

# “You don’t always get that in the city”

## Social Relationships in Rural Alcohol and Substance Use Recovery Communities: Implications for Recovery Identity Formation

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### BACKGROUND

Social relationships and community have long been understood as important aspects of recovery (e.g., Ashford et al., 2019; Lookatch et al., 2019; Oser et al., 2012). Thus far most scholarship attending to the social aspects of recovery in rural communities has focused on overall advantages and disadvantages to social aspects of rural recovery (e.g., Palombi et al., 2019) and stigmatizing attitudes in the wider community (e.g., Burgess et al., 2021; Krentzman & Glass, 2021; Palombi et al., 2019), rather than the internal workings of recovery communities in rural areas. Rural communities are unique settings to evaluate the social aspects of recovery because sparse populations distributed across large distances can impede an individual’s ability to make the changes in their social networks that Best and colleagues (2015) described as essential to forming a recovery identity.

### PURPOSE

Our study focused on the internal social dynamics of recovery-oriented groups and communities in a rural region using the lens of the Social Identity Model of Recovery to answer the following research questions:

- 1) **How do aspects of overall rural life influence the social aspects of recovery communities in rural areas?**
- 2) **How might social aspects of recovery communities in rural areas support or impede the formation of a recovery-based social identity?**
- 3) **How well does the Social Identity Model of Recovery explain recovery in rural communities?**

### METHODOLOGY

Thirty-four interviews, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted with people either in recovery or who work in the recovery field in rural Minnesota. These interviews were transcribed verbatim, and coded first according to a framework of strengths and challenges of recovery in rural areas, then according to aspects of the Social Identity Model of Recovery (Best et al., 2016), which explains success in recovery as a transition from social relationships with people who use substances to social relationships with others in recovery.

## FINDINGS

### Social factors that facilitate the *transition to recovery*:

- Smaller meetings  
*“I’m more apt to call and chat with somebody one afternoon from my small group . . . you get more of the one-on-one in a smaller group. That’s so crucial those first two years [of recovery].”*
- A welcoming atmosphere  
*“They are giving you their phone numbers, they’re shaking your hands, they’re wanting [you] to come back—that kind of thing. You don’t always get that in the city.”*

### Social factors that facilitate the *maintenance of recovery*

- Neighborliness  
*“it’s easier to make connections”*  
*“it creates a safer environment for recovery”*
- Recreation with others in recovery  
*“It’s a very, very good aspect of [such a community, showing us that] there’s more to recovery [than just attending meetings]. We’re serious, but yet you got to have fun in it. Otherwise, people won’t stick around.”*
- Economic and practical aid  
*“But we’ll help you out, we’ll do whatever we can. If you ask, we’re there. They’re very generous folks in this area for charitable things, very charitable people here.”*
- Religious support  
*“Someone such as myself . . . being able to give a step message [a discussion of one of the 12 steps of Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous] in the context of a faith community has been very beneficial . . . for other people to understand what the face of recovery looks like.”*



[Photos by Monica Bourgeau (left) and Tanjir Ahmed Chowdhury (right) on unsplash]

### Social factors that challenge the *transition to recovery*

- Sparse populations  
*“The community is so small that these other addicts that don’t want to better their lives and are just out there running amok will always [seek you out]. They know where you’ll hang out if you’re sober . . . [and they’ll be] looking you up to see what you’re up to [So, then you’ll] invite him into your house and the next thing you know he’s pulling out drugs [and saying], ‘Let’s get high.’”*
- Social exclusion  
*“It could have been just a perception, but it’s a smaller community. . . . [It seemed to me that] people knew each other and had history together, and [this was] predominantly men. I didn’t feel warmly welcomed immediately. Nobody was mean, but they kind of had their group. And so, it just didn’t feel as welcoming.”*

### Social factors that challenge the *maintenance of recovery*

- Stigma and judgment  
*“He fell off the wagon and everyone there started attacking him, [saying things like], ‘what are you doing here?’ [and] ‘you done f\*\*\*\*d up.’ I’m not sure if people are as supportive as they should be in these groups.”*
- Religious exclusion  
*“She doesn’t believe in Jesus Christ on the cross . . . and they preach the Bible [and] God in the meetings. . . . [In my view,] don’t judge somebody on their religion. They’re basically throwing her [non-Christian] religion in her face. That’s not fair. She feels completely backed into a corner because of it.”*



[Photos by Heyzeus Escrito (left) and Federico Respini (right) on unsplash]

## CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners in the recovery field should **consider how geographical factors may affect their clients’ recovery**, as well as how the above-mentioned **social factors may affect their rural clients’ recovery**. The Social Identity Model of Recovery is a helpful framework for understanding recovery, but should be tested in different social contexts, including urban and rural settings, to determine how the broader social context affects social identities in recovery.

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