

Education and Training Needs of Ex-Offenders

Introduction

Finding a job can be very difficult for individuals with criminal records. Research indicates that ex-offenders experience substantial barriers to employment, including restrictions on hiring because of the type of criminal charge, attitudes and perceptions of employers, low education attainment, erosion of skills during incarceration, employment-ready skills, limited re-entry resources, unrealistic expectations for employment for entry-level positions, and lack of career development interventions. Research suggests that ex-offenders with jobs have a lower rate of recidivism or have a greater length of time between re-incarceration.

During the time these ex-offenders spend in prison, individuals lose work skills, forfeit the opportunity to gain work experience, and affect interpersonal connections and social contacts that could lead to legal employment opportunities upon release. After release, the stigma of their ex-prisoner status makes the job search even more difficult as illustrated by a survey conducted in the United States of 3,000 employers in four major metropolitan areas revealed that two-thirds of the employers would not knowingly hire an ex-prisoner (Visher et. al. , 2006).

Most studies show that education reduces recidivism (Jancic, 1998) although at the same time there are some studies that mentioned education may only reduce risk for certain subgroups of the prison population (Bouffard et. al., 2000). Studies that examine recidivism rates by race and gender report that African American males are at the greatest risk for recidivating within each subgroup analysis. Education appears to be a worthy investment in prison populations since it has an established link to increased employability. However, the role that education plays in an increasing successful reintegration, especially in terms of level of education has not been explored.

Research has shown that prison education provides not only the ability to obtain or improve job skills, thereby increasing employability, but also provides an opportunity for socialization which increases self-esteem and social functioning (Case and Fasenfest, 2004). In this literature scan, we will examine previous literature on the impact of education and vocational training on ex-offenders' employment. This paper will also discuss the barriers that ex-offenders may face even after they have obtained a formal education or vocational training education. As most of the studies were done in the United States and other Western countries, this paper will explore ways that we can use the studies to contextualise the findings to the Asian context.

Formal Education versus Vocational Training

A wide variety of research on educational, vocational and work programs for adult ex-offenders has shown that these ex-inmates who are employed after release are less likely to recidivate (Vacca, 2004). It appears that ex-inmates who avail themselves of educational opportunities get jobs at a higher rate, begin to pay taxes, and contribute to their community in qualitatively different ways than those who return to a life of crime. According to Wilson et. al. (2000), adult basic education and vocation programs were positively related to post-release employment and negatively related to future criminal activity. Gerald Gaes (2008) explored the role of prison education programs on post-release outcomes based on four meta-analyses, together comprising hundreds of studies. In his meta-analysis, he compared and contrasted different education programs and adjusted effect sizes

for the reduction in recidivism. Based on his study, it is highlighted that post-secondary education programs appeared to be most effective at reducing recidivism as some studies showed that there is a drop in recidivism of more than 40% for those involved on a post-secondary education programs (Chappell, 2004). Post-secondary education is defined as an education that is beyond high school and in this case, the author was looking at college education and above. The meta-analysis scan highlighted that ex-inmates who took vocational training shows a drop in recidivism by 22 percent while those who had a high school diploma shows a drop in recidivism of 18 percent.

However, the literature scan highlighted that the intersectionality of race and gender pose specific challenges for ex-offenders from ethnic minority groups. Ex-offenders from ethnic minority groups continue to face discrimination disproportionately in their community re-entry even though they have obtained a good education (Vacca, 2004). The literature emphasized that African Americans have the most substantial barriers and African American women as a subgroup, experience further challenges of re-entry because of their roles as mothers, caregivers and heads of households before they become offenders (Brown, 2010). Compared to white women, the children of African American women suffered in the foster care or become permanently severed from their families while waiting for their parents to be released from prison (Brown, 2010).

In a study conducted by Case and Fasnfest (2004), the authors held focus groups with 29 ex-inmates in which 27 were males and 2 were females. The groups were divided by race and gender. According to the study, white males were more likely to perceive college courses in prison as being beneficial, reported a higher level of self-esteem post education, more often reported that they had taken courses post release to continue their education and not likely to perceive barriers to employment post release. However, African-American males reported opposite experiences that are likely reinforced by institutionalized racism that additionally reduces opportunities. African-American males reported more value in vocational training that provided a work skill, experienced lower levels of post education self-esteem and reported more barriers to finding and maintaining employment (Case and Fasnfest, 2004). The women reported that training was only available for traditionally female occupations such as office skills and cosmetology. Self-esteem was the largest barrier to employment faced by women post release. Furthermore, many of these women are single parents, reunited with children upon release, and struggling not only with family care but also with re-establishing relationship with their children.

In a study by O'Brien (2002), it is highlighted that female ex-offenders who have not completed high school education will receive low-wage jobs and are under-employed. Low levels of educational attainment will affect the employment opportunities of women, requiring greater emphasis on educational opportunities as they re-enter the community. Low level of education is further exacerbated by the individual's ethnicity (O'Brien, 2002). Thus, in one study, the authors examined the experience of one post-release program, Project PROVE, which focuses on the needs and special circumstances of female ex-inmates; and how those circumstances may be barriers to successful reintegration and continued education and what is required to promote employability amongst female ex-inmates (Case et. al., 2005). Based on twenty in-depth interviews, it is discovered that the experiences of the women were generally positive and PROVE has helped them with their training and continuing education (ibid.). However, there is no follow-up study to evaluate the impact of education in helping these women to secure employment.

In another study which is a 5 year longitudinal study conducted in Indiana, the authors examined the importance of the ex-offender's education on re-entry and how education affects post-release employment and recidivism among different types of offenders. This study looks into 6,561 offenders who were released from Indiana Department of Correction custody throughout 2005 (Nally et. al., 2012). The sample of this study comprises of 1,142 violent ex-offenders, 3,163 non-violent ex-offenders, 361 sex ex-offenders and 1,422 drug ex-offenders. The classification of ex-offenders was then further stratified into the different educational qualifications. Based on this study, the recidivist offenders are likely to be characterized as unemployed, uneducated, African American, young and male. Secondly, the post-employment, offender's age and education are the most important predictors of recidivism amongst ex-offenders regardless of the type of offences committed. Thirdly, the ex-offender's level of formal education functioned as an intermediate factor between post-release employment and recidivism. Although employment is the primary predictor of recidivism, this study's results demonstrated that the length of one's employment was a decisive factor in reducing post-release recidivism among ex-offenders.

The effects of race, education and a criminal record on employment have been highlighted in quite a number of previous studies. For example, in a study conducted by Pyror and Thompkins (2013), the authors highlighted the relationship between education and employment opportunities across races. There were differences among white and black respondents in regard to education producing employment. The whites indicated being referred by friends and family to their current employment which highlights the importance of social capital to secure employment. However, the majority of the black respondents were unemployed or under-employed at the point of time when the study was conducted, and those who were employed attributed the obtainment of a job to referrals from agencies or to their human skills. Common occupations in which this group of respondents held were barbers, paralegals and automotive repairmen. In contrast to the white respondents, very few of black respondents cited family connections. The majority of the jobs found by the respondents involved in this study were blue collar/manual labour jobs, which required hard skills and were linked to vocational type training regardless of their race. Some respondents found jobs related to their pre-prison work history, which in most cases was unrelated to their in-prison education or training (Pyror & Thompkins, 2013). The authors also highlighted that people of colour prefer vocational training as compared to college degrees because they experience more employment discrimination and possessing marketable skills would enable them to produce immediate profit for the employer.

Furthermore, Buck (2000) mentioned that there are some barriers in hiring ex-offenders despite having the educational qualifications or skills related to the job as highlighted below.

Barriers in hiring ex-offenders

1. Employers are reluctant to hire ex-offenders
2. Ex-offenders may be categorically barred from certain types of work
3. Ex-offenders may benefit from an awareness of laws protecting them
4. A history of drugs or alcohol use may also limit employment options
5. Ex-offenders typically have legal issues beyond the crimes for which they were convicted
6. Ex-offenders often struggle as they make the transition from structured prison life to the mainstream social environment

7. Employment is critical in reducing the possibility of a return to criminal behaviour
8. The ex-offenders' ethnicity and gender may limit the certain types of work available to them

Discussion and Suggestions

Most of the studies discussed above are done in the United States. Thus, it is difficult to apply the studies and conclude that men from minority ethnic groups in Singapore will have more difficulty in sustaining jobs even though they may have obtained a diploma or degree. Further search was done to examine if there is any similar research done in the Asian context. There are not many studies in Asia that does in-depth evaluation and research on the impact of education and vocational training on ex-offenders' ability to secure and sustain employment.

In a study being conducted in the Philippines, correctional education functioned as a coping mechanism to sustain the inmates while living in the prison (Lopez, 2015). Prison schools provide a separate environment for the inmates. Academic courses are effective rehabilitative techniques only to the extent that they allow inmates to express themselves and sublimate antisocial tendencies. The authors highlighted that public participation and cooperation are required in the reintegration of the offenders and resocialization of ex-offenders. It is important to note that many ex-offenders in the Philippines do not have much access to employment opportunities due to the lack of support from the government and the aftercare services. Public participation and cooperation in the reintegration of the ex-offenders are much needed in the Philippines. Currently this study did not evaluate the impact of correctional educational on ex-offenders in finding employment after release.

As highlighted in the previous section, the interplay of ethnicity and past criminal records is very prominent in securing the outcomes of good employment. For example, in a study conducted by Pyror and Thompkins (2013), the study highlighted that even though the black respondents received further educational opportunities while in prison, their post-prison jobs were only related either to their vocational training or in-prison employment. Thus, hard job skills were more important in determining post-prison employment for this group of ex-offenders especially for those enrolled in liberal arts college programmes. The authors also highlighted that upon release, many former prisoners cannot afford to capitalise on their educational foundation as there is the interplay of ethnicity, past criminal records and gender which may determine their ability to secure employment. These findings were also reflected in another study conducted by Case and Fasenfest (2004), who also found that white males were more likely to perceive college degree as being beneficial in securing employment as compared to their black counterparts who felt that their ethnicity and past criminal offences prevented them to secure an employment even though they have a college degree. Thus, it is important to have a similar study in Singapore that looks into the effects of vocational training and formal educational training on employment.

In Singapore, inmates are highly encouraged to further their education while in prison. Education is seen as a social levelling tool regardless of whether the individual has a criminal past or not. In 2000, the Kaki Bukit Centre (Prison School) was set up to centralize teaching resources in which the inmate-students were taught academic curriculum and also given opportunities to participate in co-curriculum activities that impart life-skills and promote good social values (Tang, 2010). Apart from formal academic studies, there are also other educational programmes offered to prisoners to enhance and accelerate their literacy level such as basic literacy and numeracy courses. For those

who are more vocationally-inclined, the Workplace Literacy and Workplace Numeracy (WPLN) series which focuses on upgrading proficiency and skills are provided instead. In addition, prisoners are matched with a job prior to their release with subsequent on-the-job training attachment after release. However, there are no evaluation or follow-up studies currently being done in Singapore to evaluate the impact of education and vocational training on ex-offenders in securing and retaining employment.

As there are currently very few evaluation studies done locally to analyse the impact of education and vocational training on employment, one suggestion is to have two short cross-sectional studies that look into ex-offenders' rate of employment and whether education or vocational training affects the type of jobs that they hold. One study could look at the outcomes of vocational training in enabling ex-offenders to find a job that is related to the skills they acquired. The study could also look into whether the ex-offenders' ethnicity and gender affect their chances of securing a good job. Another cross-sectional study can examine the outcomes of having post-secondary education (beyond the GCE 'O' Levels) and how it affects the ex-offenders ability to secure commensurate employment. Additionally the impact of ethnicity and gender in such cases could also be explored.

Apart from the above suggested studies, another possibility that can be explored is to have a longitudinal study of student-inmates who have graduated from the Tanah Merah Prison School and track their progress over time. This study could look at the subject's progression to higher education and, upon completion, whether it translates to securing better employment and lower recidivism rates.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that education and vocational training reduces recidivism although at the same time there are some studies that mentioned education may only reduce risk for certain subgroups of the prison population in particular the major ethnic group in a particular country. Some studies highlight the interplay of ethnicity and gender which affects the ability for ex-offenders to secure employment. Education appears to be a worthy investment in prison populations since it has an established link to increased employability. However, the role that education plays in enhancing successful reintegration has not been explored in-depth in the Asian context as yet. It is important to address the issues that ex-offenders face in securing and retaining employment upon their release despite having the education or skills required as this would ensure that this group of ex-offenders is able to re-integrate into society. As there is a lack of research done in this area in Singapore, it is also important to note that more research needs to be conducted to examine how ex-offenders who have upgraded their qualifications and skills are coping with their reintegration into society.

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