

BREAKING THE CYCLE: ADDRESSING CHRONIC UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG RETURNING PRISONERS

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Abstract

The abstract of the manuscript discusses the significance of employment and work ethic in the United States, emphasizing its role in shaping cultural values and individual identities. It explores the historical development of a work-centered culture, driven by factors like the growth of capitalism, the decline of non-wage labor, and the emergence of a middle-class. The manuscript also delves into the societal consequences of job loss, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and the importance of acquiring new skills in the face of changing job markets. Work is presented as a fundamental element of a person's existence, and its impact on individual lives is a critical subject in the social sciences.

Keywords: Employment, Work ethic, United States, Job loss, Cultural values

Introduction

Employment is one of the most fundamental necessities in any society. If you do not work, you do not eat, unless you were born into wealth and privilege and work is just one more of your hobbies. Throughout its history, a point of pride in the United States is its work-centered culture. Aristocratic values, like its prejudice against work, in particular manual labor, did not develop deep roots in this country. Several factors contributed to the dominance of bourgeois culture and what Max Weber called the “Protestant Ethic” in this country. During the second half of the 19th century, the rapid development of capitalism, and the growth of the working class that resulted from the expansion of capitalism undermined slavery and other forms of non-wage labor. The Southern aristocracy’s weakened power after the Civil War, and the emergence of a large middle-class as the consequence of mass production and the assembly line during the 20th century cemented the hegemony of bourgeois values and its work ethic in the United States. Work is one of those life activities that provide people with an existential purpose. The progress and inventiveness characteristic of the American economy for the past century and a half has a strong correlation to its citizens’ work ethic. In this country, it is common when individuals meet each other for the first time and move past the formality of knowing their names to break the ice with follow up questions related to the type of work and the careers they have. The work that we do is an integral part of our identity and our sense of worth. The literature in the social sciences is full of the economic, social, and psychological consequences that can befall a person that loses a job either because technology has made it obsolete or the employer is moving

production overseas. The realization that her job no longer exists or may never come back can be traumatic. Drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, spousal and child abuse, depression are factors that can push someone experiencing long-term unemployment into a downward spiral that can possibly end in suicide. Going back to school to get a new set of skills can be equally harrowing experience, especially if that person is in the middle years of her life. It is not a mystery why it is tough to procure quality employment for returning inmates. Most ex-inmates are unskilled workers. In the United States, the supply of unskilled labor tends to outstrip its demand. This argument is a generalization that holds for the economy as a whole despite variations between industries. Competition between unskilled workers drives their wages down to the minimum-wage laws in place by the federal and state governments. Currently, the federal government established the minimum wage across the country at \$7.29/hour. Employers cannot pay their employees below this minimum unless their occupation belongs to those exempt from federal and state minimum wage laws. However, the story of why inmates find it hard to find remunerating employment, if any at all, does not end with them being part of the unskilled labor pool.

Holzer, Raphael, and Stohl (2002) found that less than 40% of employers surveyed would “definitely” or “probably” hire an individual who had a criminal record even for an unskilled job. In their research, 92% of employers would hire a welfare recipient, 96% had no issue hiring an individual with missing work history, and 83% would hire an individual who had been without a job for a year (Holzer, Raphael and Stohl, 2002). The stigma of incarceration is deep-rooted in our culture. The nation’s history of mistrust, suspicion, and prejudice makes it incredibly difficult to convince more than one-third of potential employers to take a chance on a recently released inmate. Unfortunately, an individual’s contact with our nation’s criminal justice system in the form of arrest, conviction, or incarceration will drastically reduce his employment options after he leaves the system, notably if that person lacks skills that are in demand in the job market. The more time a person spends behind bars, the prospects of future employment diminish considerably.

Pre-Prison Employment

Before they went to prison, 56% of prisoners surveyed had worked full-time (BJS, 2000a). Losing a job or career due to incarceration will reduce a family’s income and harm its members’ socioeconomic condition. The family will have to find other income sources to soften the damage caused by the income lost from one of its primary or maybe its only wage earner. Besides facing the everyday dangers of life behind bars, the forfeiture of freedom, the stigma of incarceration, the disruption of family life, and the loss of confidence and purpose that results from failing as providers and protectors of their families are heavy burdens to bear for anyone with a conscience. Going from the role of family provider to being dependent on its members for support while incarcerated is also a source of much frustration. However, it is doubtful that things can be any different. These are some of the social and individual checks on behavior that keep most people out of jail. Besides the psychological and moral burdens of incarceration, the social and economic costs can be substantial. Working for a few cents does little to increase the

Public Policy and Administration Studies **Journal**

Research Article

nation's wealth (Bernstein & Houston, 2000). Holzer (2002) has estimated that about 1% of the nation's labor force is in prison or jail during any given day. Travis (2005) estimated that being incarcerated reduces the nation's total employment financial output by \$100-\$200 billion a year.

Future earnings will suffer once released, as ex-inmates have a slim opportunity to make up their prior earnings in a legitimate sense with the stigma attached to them from being incarcerated. The inability to find permanent employment undoubtedly means that ex-prisoners will continue to be dependent on their families, friends, their returning communities (most of whom are unprepared for their return), and government for necessities such as food, medical care, and housing.

Statistically, as ex-inmate once returned to society, continue to remain unemployed, the higher the probability that they will be tempted to resort to crime for economic reasons. Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) have theorized that the longer an inmate has been in prison, the lower the probability of gaining legitimate employment becomes. The inverse relation between long-term incarceration and the diminishing possibility of finding employment is a particularly acute problem for communities of color whose residents are disproportionately affected by lengthy prison sentences due to drug crimes. As prison sentences have increased and become lengthier due to draconian punitive legislation, after release, a poor work ethic, and inadequate social skills, have markedly expanded the probability for ex-inmates to return to a life of crime (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis, 2005).

Prison Employment

While in prison, inmates have jobs to either keep themselves busy or are put to work by the state or federal system (Travis, 2005). Prisoners work manufacturing license plates, linens, and furniture for state agencies and other state government offices. Other employment in prison consists of working in the kitchen and grounds maintenance, thus keeping busy and saving taxpayer money by using non-union workers. Alternatively, prisoners may also be used to clear highways and roads of litter and road repair. Some prisons also have computer repair shops and auto repair. There are also laundry services and sorting arriving mail as well as work in the prison library. In theory, prisoners are free labor to the state, and their labor maintains and keeps the prison's expenses lower than if the jail were to contract out to a private corporation. The reality is that while they may be working for free in the present, the state will end up paying more in the future. In a few states, prisoners may also be subcontracted out to private companies and may be paid a few cents an hour or a day for their work (Travis, 2005). Private companies use their discretion when hiring, and the skills taught are not likely transferrable to the outside world when the prisoners leave. Prisoners also work on farms either through the state or contracted with private industry.

However, overall, not many prisoners work while in prison, and in most instances, there are lengthy waiting lists to get employment and work. Prisoners cannot apply and receive a job immediately, and frequently it can take months to be provided employment.

Public Policy and Administration Studies **Journal**

Research Article

The choice of jobs while in prison is also not something that most individuals on the outside would like to do. However, there is boredom and a desire to keep busy while in prison. On average, about 50% of prisoners are working steadily in jobs while in prison (Travis, 2005). In an ironic twist, there is very high unemployment in prison. Travis (2005) found that 43% of prisoners did general maintenance, while 7% worked in prison industries (linens, furniture, etc.). Prison industry workers in the United States generated \$1.185 billion in sales from products manufactured with four states- Texas, Florida, New York, and California leading with almost half of those sales (Travis, 2005).

In the 1990s and roaring 2000s, when the stock market, real estate, and the dot-com boomed, there were plenty of jobs for almost everyone, even with limited skill and work experience. There were fewer vacancy rates for jobs, and overall incomes for most Americans, mainly the middle-class did improve before the Great Recession of 2008. However, for one group, ex-inmates, their work opportunities did not improve. While their low wages remained stable for approximately 20 years, their livelihoods and work opportunities did not improve (Holzer and Offner, 2002).

Other employment options in prison

Besides attempting to earn some money while in prison, public policy advocates have emphasized that inmates should focus on improving themselves while behind bars. In many states, behavioral modification courses on anger management, family, alcohol, drug counseling, and educational attainment through G.E.D. and college courses are provided by prisons. Some prisons offer culinary skills through corporations such as Aramark for food safety and food handling certification (Nayer, 2015).

The unfortunate problem most inmates in prison face is that there is a lengthy waiting list to enter these vocational and education programs (Bernstein & Houston, 2000). Heintze & Berger (2004) studied prisons and determined that less than 10% of inmates could participate in these types of programs while serving time. It appears that almost 90% of inmates in prison are, therefore, not actively “bettering themselves” to paraphrase what many public policy advocates criticize. After all, what good does it do for our society for inmates to be behind bars without any chance of improvement and potentially redeeming themselves when they return to society? Considering that our nation has a soft spot for giving people a second chance in life, prisons can be a good place where inmates can earn another opportunity to improve themselves with the support of government for programs and other methods of skills and job training. If adequately calibrated and designed, the time spent in these programs would be a worthwhile endeavor for productivity, even if it does not immediately contribute to our nation’s GDP.

Economics, Employment & Labor Markets

Economists have debated the widely considered hypothesis of job earnings from ex-prisoners as a robust deterrent for the possibility of future crime (Hannon & DeFina, 2010). Young and immature men in a prison surrounded

by violence and illicit criminal activity need not only positive role models while in prison to avoid these associations, but require these positive role models even more outside of prison (Travis, 2005). The exclusion of these able-bodied men from the workforce harms our GDP and is a representation of public policies that exclude them from labor market opportunities (Smith & Simon, 2020).

Associating with criminals while in prison can only harm the possibility of being able to “go straight” when they return to society (Travis, 2005). Unfortunately, when you are surrounded by violence and criminals are everywhere, it is much harder to be focused on bettering your future employment opportunities. The temptation to go back to crime once outside could be even more difficult when ex-inmates struggle to find legitimate employment, are in communities wholly unprepared to provide for them and may even be homeless and literally living on the streets.

Yet at the same time as previously discussed, these vocational and work skills programs are scarcer and harder to get into while in prison, due to budget cuts as well as a lack of focus and determination by public policy makers. Lynch and Sabol (2001) found that in 1991, 31% of ex-inmates had completed vocational training but in 1997, the number had dropped to 27%. In the same study, 43% of ex-inmates had graduated from education programs but by 1997, it had decreased to 35% Lynch and Sabol (2001).

Travis (2005) has written about the immediate and consistent pressures returning inmates face for gainful and legitimate employment. Nelson, Dees & Allen (1999) surveyed returning prisoners and discovered that finding a job was the most pressing concern when leaving prison.

Pressure is placed on ex-inmates not just from their families as well as themselves, but from state governments as well. Rhine, Smith & Jackson (1991) found that 40 out of 51 jurisdictions (including Washington D.C.) upon release of prisoners, required them to “maintain gainful employment.

Ex-offenders, as previously discussed are an extremely difficult population to provide quality employment once they return to society, but when considering ex-offenders who are also on parole, further hurdles can be theorized (Seim & Harding, 2020). Parole requires ex-inmates to submit to drug tests, mandatory job checks, treatment programs participation, curfew, travel restrictions and other stringent requirements that parole officers must enforce. In a sense therefore, by putting these obstacles in front of returning prisoners, parole while providing freedom also appears to paradoxically greatly harm the myriad potential opportunities of gainful employment (Seim & Harding, 2020).

Wolff and Draine (2003) have written that a returning inmate’s “social capital” is fundamentally altered and destroyed once they enter prison and cut ties to their community, including friends and family. Social capital theorists argue that our social links allow us to connect, apply for jobs, garner recommendations, and enter new career opportunities by trading on our social capital, i.e., our value and worth as free men and women in a capitalist society. In prison, an inmate’s social capital almost completely evaporates, and upon reentering the community,

the former inmate has to start all over creating social links. Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) have argued that the lack of social capital is why it takes ex-inmates a long time to find employment. The more time they spend in prison, the less likely they are to maintain outside social contacts that can assist them in finding employment once they are out. Unfortunately, even before prison, many inmates have gaps in their job histories, but prison exacerbates this gap exponentially (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Travis and Visser, 2003). These social networks, family, and friend connections are invaluable to direct and provide a “good word” for them for possible job opportunities (Coleman, 1990; Travis and Visser, 2003).

Another public policy problem addressed by economists is that of the “wage penalty” returning inmates may have to pay when returning to society (Western and Pettit, 2000). Incarceration establishes a “wage penalty,” that is, a drastic reduction in potential future earnings, and it also reduces considerably the ability to work in a variety of potential jobs (Western and Pettit, 2000). Additionally, because most prisons have not accurately invested in their employment opportunity programs, this means that when ex-inmates return to society, they lack the job skills that the labor market demands. To begin with, most inmates do not have the education and job skills as it is, and this detriment only becomes worse while incarcerated (Nayer, 2015). When ex-inmates return to society and cannot meet their employment obligations to themselves and their families, the government steps in with welfare assistance through housing vouchers, food stamps, Medicaid, and whatever other assistance they are eligible for or entitled to by law. If they return to a life of crime, they will eventually get sent back to prison.

Finally, while taxpayers across the country share the economic costs of crime and incarceration, the social costs fall disproportionately in the communities and neighborhoods where the ex-prisoners return. Most of these communities are poor and communities of color, thus continuing the cycle of poverty and government aid dependence. These neighborhoods already have high crime rates, unemployment, social strife, and conflict (Travis, 2005). The wage penalty becomes only another ulcer on the collective and bruised neighborhood ego. Also, many states have laws and ordinances prohibiting individuals from being able to work in jobs and professions they may want to but are barred from working in them (Travis, 2005). As previously discussed, a sizable minority of employers have hesitations and reservations about hiring ex-inmates.

Conclusion

Smith and Simon (2020) have estimated that almost seven million people are in the correctional system nationwide, including jails, detention centers, probation, parole, and prisons. They concur that there have been slight declines in aggregate corrections population but agree that the current rates are still much too high. The numbers even today appear to show that they are higher than anytime between 1900-1975.

Our correctional system numbers are higher per capita than any other nation, including China and Russia (Smith & Simon, 2020). Criminal justice policy advocates for years have called for a multi-pronged approach to curbing the desire to return to crime, such as increased employment opportunities and the ability to have records expunged.

Public Policy and Administration Studies **Journal**

Research Article

Without steady and quality employment, there can be no quality of life for inmates returning to their communities. Instead of a public policy focusing on punitive measures, even after former inmates have served their debt to society, states and the federal government need to work with private employers and non-profits to find solutions for these pressing problems. The government-private partnership should also include educational institutions such as HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions.

Without building viable communities, returning prisoners will not be successful on their return to their neighborhoods. Healthy communities require suitable, steady employment that families can support, and a community thrives. Take away one of these factors, and neighborhoods start to deteriorate, wither and eventually die. In many communities of color, such as Flint, Michigan, once steady and consistent employment went away as factories moved or closed, families fell apart, and crime and violence increased. Any policy advocate advising politicians running for office in 2020, with interest in prisoner reentry, must first provide good jobs to the community.

With the recent pandemic and its likely long-term adverse effects on our economy, automation is likely to increase. Anecdotally, the pandemic seems to be accelerating the replacement of cashiers with electronic machines in chain pharmacies, supermarkets, superstores, and the like. We anticipate that ex-inmates returning to communities already struggling with high unemployment will have a difficult time securing good, long-term jobs and careers. This trend may also affect blue-collar jobs and other types of manufacturing jobs if American companies continue to send jobs overseas. However, not everything is doom and gloom. Before the pandemic, the American economy was running on all cylinders. Unemployment was below 4%, inflation remained relatively low, and tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs were returning to the country. Whether this trend will continue after the economy finally opens completely is hard to tell. One of the economic upsides of the pandemic is the realization of the dangers associated with having our manufacturing base in other countries. The current and future administrations would have to do a cost-benefit analysis for expanding the manufacturing sector of the economy. Suppose the service sector of our nation's economy keeps expanding and manufacturing sector jobs continue their downward spiral—a trend that we have seen over the past few years may not be written in stone. In that case, we anticipate that quality jobs and careers will be more of a problem for everyone, but particularly hardhit will be returning inmates. We call upon our elected representatives at both the state and federal levels to support more humane public policies for our returning prisoners at the state and federal levels.

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