

Recidivism: Why do ex-convicts recommit crimes?

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ABSTRACT

Stigmatization towards ex-convicts form unjust barriers hindering their access to opportunities and services, namely employment prospects, welfare benefits, and housing opportunities. As ex-convicts experience financial instability due to the lack of income, mental distress due to the constant failure of finding jobs and the sense of exclusion from others, and the overall challenges of reintegrating into society, recidivism rates soar.

Keywords: Ex-convicts, recidivism, employment, welfare benefits, housing opportunities.

Subject: Sociology

INTRODUCTION

Recidivism refers to the tendency of an ex-convict to relapse into their previous mode of behavior. High recidivism rates put strain on the already burdened prison system, reducing the resources supplied to prisoners during rehabilitation. Legal consequences post-offence, most of the time imprisonment, serve the purpose of deterring people to commit and recommit crimes, hence safeguarding order in society. However, statistics show that there is a high tendency for ex-convicts, having committed a crime, knowing and having experienced these legal consequences, to recommit crimes. With legal consequences already holding enough deterrence, other factors seem to play significant roles in determining recidivism rates. Common reasons for reoffence include not having adequate financial resources to sustain life for themselves and their family, lacking sense of self-worthiness and motivation in life, experiencing stigmatization and exclusion by others in society. These phenomena stem from two main factors: consistently low employment prospects, directly hindering the income and mental well-being of ex-convicts; and the lowered access to welfare and housing benefits, reinforcing the sense of exclusion ex-convicts experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a study by Nazak Dadashazar, Walden University (2017), statistics have shown that since 2013, 75% of ex-offenders return to prison within 2 to 3 years of their release. In terms of job opportunities, researchers suggest that the ability for an ex-offender to secure suitable employment is challenging and at times impossible (Blomberg et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2013; Lockwood et al., 2012). The study also indicates that, regarding housing issues, various challenges arise from legal problems; strict eligibility provisions, particularly for government subsidized accommodation; discrimination; and inadequate affordable housing, among other factors (Fontaine et al., 2012; Latessa, 2012).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Studies have shown that after having served their sentences, ex-convicts are often stigmatized in society, hindering their employment prospects, welfare benefits, and housing opportunities, resulting in a tendency of ex-convicts to repeat their crime despite acknowledging and having experienced the legal consequences of doing so.

Firstly, it is difficult for ex-convicts to access job opportunities. In general, companies tend not to hire people with criminal records, for instance, only 12% of companies in San Francisco openly hire people with a felony conviction on their record (Lorentzen, 2022). This is mainly due to the stereotypical image of ex-convicts, with employers thinking

that there is a high possibility of them being dishonest or even re-committing crimes in work, ultimately harming their company's reputation. Take an ex-convict of theft as an example, employers acknowledge the prospect of them reoffending, while fellow employees fear their properties being stolen. The ex-convict will likely not be hired, not because of their inability to work, but to ensure that the company's reputation is upheld and security of the company's properties is maintained. And it's not just confined to the employers, employees are usually more reluctant to work with ex-convicts due to concerns regarding their personal safety, hindering the companies' recruitment process, as well as its workplace environment in the long term. On a societal level, stigmatization will only continue to worsen in spite the recent movements toward anti-discrimination where the focus tends to be on gender equality and other attributes rather than ex-criminals. Employment is essential for ex-convicts to be reintroduced into the society, to sustain their daily living and stay out of prison, and not being able to find a job even after persistent trials results in ex-convicts' frustration and lack of motivation in life, thereby causing recidivism. In fact, because 60% of inmates released from prison are unable to find employment within one year, nearly one out of every three people released from prison will commit a crime landing them back in prison within one year of their release (Lorentzen, 2022).

Even for the minority of ex-convicts who are offered jobs, the jobs are often exploitative. Darris Young, a former incarcerated individual, stated in an interview that "One of the jobs that an agency sent me to was for the Goodwill Industries. At that time, their wage was \$8 an hour. I live in the Bay Area. It wasn't sustainable" (Diep, 2015). Agencies take advantage of the usually low education level of ex-convicts, and the fact that companies in general tend not to hire ex-convicts, to force exploitative standards on jobs offered to them. Job opportunities available for ex-convicts are usually low-paying with no potential wage increase, and unstable with a lack of labour protection. It is thus hard for ex-convicts to sustain their daily life with spendings on bills and essentials, especially when they're the source of income of their family. With such low wages, ex-convicts also have low social mobility. It's difficult for them to escape poverty and climb up the social ladder. This extends into the problem of intergenerational poverty, widening the already existent gap between the living standards of their children and others, making it even harder for their children to catch up in the future. Furthermore, being offered exploitative jobs mean that ex-convicts are less likely to be accepted into the society, and that discrimination against them is still severe, which further accelerates recidivism.

Secondly, ex-convicts have to deal with the challenges of accessing other services, namely welfare benefits and housing. There are barriers targeting ex-convicts when it comes to welfare benefits. Eugene Glover, a drug felon, applied for food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, but because his felony conviction was drug-related, his claim had been denied. "I thought, wait a minute, I finished my sentence. Why am I still being punished?" said Glover (Osgood, 2021). It's difficult for ex-convicts to access welfare benefits due to their criminal record. Previous felony convictions also act as barriers to ex-convicts' eligibility for public housing, with certain convictions directly resulting in the disqualification of one's application. The inability to access services lowers ex-convicts' living standards, causing ex-convicts' dissatisfaction and potential resentment towards the unfair treatment posed on them, increasing their likelihood to reoffend.

One may argue that there are re-entry programs that provide housing for ex-convicts. While that may be true, the demand for these programs far outweighs their supply. In Darris Young's interview, it was mentioned that, "There are waiting lists. And a lot of re-entry housing is starting to disappear because landlords aren't contracting or renting to people that want to run programs for people coming out of incarceration" (Diep, 2015). Landlords would rather sell housing to "normal people" to earn a better value, resulting in the decrease of slots available for re-entry programs for ex-convicts. Along with the many other groups of people, such as elderlies and single-parent families, Therefore, housing remains a huge challenge to ex-convicts when re-entering the society.

The employment and housing problems explained above have only exacerbated in the last few years with COVID-19 causing major disruptions to the world economy and health systems. Governments around the world have had to deploy their limited resources to try and tackle the pandemic-driven issues, leading to consequences such as fewer work opportunities and higher crime rates. With the world staring down an imminent recession, the prospects of a quick improvement to the situation are rather bleak.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the tendency of ex-convicts to recommit crimes is a result of limited and exploitative job opportunities, as well as restraints on welfare benefits and housing services when they re-enter society, as well as the underlying cause of stigmatization towards ex-convicts by the general public. This is a socially unjust issue that should be prioritized by governments around the world. Work programmes targeting ex-convicts in their early stages of release should be launched, unreasonable constraints regarding access to social services placed upon ex-convicts should be abolished. We



should strive to give hope to these ex-criminals who have served their punishment and who deserve to be given a fair opportunity to re-establish themselves in society.

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