

Winter 12-12-2017

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## Recommended Citation

Grijalva, Daniel C., "Effectiveness of Social Work Reentry Programs at Preventing Recidivism" (2017). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/yc\\_pubs/227](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/yc_pubs/227)

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Effectiveness of Social Work Reentry Employment Programs at Preventing Recidivism

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Writing 303

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Dec. 12, 2017

Abstract

Each year in the United States, thousands of individuals are released from prisons and must reintegrate into society. Ensuring these individuals obtain adequate employment upon release is key to keeping them from returning to the penal system. This paper examines different social work programs that attempt to secure employment for ex-offenders. This paper reviews the obstacles these programs face and considers how social workers can improve the effectiveness of these programs at preventing recidivism. This paper acknowledges that some of these programs have achieved moderate success in preventing recidivism but recognizes the need to research current programs' methodologies so that more effective employment programs can be developed to combat recidivism in the future.

Main Research Question: How can social workers increase the effectiveness of reentry programs that focus on post-incarceration employment?

- 1) How effective are current social work programs that focus on post-incarceration employment?
- 2) What are the major obstacles to implementing successful social work programs focused on post-incarceration employment?
- 3) How can social workers eliminate obstacles to these employment focused reentry programs and improve their effectiveness?

### Introduction

In 1971, President Nixon declared a war on drugs which led to policies and legislation that, over the next 45 years, significantly increased the number of incarcerated individuals in the United States of America (Roche, 2015). America's "tough on crime" laws, particularly mandatory minimum sentences for drug possession, led to a tenfold increase in drug convictions between 1980 and 1996 (Zakaria, 2012). Politicians claimed that this tougher sentencing would destroy the demand for drugs, lowering the number of offenders arrested (Roche, 2015). However, these sentencing laws ultimately led to an expansion of America's prison system as even low-level offenders were subject to mandatory minimum sentences (Roche, 2015). Due to this history and the continuation of many strict sentencing laws today, the United States is home to an extensive prison system that not only deprives thousands of American citizens of their freedom, but also costs the country \$52 billion annually ("Recidivism's High Cost", 2011).

With such high rates of incarceration, the United States must release thousands of individuals from prison each year. According to the United States Department of Justice, every

year, over 600,000 ex-offenders are released back into society (“Roadmap to Reentry, 2017). These ex-offenders often recidivate. (Roche, 2015). Of those individuals released, nearly two-thirds will be incarcerated again (Rosansky, n.d.). These high rates of recidivism can be attributed to numerous factors. Paramount among those factors is the inability of ex-offenders to obtain employment after release (McDonald, 2013). Without a stable source of income, ex-offenders have little choice but to engage in criminal activity (McLaughlin, 2011). Social workers attempt to curb these high rates of recidivism by utilizing reentry programs, many of which focus on post-incarceration employment as a means of reducing recidivism (“Employment Reentry Programs”). This paper examines how effective these Employment Reentry Programs are at preventing recidivism and how they can be improved in the future.

First, this paper provides an overview of current social work programs that focus on post-incarceration employment. This section addresses the methods and results of specific Employment Reentry Programs. Second, this paper reviews common obstacles that social workers face when trying to implement Employment Reentry Programs. Regardless of the program used, social workers often encounter similar difficulties in securing employment for ex-offenders and reducing recidivism among program participants. Finally, this paper examines possible strategies to increase the effectiveness of Employment Reentry Programs and discusses what social workers can do differently to improve these programs in the future.

### How Effective are Current Employment Reentry Programs?

Criminal offenders transitioning out of prison face many challenges, but barriers to accessing employment opportunities may be one of the most significant. Sixty percent of employers have acknowledged that they would not hire an individual with a criminal background

(Holzer, 1996). In response, social workers have utilized Employment Reentry Programs that seek to connect ex-offenders with employers who are willing to hire individuals with prior convictions. Some of these programs appear to have achieved moderate success at preventing recidivism. Two prime examples include New Jersey's state sponsored halfway houses and a federal government program entitled the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative.

The state of New Jersey implements Employment Reentry Programs through Halfway Houses (HWHs) and has used HWH programs since the 1970s (Donnelly, Forschner, 1984; Jeffery, Woolpert, 1974; Allen, Latessa, 1982; Latessa, Travis, 1991). HWHs provide necessary services to ex-offenders such as education opportunities, vocational skills development, employment assistance, and work-release services (Hamilton & Routh, 2015). To provide appropriate services to ex-offenders, New Jersey's HWHs utilize a risk-need-responsivity model that uses patterns to predict an ex-offender's future behavior and determine his or her chances of recidivating (as cited in Andrews & Bonta, 1994, 1995; Bonta, 1995). By utilizing an individual assessment to determine an ex-offender's personal needs and risks, New Jersey's HWHs can ensure that offenders are matched to "the proper type, intensity, and dosage of the intervention" (as cited in Andrews et al., 1990). This method has been shown to reduce recidivism, especially in cases involving work-release HWHs in which participants begin working through the HWH program prior to release from prison (Hamilton & Routh, 2015).

A federal program called the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) has also had moderate success at reducing recidivism among its participants. SVORI seeks to develop state-of-the-art reentry strategies and training (Cook, et al., 2014). The SVORI program attempts to reduce criminality through supervision and monitoring as well as by improving the self-sufficiency of returning offenders through employment (Lattimore, Steffey, 2010).

Ultimately, SVORI's results demonstrate that SVORI participants, who received individual attention through the supervision and monitoring program were more likely to be employed three to fifteen months after release and were less likely to have been rearrested (Lattimore, Visher, 2009).

While these Employment Reentry Programs sound like a possible solution to high rates of recidivism, "evidence on this matter is mixed at best" (Braga, Cook, Kang, Ludwig, O'Brien, 2014, p. 361). In fact, one review of Employment Reentry Programs concluded that "work doesn't work" (Apel & Bushway, 2012, p.26). Apel and Bushway (2012) studied the results of a major Employment Reentry Program, the National Supported Work Demonstration (NSWD), a subsidized work experience program for ex-offenders struggling to secure employment. In addition, Apel and Bushway (2012) assessed the Returning Home study, a study conducted by the Urban Institute which explored the factors contributing to successful reentry. In evaluating this program and study, Apel and Bushway (2012) found that Employment Reentry Programs have a low probability of improving employment outcomes for ex-offenders and have little to no effect on recidivism. Similarly, a recent study conducted in Pennsylvania found that individuals who spent time in state HWHs were more likely to recidivate than those who were released without any programming (Dolnick, 2013).

### What are the Major Obstacles to Implementing Successful Employment Reentry Programs?

While some Employment Reentry Programs have achieved moderate success in helping ex-offenders attain self-sufficiency post-incarceration, there are many obstacles that have thwarted these and other programs from obtaining significant reductions in recidivism. Social

workers must determine which problems are barriers to the successful implementation of Employment Reentry Programs before creating new programs or continuing to pursue current programs. Although there are many challenges to Employment Reentry Programs, some of the most common issues cited are: 1) engaging program participants enough to keep them involved in the program; 2) obtaining proper employment for ex-offenders who often have poor credentials and are discriminated against in the hiring process; and 3) receiving community support to implement these programs. Due to the frequency with which these issues are cited in current research, this paper will attempt to address each one.

The first major challenge faced by social workers utilizing Employment Reentry Programs is poor participant engagement in the programs. Many ex-offenders are young males, the demographic which is most likely to be non-compliant in programming (Bushway, 2003). Apel and Bushway (2012) found that ex-offenders often failed to attend the training provided by Employment Reentry Programs and missed their initial days of work. This noncompliance makes it difficult to evaluate the effect of such programs (Apel & Bushway, 2012). Noncompliant participants who do not receive program benefits are unlikely to experience changed outcomes due to membership in Employment Reentry Programs.

However, while noncompliant program members make it difficult to evaluate a program's effectiveness, these noncompliant members cannot be ignored when evaluating Employment Reentry Programs. If noncompliant participants are not accounted for when reviewing a program, any positive outcomes from the program cannot be properly compared to the general population of ex-offenders. For example, one Illinois program touted as "effective" at reducing recidivism was only effective because noncompliant participant parolees were "rapidly identified and sanctioned or returned to prison" (Anderson, 2002). This program's



reductions in recidivism were due to the limited sample of participants that included only those willing to engage in the program. These participants did not reflect the general population of released offenders; and thus, the results of this program were meaningless. Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together (ComALERT), a holistic reentry program in Brooklyn, takes an opposite approach from the Illinois program. ComALERT provides data on all inmates given the opportunity to participate in its programming. Under the ComALERT program, inmates being released from prison are given the opportunity to sign up for ComALERT classes and resources (“Evaluation Outcomes”, 2011). Those who sign up have the option to attend classes and those who succeed in those classes eventually graduate from the ComALERT program (“Evaluation Outcomes”, 2011). Some sources have lauded ComALERT as a success because ComALERT graduates are 39.2 percent less likely to recidivate than the general population of ex-offenders (“Survey on Reentry”, 2009). However, ComALERT provides data to show that those who attended ComALERT classes, but failed to graduate were only 18 percent less likely to be arrested within two years of release when compared to the general population and those who were “discharged” from the program did not experience improved outcomes at all (“Evaluation Outcomes”, 2011). ComALERT provides fulsome data to ensure that the information accurately reflects a comparison with the general population and notes that its outcomes are promising, but that only “participants” were less likely to be rearrested (“Evaluation Outcomes”, 2011). This demonstrates the importance of including the results of non-compliant ex-offenders. If the ComALERT data solely reported the graduates’ outcomes, any success could be attributed to the limited sample of the population that was capable of graduating from the program. It could be argued that the individuals who graduate are less likely

to recidivate from the outset which is reflected in their willingness to participate in the program and ultimate success in the program.

The second pervasive problem faced by social workers using Employment Reentry Programs is the inability to find program participants appropriate employment. Ex-offenders often have poor “employability” (Bushway & Reuter, 2004). In part, this is because many people enter the criminal justice system with little work experience and minimal education. These individuals are already difficult to employ and ultimately leave the prison system “even harder to employ.” (Apel & Bushway, 2012). However, even if an ex-offender has the credentials to adequately perform a job, ex-offenders face severe inequality in the job search process (Apel & Bushway, 2012).

Employers are able to ask applicants about criminal convictions before extending an official job offer (Graves, 2013). Many employers are hesitant to hire those with criminal convictions due to the perceived risks involved (Pager, 2006). Employers have expressed concern that ex-offender employees will engage in theft or violence in the workplace (Pager, 2006). Studies show that individuals with a criminal conviction are 63% percent less likely to receive a job than an equally qualified candidate with no criminal history (Agan & Star, 2016).

The third significant problem social workers face is difficulty obtaining community support to implement Employment Reentry Programs, especially if they are residential programs. The perception the public holds about helping ex-offenders reenter society is a major hurdle in whether programs can succeed. In Jersey City, New Jersey, plans of building a re-entry center had to be abandoned due to public outcry (Kirchner, 2015). The same reaction was seen in Arizona when the Governor reopened a re-entry facility in 2016 (Baker, 2016). Social stigma

surrounding criminal history makes it difficult for ex-offenders to find homes, obtain employment, and integrate into a community.

### How can Social Workers Eliminate Obstacles to Employment Reentry Programs and Improve Their Effectiveness?

Although many obstacles to implementing Employment Reentry Programs exist, some Employment Reentry Programs have successfully decreased recidivism rates among participants. These successful Employment Reentry Programs provide examples of how social workers can eliminate obstacles and improve the effectiveness of Employment Reentry Programs.

As mentioned in the previous section, engaging program participants is crucial to ensuring program success. Low participation is often due to young male participants who are particularly likely to recidivate and are less likely to participate in programs than their older peers (Bushway, 2003). Young men often lack interest in Employment Reentry Programs because they lack the desire to change their behavior and find themselves “more embedded in a life of crime.” (Bushway, 2003, p. 9). Many young males have difficulty engaging in Employment Reentry Programs when they return to their former communities after prison. Often, these young men are returning to a location where they are known as a criminal, have an extensive criminal network, and are surrounded by those individuals who they committed crimes with in the past (Bushway, 2003). To achieve success with respect to this population, social workers must convince these young males to actively participate in the process of change (Bushway, 2003). Programs that have achieved success with the young male population tend to be residential programs or programs that begin while offenders are still incarcerated (Burghardt, Glazerman, Schochet, 2000).

Job Corps, a residential vocational program, has shown the benefit of residential programs in helping the young male population avoid recidivism (Bushway, 2003). The key to Job Corps' success is the residential aspect which provides young males with a set structure and incorporates them into a new community of like-minded individuals who are trying to forego criminal activity in the future (Bushway, 2003). Job Corps' results show that younger ex-offenders were more likely to take advantage of programs and services in this type of environment than when they returned to their original homes (Burghardt, et al., 2000). However, despite the positive results of this program, it was not a complete solution as "50 percent of the study group either did not start the program or lasted less than three months." (Bushway, 2003, p.10). The high drop-out rate could be attributed to the delayed start date, which occurs after an offender is released from prison providing them the opportunity to return home prior to joining their new residency (Bushway, 2003).

This problem could be avoided by having offenders begin to participate in Employment Reentry Programs while they are still incarcerated. This is the approach taken in Arizona (Schriro, 2009). Arizona implemented the *Getting Ready: Keeping Communities Safe* program, which screens each offender and assigns him or her a corrections plan while he or she is still incarcerated ("Getting Ready", 2008). Arizona provides tailored incentives for taking part in educational and work-related programs while in prison which encourages participation and provides an opportunity for offenders to acclimate to program conditions prior to release ("Getting Ready", 2008). Since participants are prepared for life after being released, the program has had high rates of participant engagement and thus, has also proven effective at reducing recidivism. Just under 2% of those involved in the Getting Ready program recidivated after three years ("Getting Ready", 2008). However, even when ex-offenders are willing to

participate in Employment Reentry programs, social workers administering these programs still have difficulty finding employers to hire ex-offenders.

Despite social workers' best efforts to provide ex-offenders with training and education in prison and Employment Reentry Programs, ex-offenders are one of the least desirable job applicants (Bushway, 2003). Applicants with criminal records are often rejected from jobs at much higher rates than others (Pager, 2003). In certain states, policy change has helped ex-offenders find employment. Specifically, a trending initiative called "Ban the Box" (BTB), first utilized in Hawaii in 1998, has been codified into law in 29 states (Avery & Hernandez, 2017).

BTB was introduced to help individuals with criminal records through the initial application process, putting them in front of a prospective employer for an interview (Avery & Hernandez, 2017). BTB achieves this by banning the criminal history portion on job applications and delaying an employer's ability to conduct background checks until a formal offer of employment has been made (Avery & Hernandez, 2017).

BTB has been proven effective in Durham, North Carolina. After adopting BTB in 2011, the percentage of hired ex-offenders increased from 2.25 to 15.53 percent (Atkinson & Lockwood, 2017). However, the designers of the "Durham Campaign" which enacted BTB did more than just ban the box. The Durham Campaign changed the way in which criminal records are handled in the city (Atkinson & Lockwood, 2017). The new law provides that only those trained in reading a criminal record can review an application (Atkinson & Lockwood, 2017). Similar success occurred in the city of Minneapolis which, after instituting a similar BTB initiative, saw more than half of applicants with criminal records obtain employment (Mccammond, 2016). However, despite these examples of success, the challenge of getting local

communities to accept ex-offenders still exists. However, even if policies are implemented to reduce the effect of an ex-offender's criminal history on employment opportunity, ex-offenders cannot be successful unless employers and the public at large accept them as employees and members of the community.

Most social work programs designed to help ex-offenders focus on the ex-offender by improving their education, training, employment prospects, etc. However, social stigma can only be combatted by focusing on the views of those who will be living and working with ex-offenders, not the ex-offenders themselves. Very few programs have focused on eliminating this social stigma from a public perspective. However, one program in Arizona that has achieved some success works with potential employers to educate them on ex-offenders and connects offenders identified as high-risk (likely to recidivate) with employers as well as social service workers to ensure that their transition out of the system is a success (Harris & Na, 2017). The Program introduces prospective employees to employers who have been provided information about ex-offenders and are open to hiring offenders (Prange, 2017). Providing employers information can make a difference in their views about ex-offenders. While employer's fears about the risk associated with hiring ex-offenders may appear legitimate, a study conducted by Kellogg School of Management and Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law determined that not only were ex-offenders less likely to quit, but they were "no more likely to be fired than non-offenders" (Minor, Persico, Weiss, 2016). The study also goes on to find that the hiring of ex-offenders may be good for employers due to the low turnover of ex-offenders.

However, even if employers are more likely to hire an ex-offender, if ex-offenders are not welcome in the community, social workers may be unable to establish residential programs and

employers may feel pressure from customers not to hire ex-offenders. Thus, social workers must also ensure that members of the public are educated about the difficulties faced by ex-offenders.

Members of the general public often do not realize the barriers that an ex-offender faces when they are reintroduced to society (Immerwahr & Johnson, 2002). While a survey conducted demonstrates that the public acknowledges employment is a top concern among ex-offenders, the general public lacks knowledge on other key aspects of a criminal record (Brooks, Visher, Naser, 2006). Some respondents were even surprised to find that felons cannot vote and in some instances, cannot obtain a driver's license (Immerwarhr & Johnson, 2002). As it stands there has been little research done to look at how effective educating the community would be in helping ex-offenders reintegrate back into society. However, this type of education would help reduce the social stigma associated with a criminal record and likely lead to more community support for Employment Reentry Programs giving social workers he opportunity to effectively combat recidivism.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no one reason for the current ineffectiveness of Employment Reentry Programs. However, this paper highlights three major problems with Employment Reentry Programs: 1) low participant engagement; 2) difficulty obtaining employment for ex-offenders; and 3) difficulty gaining community support for Employment Reentry Programs. Research suggests that each of these three issues can be addressed through methods employed by some programs today.

To target participant engagement, programs should attempt to utilize early intervention, getting offenders accustomed to program involvement prior to release. In addition, programs

should provide residential options to participants, so they do not have to move back to homes where they will likely return to criminal activity. To improve employment opportunities, social workers should advocate for policy changes such as BTB and should attempt to educate employers on the benefits of hiring ex-offenders. Finally, to combat social stigma surrounding ex-offenders and increase public support for Employment Reentry Programs, social workers should provide community opportunities to educate the general public on the difficulties surrounding reentry and societal reintegration.

This paper urges social workers to continue in their attempts at programming even if current Employment Reentry Programs have not seen significant reductions in recidivism. The modest statistical results do not reflect a lack of need for these programs. Researchers argue that ex-offenders can experience improved outcomes through participation in Employment Reentry Programs even if the level of improvement is not enough to create observable reductions in recidivism (Apel & Bushway, 2012). Even if improvement is slight, researchers believe that further use of these programs is essential to finding a solution to high rates of recidivism. Thus, social workers should continue to modify and implement these programs in an effort to find an ultimate solution to the high rates of recidivism in this country.



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