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EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND THE EX-OFFENDER: SUCCEEDING IN THE WORLD OF WORK

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EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND THE EX-OFFENDER

Population and Recidivism

In 2008, nearly 750,000 adults nationally were on parole or mandatory conditional release following a prison term (1). Annually, the Missouri Department of Corrections (MO DOC) has over 30,000 incarcerated inmates, 97% of who will return home to our communities throughout the state (2). In 2008, Missouri released 18,864 persons (3). In 2007, 25% of parolees in Missouri recidivated (4,5). Since 2004, however, recidivism rates have decreased annually (6). Recidivism rates have decreased due in part to MO DOC's adoption of a more comprehensive approach to offender reentry called the Missouri Reentry Process.

Recommendations: Ex-Offenders who receive vocational and educational training are less likely to commit new crimes (7). Vocational and educational programs are cheaper to fund than the alternative: the cost of housing an offender for an additional sentence in the penal system (8). Area service providers should recognize that family reunification is often an additional incentive for an ex-offender to obtain and maintain employment.

People with convictions have significant employment barriers

Prisoners re-entering general society face a variety of barriers to success, including: unmet basic needs, substance abuse issues, mental health issues, higher risk of homelessness, higher prevalence of serious diseases, the need to reestablish bonds with support networks, a lack of education and literacy, unemployment, and lower income potential (9). Often ex-offenders lack appropriate work attire and the money to buy basic hygiene supplies. These risk factors are exacerbated by dependencies developed while institutionalized that frequently lead to poor decision making during reentry (10).

Promising Practices: Effective reentry programs and services must effectively address all barriers faced by ex-offenders. Service provision must be client-centered and culturally competent of individual clients' experience, knowledge, skills, and background (11). This requires a network of service providers that consistently and constructively communicate well with each other and MO DOC and Federal Probation and Parole Boards.

People with convictions have less educational attainment

The Urban Institute reports that "more than 80 percent [of ex-offenders have]...worked, and about 61 percent...[have] worked for a single employer for six consecutive months (19)." But relatively few prisoners receive significant occupational experience while incarcerated (20). Only 50% of inmates

had a work assignment, 35% participated in education programs, and 27% experienced vocational training (21). Professional knowledge, skills, and abilities are less developed because time spent incarcerated means time not spent in the labor market (22). Offenders undergo a socialization into prison culture that strengthens bonds while criminal elements (23). The more time an individual spends incarcerated, the less likely they are to contribute to the legal economy (24).

As with many individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, soft-skills are often a major deficiency (25). (Soft-skills include good communication and interpersonal skills, ability and willingness to learn, attention to detail, reliability, and showing up for work on time identified by employers that consider hiring ex-offenders" (26). Hard skills are typically described as the technical skills required to successfully complete job assignments.

Promising Practices: Ex-offenders who participated in prison industries or experienced vocational training while incarcerated have better outcomes (27). MO since 2004, MO DOC has increased the reentry services available to offenders approaching release. Missouri recidivism rates are nearly 8% lower for offenders with a history of vocational training/work experience (28). Offenders who obtain employment after release from prison are much more likely not to reenter the penal system (29). Service providers that provide comprehensive employment-focused case management, including a combination of life skills, job coaching (including soft-skills training), job development, and follow-up/job retention support, can dramatically improve the chances that ex-offenders not only obtain, but retain, employment (30).

Employers are often reticent to hire formerly incarcerated individuals (31). Employers indicated they were less inclined to hire a person with a criminal record, citing "lack of skills and experience, untrustworthiness, and fear of negligent hiring" as their chief concerns (32). Employers preferred not to be the first employers to hire ex-offenders after prison (33).

Promising Practices: Employer incentives are often a useful means to encourage ex-offender employment prospects. Ex-offenders may apply to become bonded (i.e., insured) for the first six months on the job at no cost to the employer (34). The US Department of Labor (DOL) underwrites the Federal Bonding program, which serves as a job-hire incentive for at-risk job seekers, and a State Bonding Coordinator oversees the process in each state (35). Subsidized employment is also another strategy to encourage employers to hire ex-offenders. A third-party social service agency typically shares the cost of an ex-offender's salary with an employer, allowing both the former inmate and employer to establish a positive working relationship. When an ex-offender establishes a positive relationship with an employer, the employer begins paying the individual's full salary. Subsidized employment typically lasts several months. These strategies are most successful when undergirded by comprehensive employment case management. Post-release development, and follow-up services are important to reducing recidivism-job training alone is not enough (36).

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