

**Lack of Prisoner Reentry Programs for Ex-Offenders Seeking Employment**

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For formally incarcerated individuals, life after prison can be extremely challenging, as ex-offenders often find themselves unable to find work as a result of their criminal record and experience in prison. It can be nearly impossible for an ex-offender to find a sustainable job, which presents the public issue of not having nearly enough resources and funding for prisoner reentry programs (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Prisoner reentry programs help to guide ex-offenders through the process of integrating back into society, as they may be struggling with their new reality within the outside world. Oftentimes when an ex-offender is released from prison, they have nowhere to go, and most likely do not know what the first steps are when it comes to integrating back into society (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). This presents a huge issue as this can easily lead to more crime if an ex-offender is not sure what their place is on the outside (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Prisoner reentry programs are a key factor in helping to achieve an ex-offender's goals of staying out of prison through the process of helping them find ways to stay out of trouble through finding a job. To emphasize the need of policy solution in this instance, the literature review that follows provides scholarly evidence into the barriers that ex-offenders face when seeking employment post incarceration.

There can be a misconception when it comes to how society feels about ex-offenders trying to find sustainable work. It is not uncommon for people to feel uncomfortable or uneasy with the thought of hiring an ex-offender into their place of work. However, social workers believe in social justice, and ex-offenders who have done their time should be able to integrate back into the work place without fear of any backlash. If they present themselves as ready to move on and they want to better themselves, then ex-offenders should be able to have access to prisoner reentry programs who can help them find sustainable work within their community. Ex-offenders have the right to try to improve their lives, and prisoner reentry programs help them

do just that. Having the resources and funding available to open more prisoner reentry programs is crucial to this vulnerable population's success in the outside world. By opening more programs for ex-offenders, recidivism can be significantly reduced, and public safety would be improved as it is less likely for an offender to commit crime again if he or she has a sustainable job in place (The United States Department of Justice, 2021). Life after incarceration is linked to many other issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, mental health issues and more, so it is important to be able to help ex-offenders transition smoothly back into society by finding them a sustainable job to keep them motivated and reaching successful outcomes, which includes sustainable employment.

Historically, the reentry movement presents itself as a newer concept due to it becoming more prevalent in the last decade than it ever has before (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). This is mainly because the number of released inmates annually is roughly 600,000 (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). With this statistic alone, it shows the demand for effective reentry programs for these ex-offenders. The term "reentry movement" stands for the focus on developing programs to facilitate the successful return of ex-offenders back into the community (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). It is crucial to emphasize the need for reentry programs as it also has ties with rehabilitation, and helps keep offenders out of a life of violence, drugs, or crime (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Whether inside the prison or on the outside, prisoners will face a great deal of personal or situational risks and issues that if left unaddressed, will eventually lead them back into a life of crime (Jonson & Cullen, 2015).

To add to these issues, former prisoners return to their urban communities with concentrated social, economic, and political stressors such as unemployment, limited social services, drug use, high crime, homelessness and more (Wikoff et al., 2012). Developing more

reentry programs that are evidence based and effective is necessary, as most of the prisoners who are released do not know how to move forward with their lives (Wikoff et al., 2012). Reentering prisoners are often seen as “risks,” that most people do not want to take on, however, it is important to promote the concept of social justice as they have served their time and are ready to reintegrate back into society (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Providing ex-offenders with resources such as these can create issues for some people within the community, however, the concept of social justice states that they are people as well and have the right to better their lives if they so desire (NASW, 2021).

An Australian study conducted by Moschion and Johnson (2017), closely observed the relationship between homelessness and incarceration, trying to further understand how one effects the other. The main question that was observed was if release from incarceration had any correspondence with increases in homelessness (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). This study followed disadvantaged ex-offenders for two and a half years after being released from prison (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). Changes in housing and incarceration status were observed throughout the two and a half years, and homeless and at risk individuals were also closely observed to compare (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). It was found throughout this study that recently incarcerated men faced significantly higher odds in regards to facing homelessness and housing insecurity once released from prison (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). Additionally, it was discovered that incarceration does in fact increase the probability of an ex-offender becoming homeless within their lifetime but not necessarily right away (Moschion & Johnson, 2017).

Among those leaving the Australian prison system, the authors found that the rates of homelessness after prison ranged from ten to twenty five percent (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). This is mainly due to a severe lack of reentry programs within Australia. Another study in the

United States looked into the New York prison systems, where it was found that 11.4 percent of the 48,424 inmates released, entered the New York homeless shelter system in the two years following their release (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). It was also found that the critical period for ex-offenders starts at six months, suggesting that after release, this is a time where guidance from support programs would be the most efficient (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). This study also found that nearly one in ten ex offenders ended up homeless after being in the prison system (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). This study ultimately shows the importance of having “adequate coverage” for post release programs in order to break the link between homelessness and incarceration (Moschion & Johnson, 2017). It highlights the importance of finding jobs for ex-offenders in order to avoid continuously adding to the homeless population. (deleted a sentence)

Another reason why it is crucial for ex-offenders to have access to reentry programs is for those who have intellectual disabilities, and who have a difficult time functioning in an already terrifying new way of life in the outside world. A qualitative study was performed in the United Kingdom that investigated the lives of ten ex-prisoners with intellectual abilities after being released from prison (Chiu et al., 2020). The results of this study show the consequences of having a severe lack of reentry programs in the UK, meaning that there is an unclear pathway between prison and life after prison for those with intellectual disabilities (Chiu et al., 2020). The ten participants in this study reported feeling “extremely under-supported” after being released from prison, as they were unsure what the next step was without the help of a reentry program (Chiu et al., 2020). Some showed signs of hostility towards co-workers when they were asked about life in prison, and found that their employers, if given the chance to be employed, were too focused on their previous crime rather than the work they were putting in (Chiu et al., 2020). It

was also shown that many prisoners with intellectual disabilities required educational or rehabilitative services within prison, but these reentry programs were ultimately not suitable for those with additional needs associated with intellectual disabilities (Chiu et al., 2020). It is important to note this because it shows the devastating effects from a severe lack of funding and resources associated with reentry programs, and it appears that the reentry programs that do exist, lack the resources needed to be able to integrate ex-offenders with intellectual disabilities, back into society. These services should be equally as trained and qualified to work with ex-offenders with disabilities, as they are trained to work with those without them. Finding jobs for ex-offenders has been shown to be difficult, but it is even more difficult for those who have intellectual abilities to find a sustainable job (Chiu et al., 2020).

With an overwhelming amount of obstacles and barriers, ex offenders may experience issues with their mental well being and health after being released from prison. With this brings difficulty to have the motivation to want to find a sustainable job once released. Ex-offenders oftentimes deal with stigmas surrounding them, whether that be from friends, their family, potential employers and co-workers, which can take a huge toll on their mental health (Gonzalez & Connell, 2014). Ex-offenders with untreated mental health issues are at a much greater risk for correctional rehabilitation treatment failure and future recidivism (Gonzalez & Connell, 2014). It was discovered that after release from prison, former inmates who were given official diagnoses were 70 percent more likely to return to prison at least once than those who were not given a diagnosis (Gonzalez & Connell, 2014). Also, it is important to note that among those who were incarcerated, the rates of recidivism were increased to 50 to 230 percent for those with diagnosed mental health conditions (Gonzalez & Connell, 2014). With there being limited options for treatment within prison walls, it is crucial to be able to find resources and reentry programs that

focus on bettering one's mental health after prison, while also validating their fears and concerns about integrating back into society. Without the proper funding for these reentry programs, communities might see increases in crime statistics where they live, whereas ex-offenders who are not given proper treatment, will most likely retaliate. Having programs that can help provide stable jobs for mentally ill prisoners while also providing treatment at the same time, can provide ex-offenders a better chance at staying out of trouble in the future.

Although there is significant evidence in regards to the lack of successful reentry programs, there are limitations amongst these studies. When conducting a study in regards to ex-offenders, it is important to include a wider population of ex-offenders as opposed to the small pool of ex-offenders in these given studies. Obtaining a greater abundance of evidence by utilizing a larger population of ex-offenders within a study, can provide even more research as well as credibility, which can ultimately help in the persuasion of policy makers. Being able to obtain a wide array of statistics can only be beneficial as it emphasizes the very clear lack of motivation in regards to helping prisoners find sustainable jobs. Another limitation would be the lack of follow-up's for all of the participants rather than just a few. It would be beneficial to the research for the conductors of these studies to follow up with the entire amount of participants in order to receive the most accurate statistics when it comes to finding jobs post incarceration.

Ex-offenders have been shown in the research to face substantial barriers when trying to find their place within society after incarceration. Along with parole services, easier access to reentry programs are what will ultimately push individuals to have the confidence to obtain a sustainable job, which will lead to sustainable income and housing. Most offenders leave behind families when they enter the prison system, which leaves them with a tremendous amount of income to be responsible for when they enter back into society. This can be extremely

challenging due to the fact that most work places do not hire ex-offenders, and if they do, they are working low income jobs. Ex-offenders, when denied employment to which they are qualified, represents discrimination and is denying their legal right to employment opportunities. (deleted a sentence) .As stated in the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers' jobs are to pursue social change, particularly when it comes to issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice (NASW, 2021). It also states the importance of equality of opportunity, as even ex-offenders should be able to find a sustainable job in order to provide for themselves and for their families (NASW, 2021). Due to societies hesitancy in regards to hiring ex-offenders, it is important to promote the concept of believing people can change for the better. Another value that social workers should remember when working with ex-offenders is dignity and worth of a person (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021). It can be challenging working with people who have opposing views, but it is crucial to obtain a sense of professionalism as well as promote the importance of respecting one's dignity and worth regardless of the situation at hand. Regardless of background or situation, ex-offenders have and deserve the same rights to help.

Overall, there are many gaps for ex-offenders in relation to receiving services, and there is change to be made to fill in those gaps. Reentry programs are crucial to the success of an ex-offender, as these programs have been proven to decrease recidivism. Keeping ex-offenders out of trouble is crucial to our communities, and funding effective reentry programs will not only help the ex-offender, but it will help keep communities safe. Ex-offenders deal with a wide array of issues whether that be with substance abuse, violence, mental health issues and more, so finding ways to provide them with sustainable jobs to keep them out of trouble will only benefit them and the communities in which they live in as a whole.



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