

Education & Employment and Reentry: Briefing Paper

Research has shown a clear link between crime and work. Having a legitimate job lessens the chances of reoffending following release from prison. Also, the higher the wages, the less likely it is that returning prisoners will return to crime. However, studies also show that released prisoners confront a diminished prospect for stable employment and decent wages throughout their lifetimes. Job training and placement programs show promise in connecting former prisoners to work, thereby reducing their likelihood of further offending. Yet, fewer inmates are receiving in-prison vocational training than in the past and fewer still have access to transitional programs that help connect them to jobs in the community.

In addition to public safety concerns, there is currently a heightened level of interest in the issue of prisoner reentry and employment across other sectors of society concerned about workforce development issues. State agencies, the federal government, and local communities are now exploring the negative impacts of incarceration on former prisoners' abilities to obtain and maintain employment and become productive members of society. Research shows that the majority of prisoners are not prepared for the competitive labor market upon release.

Although most prisoners held a job before their incarceration, they confront many barriers to employment such as low education levels, stigma, and lost time in the labor force, upon their return to the community. Thus, it is important to explore the role these factors play in the reintegration process. To the extent that these issues present serious barriers to transitioning prisoners, they also present serious risks—or at least lost opportunities—for the communities to which large numbers of prisoners return. The ability to find a stable and adequate source of income upon release from prison is an important factor in an individual's transition from prison back to the community. Further, former prisoners' employment prospects have direct and important implications for their abilities to contribute to the viability and stability of their families and communities.

Returning Prisoners Face Many Employment Challenges

Studies show that released prisoners have a lowered prospect for secure employment and decent wages throughout their lifetimes (Bernstein and Houston 2000). Job training, prison industries, and placement programs show promise in connecting former prisoners to work, thereby reducing their likelihood of further offending. Yet, today, fewer inmates are receiving in-prison vocational training than in the past and fewer still have access to transitional programs that help connect them to jobs in the community after release.

Several factors about the prison experience contribute to reducing the employability of former offenders. Few inmates engage in any type of meaningful work experience or vocational education while in prison (Lynch and Sabol 2001). Just over half of all soon to be released prisoners had a work assignment in 1997 and fewer still participated in educational programs (35 percent) and vocational training (27 percent) while in prison.

Time out of the labor market also interrupts an individual's development of work experience and skills. During prison, inmates are exposed to a prison culture that frequently serves to strengthen links to gangs and the criminal world in general (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Several studies looking at the impact of incarceration on future employment have concluded that as time spent in prison increases (net of other background factors), the likelihood of participating in the legal economy decreases.

Upon return to the community, former prisoners face a number of significant barriers to securing employment, particularly employment outside of the low-wage sector.

- Employers are more reluctant to hire former prisoners than any other group of disadvantaged workers. Fewer than 40 percent of employers claim that they would definitely or probably hire former offenders into their most recently filled no-college job (Holzer et al. 2002).
- Job applicants with a criminal record are substantially less likely to be hired. According to a recent audit, when two similar applicants were sent for the same job opening, one with a criminal record and one without, the likelihood of getting hired was 40 percent lower for the applicant with a criminal record and 60 percent lower if the applicant was an African-American man (Pager 2002).
- Individuals with felony convictions are statutorily barred from many jobs. The list of employment bans has increased over the past decade. At the same time, the number of individuals leaving prison has increased (Mukamal 2001).
- The availability of criminal records online, and changing public policies regarding access to those records, make it easier for employers to conduct criminal background checks on potential employees (Holzer et al. 2002).
- The kinds of jobs for which employers have historically been more willing to hire individuals who were formerly incarcerated—blue collar and manufacturing jobs—are diminishing in the national economy. At the same time, jobs for which former offenders are barred or are less likely to be hired—childcare, elder care, customer contact, and service industry jobs—are expanding (Holzer et al. 2002).

Effectiveness of Education and Training Programs

A key factor to finding and maintaining employment is developing certain basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic necessary to succeed in the labor market. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 13 percent of parolees have an education level below eighth grade and 45 percent have an education level between ninth and eleventh grades (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000). Most prison systems offer a range of educational programs, from vocational training to education courses. Yet, little systematic evaluative research has been done on the effectiveness of prison education and job training programs. The available research, however, does indicate that certain carefully designed and administered prison education programs can improve inmate behavior and reduce recidivism (Lawrence et al. 2002).

Some studies have shown that inmates who worked in prison industries or had vocational training have better outcomes when they are released (Seiter and Kadela 2003). The most effective programs are those aimed at released prisoners in their mid-twenties or older. Specifically, a review of several studies indicates that work programs had a significant impact on the employment outcomes and recidivism rates of males who were over the age of 26 (Bushway and Reuter 2002). These individuals may be more motivated than younger offenders to change their lifestyles and connections to crime.

Studies also suggest that it is not enough to attempt to improve an individual's human capital. It is also important to address changes in motivation and lifestyle away from criminal activity to positive engagement in the community. This takes time; it is more complicated than teaching marketable skills, and it may mean reestablishing connections with organizations in the community.

One reason cited for why job training has not been more effective in reducing recidivism is the general lack of job placement assistance and other follow-up after release from prison. This follow-up period may be particularly important for employers who indicate a willingness to hire former prisoners if a third-party intermediary or case manager is available to work with the new hire to help avert problems (Welfare to Work Partnership 2000). Programs such as these, working within departments of correction or operating

as community-based organizations, offer promise in connecting former prisoners to full-time employment and lowering levels of criminal activity and substance abuse.

Employer Willingness to Hire Former Prisoners

Employers generally express a reluctance to hire individuals who were formerly incarcerated (Holzer et al. 2002). Many returning prisoners' educational levels, work experience, and skills are well below the national averages for the general population, which make them less desirable job candidates. Individuals with criminal records face stigma from potential employers since many are reluctant to hire former offenders out of fear of crime against their business or other employees.

Not surprisingly, employers' willingness to hire former prisoners varies according to industry. Construction and manufacturing employers expressed more willingness to hire former prisoners than employers in retail trade or services. In particular, employers indicated a reluctance to hire former prisoners for positions that require a wide variety of skills and direct contact with customers.

An employer's willingness to hire also depends on factors related to the circumstances of the individual's criminal history. Employers will review the applicant's experiences since their release from prison such as the nature of the offense (violent versus property crime), how much time has passed since release, and whether they have had any work experience in the meantime.

A survey of 600 employers by the Welfare to Work Partnership (2000) suggests that the availability of services from intermediary agencies increases the willingness of businesses to hire former prisoners. Of the employers who indicated that they would consider hiring a former prisoner, more than half said they would be more willing to do so if a social service agency stayed involved with the individual. Further, 53 percent said they would be more willing to hire former prisoners if the government could insure them against financial loss or legal liability.

Reentry as an Opportunity for Intervention

The circumstances surrounding the immediate days and weeks after release from prison are critical to the success of an inmate's reentry. Seen through the lens of a workforce perspective, it is important to think about what can be done to increase the likelihood that a released prisoner is employed immediately following his/her release from prison.

Research suggests that well-conceptualized and strategically placed job training and placement interventions can be successful (Lawrence et al. 2002). They also suggest that nontraditional interventions are required—a mix of traditional workforce development interventions, with supportive services to deal with issues of health, substance abuse, and housing—particularly during the time immediately following release from prison. One example, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), a New York City program, offers parolees immediate employment, job training, and job development. CEO reports placing 65 to 70 percent of its graduates in full-time jobs in three months. Of those, about three-quarters were still working after one month and 60 percent were still on the job after three months. In 1997, the Vera Institute conducted a study of CEO enrollees that found that only 21 percent of all enrollees (whether they were with CEO for one day or one year) were reincarcerated within three years; only 15 percent of enrollees that CEO placed in jobs were reincarcerated within three years.

Some evidence indicates that employers could be persuaded, with the help of appropriate interventions, to take advantage of the ready supply of labor exiting the nation's prisons every year (Holzer et al. 2002). These interventions need to address the concerns of employers about the perceived risks of hiring individuals who were formerly incarcerated and provide former prisoners with needed job training, placement, and supports.

Finding a job hastens the successful reintegration of returning prisoners. Research has shown that the process of desistance—the decision to stop engaging in criminal activity—is closely linked to a transition to adult roles, principally attachment to the world of work and marriage (Sampson and Laub 1990). Thus, work becomes a central component of the reentry process and the journey toward a pro-social identity. If former prisoners are working, they can support their families, contribute to their communities, provide for their own needs, and claim a role as a productive member of the community.

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