



FORMER PRISONERS AND DISADVANTAGED YOUTH: CHANGING OUTLOOK AND OPPORTUNITY

Cynthia Miller, MDRC

Former prisoners and disadvantaged youth share common traits that should be considered in efforts to reduce poverty and increase their well-being. Former prisoners face distinct barriers, such as their record and high rates of mental health problems, and many disadvantaged youth are headed down the same path. Both groups typically have low education levels and lack connections to jobs, with few services and benefits to help them. Still, there is reason for hope.

FORMER PRISONERS

The prison population in the United States has exploded, from 300,000 in 1978 to 1.5 million in 2012, and every year since 2000 more than 600,000 people have been released from prison. Once they are released, nearly half are rearrested within a year. The larger prison population and high recidivism rates have led to increased focus on reentry initiatives, which can reduce corrections costs, and benefit both the former prisoners and their families.

Data show that prisoners have low levels of education and high rates of health problems, including substance abuse, relative to the general population. They also face additional barriers in the current job market, such as the increased importance of a college

education, reduced wages for those without a high school diploma, employers' reluctance to hire ex-convicts, and their barring from certain occupations by state and federal laws.

Those who do find employment make little money—about \$3,000 per quarter—and often fail to keep their jobs.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Policies to reduce crime and recidivism must consider how an individual decides to commit a crime. What are the costs and benefits of engaging in criminal activity? They include factors such as severity of punishment and the returns from legitimate work.

The Innovating to End Urban Poverty policy brief series details policy recommendations from top researchers and practitioners on how to improve the quality of life for low-income urban residents. Topics include education, housing, health care, executive function, immigration and the role of place.

The role of an individual's preferences and values in the decision must also be considered. Growing recognition notes that these are not necessarily fixed and that changing them is key to better outcomes. Indeed, many in the criminal justice field argue it makes little sense to change costs/benefits without first changing preferences/values.

Findings from three types of policies offer a mixed picture of interventions' ability to help former prisoners stay out of prison.

- **Employment and training programs.** Thirty years of experience shows the difficulty of improving the employment and earnings of disadvantaged men, let alone former prisoners. But certain transitional jobs programs have increased employment, reduced recidivism, or achieved both. Among these program's lessons: transitional jobs must be longer to better demonstrate employability; participants need to be able to return to these jobs if unsubsidized employment fails; jobs need to be more substantive and offered in conjunction with vocational training; and incentives in the form of earnings supplements might encourage sustained employment.
- **Earnings supplements.** Research finds an association between higher wages and reduction in crime. But little research has been conducted into how pay incentives affect former prisoners. At a minimum, it would increase their income, which is typically \$12,000 a year or less. Doubling that amount should pull more disadvantaged men into work instead of the criminal justice system.
- **Changing values/preferences.** 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 reasoning that

is learned rather than inherent. An analysis of CBT focusing on such traits as moral reasoning, anger management, and impulse control found that it led to significant reductions in recidivism among former prisoners.

DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

The youth labor market has been particularly hard hit in recent years, especially for young men without a high school diploma. In 2010, only half of young men not enrolled in school or who lacked a diploma or GED were employed. The situation is even worse for youth and young adults with a prison record, a problem that is especially severe among African Americans. Among a cohort of such men born in the late 1970s, for example, 68 percent who were high school dropouts had spent some time in prison before age 34.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

A number of "second-chance" programs for youth have been tested over the years. Most offered paid work experience, education, or job training. Evaluations of these programs tell a mixed story. Several studies found that young people were substantially more likely than their control-group counterparts to earn a GED or another credential, but many of the same programs did not lead to positive effects on employment or earnings.

Job Corps is one of the few programs leading to positive effects in these categories, though results were only sustained for older youths (ages 20-24 at study entry). By preparing students for the GED and college simultaneously, the GED-Bridge Program showed large increases in GED pass rates and enrollment rates at community colleges. The National Guard Youth Challenge program demonstrated increased GED receipt, college credits received, and employment and earnings.

Findings to date suggest two strategies for improving outcomes among disadvantaged youth:

- **Strengthening ties to post-secondary education (GED-Bridge).** Job Corps' effects on employment and earnings might have faded over time because its educational component focused only on GED attainment. It is well documented that the GED is not valued in the labor market but that GED holders benefit from post-secondary education as much as high school graduates. Programs like GED-Bridge help with this important transition. Other programs focusing on the GED or short-term training should consider adding services that foster a connection to college.
- **Promoting a changed outlook (YouthBuild).** Changing young people's motivation and outlook can have important benefits. YouthBuild—a nonresidential program offering construction-related training, education services, counseling, and leadership development opportunities—might look like other employment and training programs for

youth. What sets it apart is its focus on positive youth development and transformation, and its general culture of “respect for the intelligence and potential role of low-income young people in their communities.” Such programs promote a consistent message of positive change for participants, their families, and their communities. YouthBuild studies have documented a significant transformation in the aspirations and beliefs of graduates.

CONCLUSION

While former prisoners and disadvantaged youth face significant challenges, research suggests that programs aimed at enhancing education and job training opportunities, improving the incentives for work, and changing their attitudes can help put them on a positive path toward success and away from the criminal justice system.

[Click here to access all policy briefs in the Innovating to End Urban Poverty Series](#)

USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy
Sol Price Center for Social Innovation

USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy
*Judith and John Bedrosian Center on
Governance and the Public Enterprise*