communities. Of particular note were the weak ties that many officials reported with employment agencies; although the results suggested that federal efforts (i.e., SVORI) have helped strengthen these relationships. Indeed, this finding revealed that efforts by federal and state officials to increase collaboration between corrections and employment providers can bear fruit. This study found that SVORI implementation had not produced stronger relationship ties between other social service and criminal justice agencies. Considering the existing evidence on cross-agency partnerships for successful reentry (Taxman et al., 2002; Travis, 2005), it would be useful to identify those factors that support strong relationships with employment agencies in SVORI communities for possible transference to other agency relationships. In particular, a logical, but sensible feature of cross-agency relationships might be thoughtfully and deliberately articulating partner roles and expectations (Broderick, 1999; Clore & Pappas, 2007). This study should also trigger other researchers to examine relationships among varied levels of staff to determine if collaborative relations differ across staff levels, and to explore the impacts of relationships at different levels on outcomes (Daley, 2008). Program director respondents in the Visher et al. (2007) study reported significant support for SVORI among administrators, supervisors, and staff within pre- and post-release agencies, but were lowest among line level staff in community agencies. Through additional explorations across various staff levels, relational coordination as a measure of collaboration effectiveness could further inform practice, research, and policy.

Most interesting were the implications regarding recidivism outcomes. This study explored the relationship between relational coordination and recidivism, expecting that higher relational coordination would result in decreased recidivism over time. In some instances, however, strong relational coordination was associated with increased recidivism. Likewise, significant associations were found between shared goals and increased recidivism over time. A key question for practitioners and policymakers is whether these shared goals are reductions in re-offending, better response to re-offending, or the comprehensive execution of both? Given the alternative explanation noted above, it seems logical to explore each of these potential goals.

Policymakers might consider the implementation challenges of collaboration, and the impact on organizations and communities while formulating national or state-level reentry policy. Surely, it is one thing to mandate and promote using collaboration to address reentry, but cross-agency and multi-jurisdictional relationships are dynamic, time-consuming, and bring issues of territory and resource allocation with them as well as myriad agendas that require equal attention (Hammett et al., 2001). Policymakers might direct resources explicitly to strengthening relationships among agencies engaged in offender reentry.

Organizational changes relating to reentry, including collaboration, often require a reexamination of roles and activities (Taxman, Young, & Byrne, 2001). With 94 percent of respondents reporting some level of organizational change as a result of contemporary reentry efforts, it appears transformations are occurring in Massachusetts' agencies. Specific change elements were not captured here, although anecdotal evidence from respondents was replete with collaborative change accounts. Evidence is needed regarding the nature of change and the structure and outcomes of collaborative relationships (Provan et al., 2005) as part of that change.

Conclusion

This study offered insight into cross-agency collaboration, an understudied dimension of offender reentry. The study also reflected a significant and growing concern among practitioners and policymakers, particularly given that collaboration is often seen as an antidote for complex societal issues. As collaboration or other relationship-based cross-agency strategies continue to grow, there is a need to understand and use proven methods to assess community and organizational-level effects of collaboration. Relational coordination fits well in the criminal justice setting and should be used to assess the strength of collaborative relationships and measure the impact of specific collaborative ties on reentry outcomes of interest.

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Notes

1. Offenders released from state corrections were this study's focus. As a state agency, the Massachusetts Department of Correction does not assign staff to specific communities; therefore, they are not able to speak to "within" community relationships.

2. Recidivism rates are operationalized as reconviction within one year post-release. Including and prior to 1996, the Massachusetts DOC defined recidivism as "any inmate released from the DOC in a given year, who served at least 30 days, and who was re-incarcerated for at least 30 days to a state or county facility within one year of their release to the street. Post 1996 recidivism reports measured recidivism as: a recidivist is 1) any inmate released to the street from DOC in a given year who was re-incarcerated in a state, county or federal facility within three years of their release; 2) any inmate released to the street from DOC in a given year who is re-convicted within three years of their release" (Hoover, 2005, p. 3). For more information about the ongoing debate regarding appropriate measures of recidivism, see Travis, 2005.

3. Recidivism data for 2002 releases were made available for this study in 2004.

4. The year 1997 was used as a baseline to reflect the pre-policy time period, compared to 2002 when Massachusetts had already enacted several reentry policies.

5. Aggregated individual recidivism rates were used in Solomon, Kachnowski, and Bhati (2005).

6. To rule out the influence of a number of variables on recidivism, community indicator data were used as control variables in preliminary analyses (Kingsley, 1998). Indicators included population, median household income, percentage of families in poverty, unemployment rates, educational and public safety expenditures, admissions to state drug treatment programs, and crime rates. No associations were found between these variables and recidivism.

7. It was the expectation that recidivism rates decreased between 1997 and 2002, meaning there were fewer recidivists.

8. Rather than exclude Boston from the study entirely, tests were conducted with and without Boston. Since Boston is both a major city and a reentry hot spot; therefore, excluding it seemed inappropriate.

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