

Training and Preparing Inmates for Post-Prison Employment

By Doris Wells

Author's Note: Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

In his Research for the Real World presentation,¹ based on a study funded by the National Institute of Justice on race and ethnicity,² Scott Decker indicated that he and fellow researchers found that a prison record has a negative effect on employment, especially for the high-risk populations of blacks and Hispanics. To counteract this, Decker and his fellow researchers recommend that correctional institutions should train and prepare inmates for the challenges of the current employment environment. In the three-year study that included both online and in-person application processes and an employer survey, Decker and his fellow researchers' goal was to determine the effect of a prison sentence on employment prospects. The researchers wanted to know whether the effect of a prison sentence on someone's future employment was affected by race, ethnicity and sex. Consistent with prior findings,³ the researchers found differences by race and ethnicity, with black and Hispanic ex-offenders generally faring worse than white ex-offenders. The differences were more significant for the in-person interview process, but nonetheless, the researchers found that a prison record has a negative effect on job prospects, particularly in the low-skill food service sector, where ex-offenders are likely to seek employment during reentry. The employer survey revealed that employers strongly preferred hiring individuals with no prior criminal justice record. The employers associated a prison record with

a number of negative work-related characteristics, including tardiness and the inability to get along with co-workers.

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Methodology

The researchers used the online and in-person application processes and the employer survey to assess whether job applicants — matched by race/ethnicity (black, Hispanic or white), gender and prior record (prison term or no prison term) — received a call back from a potential employer. More than 6,000 online and 60 in-person applications were submitted for entry-level jobs. A survey was conducted with 49 employers who participated in the in-person process. Both online and in-person groups had six different pairs of job applicants: black men, black women, Hispanic men, Hispanic women, white men and white women. One member of each pair had a prison record included on their resumé. In every other respect, the resumes were identical.

Prominent Findings

The analyses revealed important gender differences in both online and in-person application processes. There was no effect of race/ethnicity, prison record or community college on men's success in advancing through the hiring process. In comparison, women's chances of receiving a favorable response from employers were negatively impacted by race and prison record. Black women and women with a prison record were less likely to receive a positive reply than white women or women without a history of incarceration. No significant difference between black and white women was detected, but black men were significantly less likely to receive a call back than white men. In addition, men who had a prison record were significantly less likely to be contacted by employers than men without a record. For women, there was no direct effect of incarceration except for a marginally significant effect on Hispanic women's job prospects.

When matched testers were sent to apply for jobs in the food service industry, Hispanic men were significantly less likely to receive a call back than white males. However, Hispanic women's employment chances were significantly greater than white women's. For food service jobs, applicants with a criminal record were seen as the least likely to be hired compared to other types of stigmatized job applicants, such as welfare recipients; the short-term unemployed; and those with only short-term and part-time work histories. Respondents reported that applicants who had a prison record or were currently on parole or probation would be the least likely to be hired. Employers expressed a clear desire to avoid

interviewing ex-offenders for fear of potential problems such as absenteeism, tardiness and drug and alcohol abuse. However, the employers emphasized that an offender with prior experience would increase that applicant's chances of getting an interview.

Policy Considerations

Decker and his fellow researchers developed a number of recommendations based on the findings of the study that indicated areas where ex-offenders lacked experience and information, such as computer knowledge and exposure to the job interview process.

Role of the Internet in applying for a job. Due to the shift in how jobs are advertised — print ads to online job boards and social media websites — it is imperative that ex-offenders have access to computers and acquire skills in using the Internet, including creating email accounts; using search engines; filling out electronic forms; and formatting resumes and cover letters. This process should begin before release, so ex-offenders are immediately prepared for the job application process, reinforcing the importance of obtaining employment. Inmates should leave prison with copies of a generic cover letter and resume that details their work experience, qualifications, skills and a contact address.

Job interview, training and preparation. Training for a job interview is critical, particularly for former inmates. The ex-offender should be prepared for the routine employment processes including interviews, resume development and appropriate dress and behavior. However, ex-offenders face an additional challenge. Ex-offenders must be prepared to explain and account for their time in prison and employment gaps. In response, ex-offenders should proceed with the following steps:

- Give an honest account for time in prison (employers will find out through background checks);
- Develop a redemption script that acknowledges the factors that led to their criminality and describes how the prison experience has made them stronger and better able to contribute to society;
- Develop a reentry script that acknowledges responsibility for the past and demonstrates a commitment to change;
- Prepare for the reality of the job application process (e.g., rejection and disappointment);
- Acquire training in specific areas before release from prison and clearly list certificates, diplomas and other documents demonstrating completion of training, workshops or seminars on a resume. Employers often stated that they were looking for evidence of training or experience specific to the employment opportunity that was advertised; and
- Acquire training for the new workplace, including the use of computers and good work ethics such as taking orders, showing up on time, staying at work past a certain hour and waiting two weeks to be paid. As part of the reentry process, ex-offenders should also acquire identification materials and a regular mailing address.

Expanding social capital of former inmates. Former inmates should establish and maintain social capital — relationships with supporters such as family members; former co-workers; parole officers; social services providers; and acquaintances without criminal records. This will help inform ex-offenders of job opportunities; provide them with references; and assist in other aspects of the employment process.

Future Outlook

Decker admits that other ongoing movements such as “ban the box” efforts and “redemption research”⁴ are encouraging, but do not help the immediate or pending ex-offender seeking a job. Thus, to get over the prison sentence hurdle, correctional facilities should provide training that equips inmates (especially those with medium to long sentences) with a skill set that can be transformed into some type of employment upon reentry into the community. In addition, job counselors may have to change their approach in order to find more effective ways of helping former inmates feel confident in finding employment and doing the job well.

ENDNOTES

¹ Decker, S.H. 2014. Consequences of a prison record for employment: How do race, ethnicity and gender factor in? Retrieved from <http://www.nij.gov/events/Pages/research-real-world.aspx>.

² Decker, S.H., C. Spohn, N.R. Ortiz and E. Hedberg. 2014. Criminal stigma, race, gender and employment: An expanded assessment of the consequences of imprisonment for employment. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/244756.pdf>.

³ Pager, D. 2003. The mark of a criminal record. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(5):937-975.
Pager, D., B. Western, B. Bonikowski. 2009. Discrimination in a low-wage labor market: A field experiment. *American Sociological Review*, 74(5):777-799.

⁴ Blumstein, A. and K. Nakamura. 2009. Redemption in the presence of widespread criminal background checks. *Criminology*, 47(2):327-59.

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