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## Pathways to Employment for Justice Involved Individuals: A More In-depth Look at the Issues

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## *Pathways to Employment for Justice Involved Individuals: A More In-depth Look at the Issues*

In the United States, after serving time in prison, many recently incarcerated individuals are released with significant and ongoing economic and societal obstacles that often prevent them from thriving in a productive manner.<sup>1</sup> While many employers make claim that they are willing to hire justice involved individuals, they often do not.<sup>2</sup> This paper will discuss the issues of justice involved individuals with regards to employment with a focus on homelessness, unaddressed trauma, mentoring, and job readiness.

### **Homelessness, Employment, and Incarceration**

Homelessness and incarceration often go hand in hand, and present a significant barrier to obtaining employment, trainings, or skill advancements upon release from jail or prison. “For many formerly incarcerated individuals, their criminal records preclude them from receiving most types of public assistance, including public housing and housing subsidies, and periods of homelessness have shown to double the risk of new convictions and reincarceration.”<sup>3</sup> On top of the challenge of finding housing that is affordable, maintaining that housing can often be incredibly challenging for formerly incarcerated people. “Researchers generally estimated that 25-50% of the homeless population has a history of incarceration. Compared to adults in the general population, a greater percentage of inmates have been previously homeless (5% of general population versus 15% of incarcerated population with history of homelessness), illustrating that homelessness often precipitates incarceration.”<sup>4</sup>

Some research has shown that the rates of recent homelessness was “7.5-11.3 times more common among jail inmates than in the general population. Homelessness and incarceration appear to increase the risk of each other, and these factors seem to be mediated by mental illness and substance use, as well as by disadvantageous sociodemographic characteristics.”<sup>5</sup> Many of the same risk factors for incarceration are also risk factors for homelessness: being poor, from a minority ethnic group, or lack of education, for example, are indications of higher risk for homelessness and incarceration.<sup>6</sup> In the same study by Greenberg and Rosenheck, the impact of past trauma and the connection with homelessness and incarceration was discussed. This study showed that “homeless inmates were significantly more likely than domiciled inmates to have been exposed to all categories of trauma, specifically to have been sexually or physically abused.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Unaddressed Trauma in the Workplace**

Trauma as it relates to mental health and substance use has been widely studied, but trauma as it relates to employment has been understudied. Trauma is the exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one or more of the following ways: directly experiencing, witnessing, learning about, or experiencing repeated traumatic events. Trauma can often affect persons differently, but there are some common characteristics of those who have been traumatized display. Those who have experienced trauma can exhibit all of the following symptoms, just a few, or even none.

People who experience trauma often struggle to concentrate and sit still, have a lack boundaries, and have low impulse control. People can also experience anger or aggression, have limited problem solving and language

skills, and avoid certain people or doing things.<sup>8</sup> Since companies are continuing to rate their employees' interpersonal skills as more important than their analytical abilities, those with unaddressed trauma and symptoms of trauma may fall short on this skill set.<sup>9</sup>

The hallmark study of trauma in childhood is the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, (1988). This study found a direct correlation between ACE scores (adverse childhood experiences) and mental health diagnosis, substance use, risk for HIV and criminal justice involvement. It also found a direct correlation between ACEs and high rate of diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and liver disease.<sup>10</sup> The few studies that are in the literature about trauma and employment focus on childhood trauma and childhood adverse experiences.

A study completed by Tam, Zlotnick, Robertson (2003) which examined about 400 homeless persons suggests that adverse childhood events may contribute to negative adulthood consequences, including consistent substance use and reduced labor force participation.<sup>11</sup> Another study completed by Sansone, Leunga, and Wiederman (2011) of a primary care sample of 369 participants suggests that childhood trauma may have a negative impact on employment into adulthood.<sup>12</sup> They also specifically found that sexual abuse in childhood was associated with a greater number of full-time jobs in adulthood as well as a greater likelihood of being fired.<sup>13</sup>

Those who have unaddressed or untreated trauma may suffer from addiction disorders, mental health disorders, and an overall lack of daily living and communication skills. The lack of skills and addition of disorders may make it hard for people with trauma to become employed and stay employed. More studies need to be conducted to identify the full risk that unaddressed trauma can have on a person's employability and subsequent job retention. It is widely acknowledged that a trauma informed care model can effectively reduce trauma-related symptoms.<sup>14</sup> A comprehensive trauma informed approach should be taken in both the initial treatment setting and job readiness courses.

Companies must ensure that staff and clients alike experience a safe, professional, and secure environment in which business can take place. Viewed through a cultural lens, employers must adapt to the needs of their employees, and incorporate a trauma informed corporate culture into their workplaces. This will allow managers to collaborate with leadership and human resources to improve resiliency components and decrease stress among their teams.

### **The Role of Mentors with Formerly Incarcerated People**

Mentoring programs have begun to show increased success with formerly incarcerated individuals. Mentoring programs with justice involved individuals, partially based on the successes of well-run youth mentoring programs, have shown to positively affect behavior. There are many different variations of mentoring programs across the US, for a multitude of populations- formerly incarcerated, youth, homeless individuals, and more. A study by the Ready4Work program in 2003 showed that formerly incarcerated persons who worked with mentors were more likely to find a job, maintained the job longer, and showed significant reduction in the likelihood of re-offending when compared to formerly incarcerated persons who did not work with mentors.<sup>15</sup>

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration, mentoring is a key component in successful reentry.<sup>16</sup> As part of the grant for The Reintegration of Ex-Offenders – Adult (RExO) program, employment opportunities, vocational training and educational interventions, and mentoring of ex-offenders were the areas that were most necessary for success upon release.<sup>17</sup> This grant opportunity defined mentoring as “a relationship over a prolonged period of time between two or more people where volunteer mentors assist ex-prisoners in successfully and permanently reentering their communities by providing consistent support as needed, guidance, and encouragement that helps participants in developing positive social relationships and achieve program outcomes such as job retention, family reunification and reduced recidivism.”<sup>18</sup>

It is important to understand not all participants will have the same needs upon release. Mentoring programs must take into consideration, the individualized needs of a participant when it comes to mentoring.<sup>19</sup> Mentors may be useful in keeping participants engaged with other crucial reentry services, such as case management or substance use programming, by encouraging those individual to continue participating in services, while at the same time serving as a positive reinforce for active involvement, helping to provide prosocial relationships, and alleviate boredom which are some of the main risk factors for recidivism.<sup>20</sup>

While mentoring of formerly incarcerated persons is a valuable addition to any reentry program, mentoring alone is not enough. Mentors should “serve as a supplement to services that address other critical reentry needs- such as housing, health care, substance use treatment, and employment.”<sup>21</sup> Best practices in the field of mentoring show that collaboration within organizations to provide multiple sources of support, such as case management, recovery coaching, employment assistance, and mentoring services have the greatest impact on lowering recidivism.<sup>22</sup> According to one study of men and women released from prison, “women often reported that the fact of being supported [by a mentor] [was] evidence of trust and affirmation of their status as a person, “which the women believed was a central part of their successful transition back into the community.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast, for men, “work training during imprisonment and employment following release” had a greater impact on their post-release experience than social contact.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Job Readiness for the Hard to Employ**

Individuals with chronic gaps of unemployment are commonly described as hard to employ.<sup>25</sup> These individuals often have external and personal factors that attribute to this classification.<sup>26</sup> With the threat of garnishment for fees such as child support, restitution and other fines and debts, hard to employ individuals, with poor financial repayment prospects, often seek informal alternatives to engage in the labor market. Modifications of these financial challenges need to be addressed if these individuals are going to thrive in the formal labor market.<sup>27</sup>

Examples of Common Characteristics of Hard-to-Employ Adults<sup>28</sup>

Family, Logistical, and Legal Challenges	Education and Skill Gaps	Needs Related to Responsiveness to Interventions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsible for child care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low education level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental illness</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-conflict family situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of occupational skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substance use disorder</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited work experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning disability</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of stable housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of “soft” job skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of motivation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal barriers to employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaps in work experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative attitudes about work</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of proper documentation</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor physical health</li> </ul>

**Source: The Council of State Governments website.**

According to Duran et al of The Council of State Governments Justice Center:

“Although the presence of a criminal record (particularly for a felony offense) typically defines individuals as hard to employ, there is still a broad range of job readiness within this group. The distinction is important. Job readiness is determined by personal characteristics that make someone more or less competitive in the labor market, including work experience and skill levels. In reality, individuals with criminal histories commonly have these deficits, but it is also possible for someone returning home after incarceration to be very capable of rejoining the workforce given past work experience, education levels, and professional and technical skills.”<sup>29</sup>

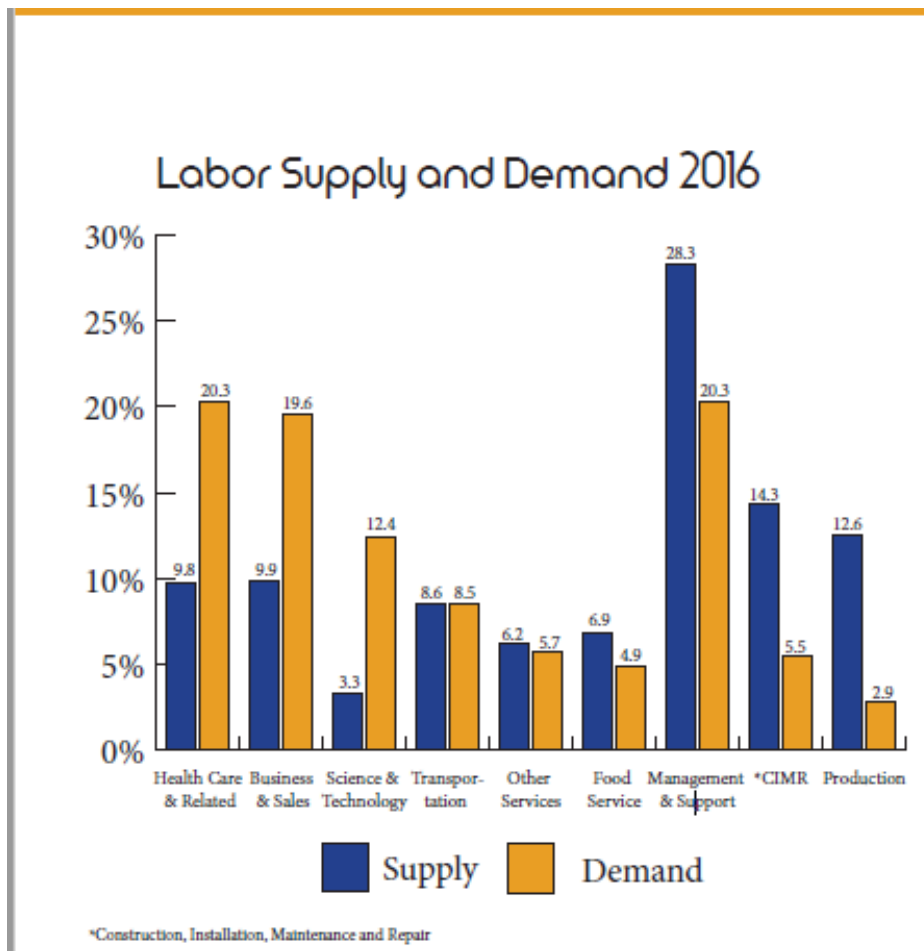
In order to improve outcomes, employment programs need to incorporate a variety of modules with the objective of achieving two goals: promoting job readiness and finding and retaining employment.<sup>30,31</sup>

Job readiness consists of:

- **Education**-imparts rudimentary proficiencies in an employment setting allowing individuals to understand the correlation between those basic skills and the labor market.<sup>32</sup>
- **Soft/Cognitive-Skill Development**-teaches life skills that concentrates on personal deficits.<sup>33</sup>
- **Transitional job placements**- a 30-90 day paid placement that allows individuals to work on their skills while cultivating their employability factors.<sup>34</sup>
- **Non-skill related interventions**-screenings that expose and address challenges that impede participation in employment programs.<sup>35</sup>

Finding and retaining employment consists of:

- **Non-transitional subsidized employment**-on the job training program that routinely leads to a permanent assignment.<sup>36</sup>
- **Job development and coaching**-used to break through obstructions caused by collateral consequences and address employer concerns.<sup>37</sup>
- **Retention and advancement** services-used to assist hard to employ individuals isolate problems and job loss.<sup>38</sup>
- **Financial work incentives**-encourages employment retention through scheduled cash payment.<sup>39</sup>



**Source: MERIC (Missouri Economic Research and Information Center)**

There are numerous benefits to hiring justice involved individuals. For employers, hiring incentives such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) allows employers to take advantage of salary reimbursements, training funds, and other tax credits when justice involved individuals are hired.<sup>40</sup> Because obtaining and maintaining employment is often a stipulation after incarceration, opportunities to hire individual with criminal backgrounds are greater than those of the general public giving employers a grander pool of applicants to choose from.<sup>41</sup> Economically, unemployed and underemployed justice involved individuals have a greater risk of recidivism converting from community asset to an unlawful burden.<sup>42,43</sup>

Lastly, for the community, employed individuals aid in stabilizing families as well as their communities while reducing the cost of incarceration on taxpayers.<sup>44,45</sup> By connecting with stakeholders, funders, the community and partnering organizations, systemic changes can be made to remove obstacles that promote success and help reduce recidivism for the justice involved.

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Simmons School of Social Work. "The Challenges of Prisoner ReEntry Into Society," <https://socialwork.simmons.edu/blog/Prisoner-Reentry/> (2011)

<sup>2</sup> Simmons School of Social Work

<sup>3</sup> Veeh, C.A., Renn, T., & Green, C., *Evidence-driven housing practices for formerly incarcerated individuals*. (AJIB071816). Washington University Institute for Advancing Justice Research and Innovation. 2016. <http://advancingjustice.wustl.edu>

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<sup>5</sup> Greenberg, G.A., & Rosenheck, R.A., Jail incarceration, homelessness, and mental health: A national study. *Psychiatric Services*, 59(2), 170-177. Doi:10.1176/ps.2008.59.2.170

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, G.A., & Rosenheck, R.A., Jail incarceration, homelessness, and mental health: A national study. P.173

<sup>7</sup> IBID

<sup>8</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 57. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 13-4801. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<sup>9</sup> Klaus, P. (2008). "*The Hard Truth About Soft Skills-Workplace Lessons Smart People Wish They'd Learned Sooner*", Collins, Inc.

<sup>10</sup> Felitte, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., et al. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults; The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 245-258. Retrieved from: <https://www.bcaci.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACE-Study.pdf>

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<sup>12</sup> Sansone, R., Leung, J &, Wiederman, M., *Five forms of childhood trauma: Relationships with employment in adulthood*.(2011). Retrieved from <http://mindmorsels.com/reprints/Sansone2012f.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Sanson, R., Leung, J., & Wiedman, M., *Five forms of childhood trauma*

<sup>14</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration. (2011, November 2). ETA Grants, Employment & Training Administration (ETA) - U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <https://www.doleta.gov/grants>

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Umez, C., De la Cruz, J., Richey, M., & Albis, K. *Mentoring as a component of reentry: Practical considerations from the field*. Retrieved from The National Reentry Resource Center. (2017) website: [www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org](http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org)

<sup>21</sup> Umez, C., De la Cruz, M., & Albis, K., *Mentoring as a component of reentry: Practical considerations from the field*

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p6

<sup>23</sup> Ibid p6, 12

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p12

<sup>25</sup> Duran, Le'Ann, Plotkin, Martha, Potter, Phoebe, & Rosen, Henry. "Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies: Reducing Recidivism and Promoting Job Readiness." The Council of State Governments. September 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Duran, Le'Ann, Plotkin, Martha, Potter, Phoebe, & Rosen, Henry. "Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies: Reducing Recidivism and Promoting Job Readiness."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid p21

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p19

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p20

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p22

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- <sup>34</sup> Ibid p24
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid p24
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid p26
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid 26
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid 27
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid 28
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