Ex-Offender Job Placement Programs Do Not Reduce Recidivism

By Marilyn C. Moses

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Ex-offender job placement interventions (e.g., job-readiness classes, job training, supported work, job placement, transitional employment, job clubs) are not evidence-based in reducing recidivism.[1] This assertion seems to be counter-intuitive, and certainly conflicts with popular belief, as well as the expansion of these programs. It also appears to contradict what the research tells us about the link between employment and crime desistence. Nonetheless, the accumulation of evidence during the past half-century indicates that ex-offender job placement programs are not effective in reducing recidivism.

Regardless of prior criminal record, individuals cannot lawfully sustain themselves without gainful employment. Unless one is independently wealthy or has a legitimate source of monetary support, income from employment is required to acquire housing, food, clothing, transportation and other necessities. A study or "evidence" is not needed to reach this conclusion. There is a body of research that links employment to crime desistence.[2] Unfortunately, the relationship between employment, job placement or assistance interventions and crime desistence is more complicated than it appears.

It is true that steady employment is a characteristic of those who have conformed to societal norms, those who have "turned their lives around" or those who have otherwise succeeded after release. It would seem that interventions designed to assist ex-offenders in securing and retaining employment must, therefore, be an evidence-based strategy to reduce recidivism. However, based on the current research available, this is not true.

Unfortunately, the relationship between employment, job placement or assistance interventions and crime desistence is more complicated than it appears.

Securing and retaining employment may signal an individual's internal motivation or a transition to a more conforming lifestyle. Given the scarcity and low capacity of ex-offender job placement programs, it is most likely that studies finding that employed ex-offenders have a greater probability of success after release include large numbers of study subjects who have succeeded with an unknown amount and type, if any, of program-delivered job assistance. Employment is an individual characteristic of successful reentrants, just as advancing age, marriage and family support are also characteristics of those "making it on the outside." At the same time, evidence supporting ex-offender job placement programs is almost nonexistent. Descriptive studies exploring characteristics of successful reentrants do not necessarily provide scientific support for characteristic-specific programs and services. For example, a study that finds that a percentage of offenders have gotten married post-release does not provide scientific support for matchmaking services, premarital counseling or access to a justice of the peace to perform a marriage ceremony as effective recidivism reduction strategies.

Existing Job Placement Research

Rigorously designed studies (random assignment) generating evidence on ex-offender job placement approaches are the result of federal investment in program development and/or evaluation. With the exception of the results of a recent randomized study, much of the existing evidence is a quarter- to a half-century old. Investments in this line of research were initiated by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Baltimore's Living Insurance for Ex-prisoners (LIFE) experiment. The LIFE experiment was one such effort that began in the 1970s. Offenders who were at high risk for returning to prison were randomly assigned to various test groups in order to determine whether income supports ($60/week for 13 weeks) and/or job assistance reduced recidivism. Study findings were perplexing. Those who received income support had lower arrest rates in the first post-release year. However,

the ex-offenders who did best were those who had been convicted of theft and did not receive income support or job assistance.[3]

The Transitional Aid Research Project (TARP). TARP was the U.S. Department of Labor's follow-up to the LIFE experiment. TARP was a two-state replication and extension of LIFE involving a larger sample size and random assignment to unemployment benefits as a source of financial support or job placement services as experimental treatments. After a one-year follow-up period, no significant differences in rearrest rates were found between the experimental and control groups.[4]

The National Supported Work Demonstration project. After TARP, in the mid-1970s, the U.S. Department of Labor followed up with the National Supported Work Demonstration project. In this experiment, ex-offenders were randomly assigned to minimum-wage work crew jobs or a control group. The follow-up period ranged from 18 to 36 months. Initially the program was deemed a failure due to a high prison return rate, but reanalysis of the data revealed that the program did appear to make a positive difference for one segment of the study participants — releasees 26 years and older.[5]

Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) Probationer evaluation. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, CETA-qualified probationers from a Midwestern city were randomly assigned by researchers Dennis B. Anderson and Randall E. Schumacker to a job assistance or control group of probationers under normal supervision. Employment application assistance, resume preparation, role-playing job interviews and some skills training were available to those assigned to the experimental group. There was a six- and 12-month follow-up period. In short, no significant difference in recidivism, as measured by probation revocation or new convictions was found in the outcomes of the treatment and control groups.[6]

The Jobs Training and Partnership Act (JPTA) evaluation. Next, the JPTA evaluation took place in 1985. In this study, young adults with arrest records were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Treatment group interventions included job-readiness, vocational exploration, job shadowing and other similar services. After 21 months, no difference was found between treatment and control group rearrests. For those followed for three years, individuals who received job-related services recidivated at a slightly higher rate than those receiving no assistance.[7]

Job Corps. In the late 1990s, another demonstration effort, Job Corps, was initiated by the U.S. Department of Labor to help juvenile and young adult ex-offenders gain employment. This program involved vocational and educational preparation coupled with job placement services. Again, study subjects were randomly assigned to receive Job Corps services or to a control group. Program effectiveness, as measured by self-reported rearrest, could not be demonstrated; no difference was found between the treatment or control groups.[8]

The Opportunity to Succeed (OPTS) program. OPTS, initiated in 1994, was a demonstration program designed to deliver comprehensive services, including job placement assistance, for reentering criminally-involved individuals with substance use disorders. The goal of the intervention was to reduce substance use relapse and recidivism. The evaluation, funded by the National Institute of Justice, included random assignment to OPTS or a control group. Rearrest was measured both by self-report and official records. Sadly, again, no significant difference was found between the two groups. However, OPTS participants did have a higher rate of technical violations.[9]

Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO). New York City's CEO is a unique and long-standing model that has been recently evaluated.[10] This model involves virtually immediate temporary employment on release and permanent job placement assistance. CEO has a number of service contracts with various agencies to provide nightly office cleaning and other services. Thus, CEO is able to put ex-offenders to work immediately on work crews with a goal of later placement in a nonsubsidized job with benefits. A randomized evaluation, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was positive but perplexing. Recidivism for CEO participants was reduced during the first two years of follow-up. However, CEO program participants were not more successful than control group members when it came to securing nonsubsidized employment. While previous studies have suggested that older ex-offenders derive more benefit from job assistance/placement programs, here, younger offenders with more extensive criminal histories directly experienced a reduction in recidivism.[11]

Positive findings from the CEO evaluation are encouraging. It does not, however, negate the overwhelmingly negative body of evidence preceding it. Additionally, we do not know exactly what it is about CEO's service delivery model that is producing modest, yet positive, results. If it is CEO's ability to provide immediate employment to its clients, how replicable is this model by small or medium-size jurisdictions with a limited economic base? And is this immediate transitional employment model practicable in an era of high unemployment for all, regardless of criminal record? Or, is it some other aspect of the CEO model, such as the long-term ex-offender/employer follow-up or matching ex-offender need to the appropriate type of services?

Conclusion

Releasees may face a number of employment barriers to their return to society, such as: race discrimination, inadequate educational attainment, insufficient or outdated skills, a spotty or nonexistent work history, undesirable physical appearance (e.g., missing teeth, tattoos), drug addiction or other health impairments, few soft skills, economically disadvantaged communities with few available jobs to return to, and a criminal record.[12] Given this circumstance, it seems that there is a role for ex-offender, job-seeker/employer intermediaries, like CEO or Chicago's Safer Foundation, which have built strong and trusted relationships with employers.[13] Job placement

programs or employment intermediaries may prove beneficial in helping ex-offenders overcome employment barriers. However, the evidence of their role, to date, in reducing recidivism is scant and is not understood.

Beyond possible value to the client, well-established programs with a solid track record of program delivery, large client volume, strong data collection infrastructure and capacity, are national research and evaluation assets. They provide researchers and program designers with the opportunity to set up "learning laboratories" where various service modalities can be tested. Rigorous tests administered by independent evaluators at these laboratories will generate needed evidence, and hopefully answers. Further investment in evidence generation will ultimately refine ex-offender job placement assistance, and perhaps, establish a positive correlation between job placement programs and reduced recidivism — a link that does not currently exist.

ENDNOTES

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