

Former Prisoners and Disadvantaged Youth: Changing Outlook and Opportunity

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This paper discusses policies to reduce poverty and increase well-being for two groups that are not typically connected to services or benefits: former prisoners and disadvantaged youth. Although separate populations, there is considerable overlap between the groups, since many disadvantaged youth have been involved with the juvenile justice system or will become involved with it at some point. Similarly, while former prisoners face certain distinct barriers to success, such as the mark of a prison record and high rates of mental health problems, both groups have low education levels and lack connections to jobs. A review of the research suggests that a potentially promising strategy for both groups involves changing the incentives and rewards for success while at the same time changing their attitudes and the way they think about these incentives.

FORMER PRISONERS

In 1978, there were about 300,000 people in state or federal prisons in the United States. By 2012 that number had increased to 1.5 million. This dramatic growth in the prison population has led to a similarly large increase in the number of people being released from prison each year. In 2012, and in every year since 2000, more than 600,000 people were released from prison.¹

Former prisoners face a number of challenges to re-integrating into the community, as evidenced by the fact that nearly half of them are re-arrested within a year of release. By three years out, half of them are back in prison, and many will return to prison multiple times.² An additional challenge is that former prisoners today are re-entering a very different labor market than their counterparts did thirty years ago. While returns to a college education have increased

¹ The number of prisoners being released each year has declined somewhat during the past few years.

² Langan and Levin (2002).

substantially over this period, wages for those without a high school diploma have fallen by 20 percent, a decline concentrated entirely among men.³

The growth of the prison population has led to an increased focus on reentry initiatives and other policies that might help former prisoners successfully transition from prison. While the main impetus behind these efforts is to reduce corrections costs, they might also have notable effects on poverty and well-being, not just for the former prisoners themselves. As Freeman notes, many individuals in low-income communities are connected to former prisoners in some way, as their children, siblings, or parents.⁴ In fact, more than half of prisoners today are parents of minor children.⁵

Profile

As many others have documented, former prisoners face a number of barriers to successful reentry. Data from surveys of prison inmates administered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics help to provide a portrait of reentrants, since most prisoners will be released at some point.⁶

These data show that prisoners have levels of education considerably below that of the general population, and relatively high rates of mental and physical health problems and substance abuse. For example, more than a third of prisoners report some type of impairment, the most common being a learning disability or vision problems. Rates of mental health problems and drug dependence are also strikingly high. One out of two state prison inmates in 2004 exhibited symptoms of a mental health disorder, covering depression, mania, or psychosis.

Compounding these barriers are barriers from the demand side of the labor market. Holzer, Raphael and Stoll document a strong reluctance on the part of many employers to hire former prisoners,⁷ and ex-felons are legally barred from a range of occupations, depending on state and federal law.⁸

Data on employment and earnings for former prisoners bear this out. The recent Transitional Jobs Demonstration, which targeted recently released offenders, provides data on

³ Economic Policy Institute (2014).

⁴ Freeman (2003).

⁵ Glaze and Maruschak (2008).

⁶ Wolf Harlow (2003); Harrison and Beck (2004); Maruschak (2008); James and Glaze (2006); and Mumola and Karberg (2006).

⁷ Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2003)

⁸ Hahn (1991).

quarterly earnings and employment.⁹ Data for the control group show low and declining employment rates over the two year follow-up period, from 41 percent in the quarter after study entry, to 21 percent in the eighth quarter. Part of the decline in employment reflects re-incarceration – 50 percent of the control group went back to prison at some point during the two years. Average earnings among those who did work during a given quarter were low, at about \$3,000 per quarter towards the end of the period.

Framework

The economic model of crime provides a convenient framework for considering potential policies to reduce crime and recidivism.¹⁰ When deciding whether to commit crime, an individual will consider the benefits and costs of doing so. The benefits and costs include factors such as the likelihood of getting caught, the severity of punishment, and returns to legitimate work, most of which can be affected by policy.

Also affecting decisions are the individual's preferences or values, which might include or derive from a broad range of cognitive/personality traits, such as moral reasoning, impulsivity, aggression, motivation, conventionality, etc. Thus, two people responding to the same set of incentives and costs will make different decisions depending on their particular sets of traits. While preferences have typically been taken as given in the model, there is a growing recognition across a range of disciplines that many of these factors are changeable and thus may also be affected by policies or programs. Moreover, many in the criminal justice field argue that it makes little sense to change opportunities and incentives without first changing preferences/values.¹¹ Bushway, for example, argues that without a changed outlook, youthful offenders who are embedded in a life of crime are not likely to respond to reasonable changes in either the benefits or costs of criminal activity.¹²

Evidence

The evidence to date gives a mixed picture on the ability of interventions to help former prisoners re-integrate and stay out of prison. Although the research covers a much broader scope of programs, this section focuses on findings from three types of policies.

⁹ Jacobs (2012). This group is not a random sample of recently released prisoners, but a group who showed up to participate in an employment program.

¹⁰ Becker (1968); Freeman (2003); Cook and Ludwig (2003).

¹¹ MacKenzie (2008); Bushway (2003).

¹² Bushway (2003).

Employment and training programs

In general, findings from employment and training experiments over the past thirty years suggest that it is difficult to increase the employment and earnings of disadvantaged men, let alone those who are former prisoners¹³ Consistent and sometimes lasting effects on employment and earnings were typically found for women, with some effects for men, and few effects for youth.

Given the difficulty of creating sustained increases in employment and earnings, it is perhaps not surprising that a range of employment and training programs have also not had large effects on recidivism. A meta-analysis by Visher and colleagues of eight randomized control trials concludes that overall the programs had no effects.¹⁴ But few of these programs led to notable or sustained effects on employment and earnings.

One exception is the National Supported Work Demonstration, which offered four disadvantaged target groups supported work assignments for up to a year. That program led to large increases in employment early on, and lasting effects for AFDC recipients. While the program was found to have no effect on recidivism overall, a reanalysis by Uggen found reductions in recidivism for older former prisoners,¹⁵ a finding that Bushway uses to support the idea that changing motivation is key, since older former prisoners are likely to have a different, more mature, take on the benefits and costs of crime.¹⁶

Two recent random assignment evaluations of transition jobs programs (targeted specifically to former prisoners), both conducted by MDRC, also led to quite large increases in employment. The CEO evaluation tested the transitional jobs program offered by the Center for Employment Opportunities in New York City.¹⁷ The program included former prisoners referred to the program by their parole officers and offered them life skills classes and job placements throughout the city, typically in maintenance, repair, or janitorial positions. Placements in transitional jobs lasted eight weeks, on average. CEO led to substantial increases in employment in Year 1, due entirely to the transitional jobs. In the quarter after study entry, for example, 59

¹³ LaLonde (2003)

¹⁴ Visher et al. (2005). An exception is Lattimore et al. (1999), who report positive effects of a vocational training program for youthful property offenders in North Carolina.

¹⁵ Uggen (2000).

¹⁶ Bushway (2003).

¹⁷ Bloom et al. (2007); Redcross et al. (2009); Redcross et al. (2012).

percent of individuals in the program group worked, compared with 34 percent for the control group. Employment effects faded after year 1. CEO also reduced recidivism in Year 1 and, somewhat surprisingly, in Years 2 and 3, effects that were most pronounced for individuals released from prison within three months prior to starting the program.

The more recent Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration (TJRD) studied the effects of transitional jobs offered to recently-released former prisoners in four Midwestern sites.¹⁸ Similarly, the program generated substantial increases in employment during the period in which transitional jobs were provided but no effects thereafter. In contrast to findings from CEO, TJRD had no effects on recidivism.

The results from both studies raise two key questions. First, why didn't both programs reduce recidivism, when both had large effects on early employment? The authors posit that the nature of the work assignments in CEO, in small work crews, may have helped to develop a type of mentoring relationship between the work supervisors and the participants. At a minimum, the results suggest that the connection between work and recidivism is not clear cut.

Second, why was the transition to unsubsidized work so difficult? The authors raise several possibilities: the jobs did not provide training for specific occupations, but were intended only to develop employability skills; the jobs were too short to demonstrate employability to potential employers; the programs had difficulty finding employers willing to hire former prisoners (especially true in TJRD); and finally, the men themselves faced too many barriers to sustained employment, such as housing problems, substance abuse, mental health problems, etc. The latter point is supported by the fact that only about a third of the people placed into unsubsidized jobs stayed employed during the follow-up period.

One implication is that the transitional job placements may need to be longer or that participants need to be able to return to them if they lose an unsubsidized job.¹⁹ Qualitative interviews with the TJRD participants indicated that the end of the transitional job was a big letdown for many of the men.²⁰ Those who did manage to stay employed reported that they were able to “reframe” themselves, in their eyes and the eyes of others, and shed their old identities as “former prisoners.” Perhaps a longer transitional job would help in this regard. (Another

¹⁸ Redcross et al (2010); Jacobs (2012).

¹⁹ One caution around a longer placement is the possibility for substitution out of unsubsidized jobs and in to transitional jobs, an effect observed in two TJRD sites.¹⁹

²⁰ Redcross et al. (2010).

interesting, although perhaps obvious, finding from these interviews is that these men had very little knowledge of the local labor markets and the jobs that might be available to them).

Another implication is that the jobs need to be more substantive, such that potential employers will value them more, or that vocational training should be provided at the same time. In addition, more work needs to be put into the job development side of the models, which would include efforts to obtain greater employer buy in. This might take the form of subsidies or other incentives. Finally, programs might consider incentives provided to the men to encourage sustained employment, in the form of earnings supplements.²¹

Earnings supplements (making work pay)

An increased return to legitimate work should reduce crime. And research does find an association between wages rates and crime, particularly property crime.²² With the exception of the one TJRD site, there has not been much research on offering these types of incentives for former prisoners. Much of the evidence for “make work pay” policies is for welfare recipients or single mothers but does show increases in employment and reductions in poverty.²³ Similarly, studies of the EITC expansions during the 1990s show positive effects on women’s employment rates.²⁴ While men’s labor supply is thought to be less elastic than women’s, the effect of such a policy is ultimately an empirical question. At a minimum, it would increase incomes. As noted earlier from the TJRD program, former prisoners who worked earned on average \$3,000 per quarter, which suggests annual earnings of less given the substantial cycling in and out of work for this group. A bonus on top of \$10,000 or \$12,000 per year could represent a notable increase in income.

Beyond that, it may also pull more disadvantaged men into work and reduce their involvement with the criminal justice system. MDRC is currently testing this idea as part of the Paycheck Plus Demonstration in New York City.²⁵ The credit, which phases in at a rate of 30 percent and offers a maximum benefit of \$2,000, will be offered to single adults without dependent children, some fraction of whom are former prisoners.

²¹ One of the sites in the TJRD experiment offered a later cohort of study entrants a bonus for maintained employment in an unsubsidized job. Results, although suggestive only, indicate that the bonus may have increased employment stability and earnings.

²² Grogger (1998); Gould et al. (2002).

²³ Berlin (2000); Michalopoulos (2005).

²⁴ Eissa and Hoynes (2006).

²⁵ <http://www.mdrc.org/project/paycheckplus>.

Changing values/preferences

Over the past decade, a wealth of evidence has accumulated showing that several social-emotional skills measured in childhood predict many adult outcomes, including schooling attainment, earnings, and crime.²⁶ In some cases, the effects of these non-cognitive factors on later outcomes are as large or larger than the effects of typically used cognitive measures, such as IQ. At the same time, there is growing evidence that many of these traits are changeable, particularly for youth and younger adults. A recent survey by Heckman documents a number of programs that appear to have few long-term effects on IQ or achievement, yet lead to lasting reduction in crime. In some cases, these changes in “character” occurred through early interventions targeting improved nutrition and parenting, for example, while in others cases they occurred through work programs or work experience, indicating that they can be changed through a variety of mechanisms.²⁷

In the criminal justice field, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions are seen as a promising strategy for reducing recidivism. The idea is that individuals who engage in crime have distorted thinking or reasoning and that it is learned rather than inherent. CBT curriculums tend to focus on moral reasoning, anger management, interpersonal skills, accountability, impulse control, etc. A meta-analysis conducted by Lipsey et al., found that on average these programs led to substantial reductions in recidivism, with larger effects on former prisoners at highest risk for returning to prison.²⁸

Next steps

A common theme throughout the criminal justice literature is that the problem of former prisoners is multi-faceted and complex and must be addressed using a variety of approaches. The findings reviewed suggest that one such approach might combine three potentially promising strategies:

- **Transitional jobs program**
 - Longer-term than previously tested
 - More resources for job development
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**
- **An earnings supplement to encourage sustained work and reduce poverty**

²⁶ Heckman et al., (2006); Hill et al., (2011).

²⁷ Heckman and Kautz (2013).

²⁸ Lipsey et al. (2007).

Many have argued that it makes little sense to change opportunities facing former prisoners without first changing the way they view these opportunities. Similarly, it would seem to make little sense to change their outlook without also changing their opportunities. Former prisoners with changed outlooks and motivation still have very few supports available to them once in the community. These two strategies would thus reinforce each other. As others have noted, desistance is a long-term process, where success builds on success.²⁹ A longer-term transitional job might help reinforce newly acquired social skills or changed motivations. In addition to providing the former prisoner with immediate income and employment, a transitional job would also seem to be a good platform for providing CBT. Within this platform, programs could also offer other important services, such as help with substance abuse or mental health issues. The earnings supplement, conditioned work, might also reinforce these two strategies. At a minimum, it would increase income and reduce poverty. The findings suggest that this combination of services might be most effective if targeted to the recently released and to younger adults, although there may certainly be effects for other groups.

While this paper recommends a specific type of intervention, it does not cover a range of other important policies that have been proposed by experts in the field. Among others, these policies include:

- expunging records after a certain period;³⁰
- changes to policies around parole violations;³¹ and
- removing legal barriers to hiring certain former prisoners.³²

DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

There is a fair amount of overlap between the populations of former prisoners and disadvantaged youth. Many disadvantaged youth have criminal justice histories or will interact with the criminal justice system at some point, with particularly high rates for African Americans. Among a cohort of African American men born in the late 1970s, for example, 68

²⁹ Maruna (2001).

³⁰ Raphael (2008); Blumstein and Nakamura (2009).

³¹ Bloom, et al. (2012).

³² Holzer, Raphael and Stoll (2003).

percent of those who were high school dropouts had spent some time in prison before they reached the age of 34.³³ Beyond the mark of a prison record, high school dropouts face enormous challenges in making a successful transition to adulthood. Along with declining wages for less-educated workers, the youth labor market has been particularly hard hit in recent years. Between 2000 and 2008, for example, the share of all 16- to 24-year-olds with employment during the summer fell from 65 percent to 58 percent, falling to 49 percent during the recent recession.³⁴ Employment rates are especially low for youth without a high school diploma. Indeed, among young men who were not enrolled in school and did not have a high school diploma or GED, only one in two was employed in 2010.³⁵

Evidence

A number of “second-chance” programs for youth have been tested over the years. This review focuses primarily on those that have been evaluated using random assignment designs. The programs typically offered either paid work experience (the National Supported Work Demonstration, the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects, and the American Conservation and Youth Service Corps) or education or job training (JOBSTART, the National Job Training Partnership Act, New Chance, the Center for Employment and Training (CET), Job Corps, and National Guard Youth ChalleNGe).

Overall, the evaluations tell a mixed story. Several of the studies found that young people in the program group were substantially more likely than their control group counterparts to earn a GED or another credential, but many of those same programs did not lead to positive effects on employment or earnings. The CET replication study, for example, found large increases in the receipt of a training certificate after four years (58 percent for the program group versus 37 percent for the control group) but had no effects on employment or earnings. JOBSTART had similar findings, although that program led to increases in GED receipt rather than in vocational certificates.

³³ Western and Pettit (2010).

³⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Youth employment and unemployment in July 2010.”
http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2010/ted_20100903.htm

³⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “College Enrollment and Work Activity of High School Graduates, News Release.”
<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgsec.t02.htm>

Job Corps is one of the few programs that led to positive effects. Job Corps offered youth education, training, and other services in a residential setting for up to one year. The program was found to have positive effects on employment and earnings, although those effects were only sustained beyond the fourth year for older youth (ages 20-24 at study entry). The evaluators noted that the provision of longer-term services and placement support may be important to producing lasting impacts and that many of the programs began changing in this direction towards the end of the evaluation period.³⁶

One recent program that aims to strengthen the pathway from GED receipt to post-secondary education is the GED-Bridge Program (offered at LaGuardia Community College and evaluated by MDRC).³⁷ The program prepares students for the GED exam using a contextualized curriculum, in which key concepts are taught using content from a specific field of interest (health or business). The program also prepares students for college by structuring the classes like college level classes. Recent data from that evaluation show large increases in GED pass rates and in enrollment rates at community college.³⁸

Finally, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program offered education and training services in a residential setting for 16- to 18-year old high school dropouts. Run in a quasi-military style, the core of ChalleNGe is a 20-week residential program, in which youth receive education services (geared towards the receipt of a GED or high school diploma) and a range of other services designed to promote positive youth development (leadership, civic engagement, services, life coping, job skills, etc.). Following the residential phase, participants participate in a one-year mentoring program. The most recent findings from that study show that after three years, ChalleNGE increased GED receipt, college credits received, and employment and earnings.³⁹

Next steps

The findings suggest two strategies for improving outcomes among disadvantaged youth.

- **Strengthening ties to post-secondary education (GED-Bridge)**

³⁶ Schochet et al. (2006).

³⁷ The full name of the program is “GED Bridge to Health and Business.”

³⁸ Martin and Broadus (2013).

³⁹ Millenky et al.(2011).

While Job Corps' effects on employment and earnings may have faded for a number of reasons, one possible reason is that the increases in educational attainment it led to were limited to GED receipt and short-term training certificates. The program had no effects on college attendance. It has been well-documented that the GED is not valued much in the labor market. However, research also finds that postsecondary education pays off as much for GED holders as for high school graduates but that only a small minority of GED holders goes on to complete even one year of postsecondary education.⁴⁰ Programs like GED-Bridge can help to make that transition. Similarly, other youth programs that focus on the GED or short-term training might consider adding services to foster the connection to college.

- **Promoting a changed outlook (YouthBuild)**

Changing an individual's motivation and outlook is very relevant to programs for youth, and the research cited in the first section of the paper suggests that it may have important effects. Such changes can occur in a variety of ways, through sustain work, as may have been the case for older youth in Job Corps, or through explicit curricula, which may have occurred with ChalleNGe. In this regard, YouthBuild represents a promising strategy. MDRC is currently conducting a random assignment evaluation of YouthBuild, covering youth at nearly 80 programs around the country. Early findings will be published in 2017.

YouthBuild is a non-residential program that provides disadvantaged 16- to 24-year olds construction-related training, educational services, counseling and leadership development opportunities. As part of their training in construction, participants work on renovating or constructing new housing for low-income or homeless people, although in recent years many programs have moved to provide other types of vocational training. Most YouthBuild participants spend from 8-to-12 months full-time in the program receiving a variety of services, including stipends, wages, or living allowances. These services typically include some kind of assessment, a "mental toughness" orientation, educational activities, vocational training, leadership training and community service, counseling, support services, job placement, and follow-up services. Currently, YouthBuild's more than 200 programs include a mix of programs focused on GED attainment, with some focused on high school diplomas (and some focused on

⁴⁰Tyler (2005).

both credentials). The program is also increasingly focused on transitions to post-secondary education. The findings reviewed here suggest that this is a move in the right direction

On paper, YouthBuild may not look very different from other employment and training programs for youth. What sets it apart, however, is its culture and focus on positive youth development and transformation, which is delivered through its youth leadership component and through its general culture of “respect for the intelligence and potential role of low-income young people in their communities.”⁴¹ The programs that fully take on this culture promote a consistent message to youth about making “things go right” in their own lives, in their families, and in their communities.

Earlier YouthBuild studies documented a significant transformation among graduates in their aspirations and beliefs. As noted in one study, for example, graduates now had more ability to envision a better life and the sense that they had a right to claim that life.⁴² An early, non-experimental study of the program by Ferguson and Snipes documented significant transformation of the youth when they were asked to think about themselves before and after the program. As one participant noted:

“I am the person who has changed his way of thinking and his attitude in the last nine months, keeping in touch of what he has to do but not forgetting where he came from and not forgetting to help those who need the help so they can get what I got. There’s more for me to conquer out here...”⁴³

It is not hard to imagine that this change in attitude will help this young person take better advantage of the opportunities he has been given.

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⁴¹ YouthBuild Program Standards 2013.

⁴² Hahn, et al. (2004).

⁴³ Ferguson and Snipes (1997).

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