



PROJECT M.E.N.D.

Moving Ex-Offenders in New Directions

**The Case for MEND
Employment and Re-entry Services**

Introduction

Mass incarceration in the United States grew out of approximately 40 years of zero tolerance policing policies, mandatory minimum sentencing, and habitual offender/ "three strike" statutes. These policies and laws spurred an unprecedented growth in the prison population, particularly amongst Blacks and Latinos. Michelle Alexander notes there are more black men under the control of the corrections system today than were enslaved in 1850. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported 1,571,013 people were incarcerated in federal facilities in the United States at the yearend of 2012.

The vast majority of these offenders received sentences that led to their eventual release from prison and return to their communities. As these lengthy sentences are ending, offenders are being released in large numbers. In 2010, approximately 700,000 people were released from state and federal institutions. In addressing the issue of prisoner release, then President George W. Bush (2004) in his State of the Union Address stated, "This year, some 600,000 inmates will be released from prison back into society...if they can't find work, or a home, or help, they are much more likely to commit crime and return to prison."

Once released, ex-offenders face serious barriers as they attempt to re-establish themselves in the community. These barriers fall into two categories: a lack of preparation for release and structural barriers to re-entry. Ex-offenders received little preparation for release, because budget constraints and cost cutting measures forced some prisons to curtail education and job training programs. Eliminating these programs within the prison left offenders ill prepared for life outside of the prison.

In an innovative approach to address issues of recidivism nationwide, in 2012 Goldman Sachs began investing in the first of its Social Impact Bond Investments. Goldman invested over \$9 million to provide services to adolescent male Rikers Island inmates intended to reduce the rates at which they reoffend after their release. Some of the services provided included education, job training, and employment assistance. According to their projections, Goldman could make as much as \$2.1 million in profit from this investment if recidivism is reduced by 10% amongst these adolescent male Rikers Island inmates. Alternatively, if recidivism is not reduced by at least 10 percent, Goldman will lose nearly \$2.4 million it is obligated to pay to its bond investors.

Scope of the Issue

The status of ex-offender is a "deviant identity" in the labor market. The stigma associated with a criminal conviction requires an ex-offender to carefully consider how to present themselves to employers. Ex-offender status has an impact on future job prospects. Consequently, many ex-offenders hide this status for fear of being isolated from the job market, and subjected to unwarranted scrutiny during the applications process. Often, prohibitions prevent ex-offenders from re-establishing themselves in the occupations they had prior to incarceration. To this point, the Federal Interagency Reentry Council (FIRC) reports that individuals who were employed before they were incarcerated can expect their future annual earnings to be reduced by as much as 40 % following their release. State Departments of

Corrections provide an average of \$69 to inmates upon release. In contrast, the Federal Bureau of Prisons provides from \$100 to \$500 to an inmate upon release.

Without question, poverty and unemployment influence crime and crime rates. However, researchers, Thornberry and Christenson (1984), used reciprocal hypothesis theory, to expand the notion that unemployment influences crime. Thornberry and Christenson added that crime and criminal convictions also influence unemployment. Therefore, scholars view employment as a vital element of addressing both criminal behavior and recidivism. Employment is one of many barriers ex-offenders face upon release because certain employment opportunities are not available to them. These restrictions often relegate ex-offenders to employment at the fringes of the job market. Although education, housing, health care, and employment are all issues that deter successful re-entry, the lack of employment is particularly problematic, because the other problems can be addressed once an ex-offender is gainfully employed.

Criminal justice scholars agree that employment is a vital component of any program intended to address recidivism. In fact, employment is so vital in addressing recidivism that researchers, Mears and Mestre, claim that participation in an employment training program upon their release can predict whether or not a person will reoffend. These authors assert that parole officers should view offender's lack of participation in the employment program as a harbinger to their reoffending. Unemployment and underemployment amongst ex-offenders likely leads to recidivism. Addressing the crisis of mass incarceration and the increasing numbers of people released from prison in the US requires a renewed focus on employment opportunities for ex-offenders returning to their communities. Structural issues add to the problem of ex-offenders attaining stable employment. Some federal and state laws bar ex-offenders from obtaining certain licensed and public sector occupations for a period of time. For example, regulations enacted in response to 9/11 bar ex-offenders from working at US ports. Post 9/11, some employees lost their jobs and security clearances, because background checks revealed previous convictions.

Using a duration model of age, employment, and recidivism, Uggen (2000) found that the effect of employment on reducing the likelihood of recidivism is strongest during the ages when recidivism is most likely. Here, Uggen (2000) took a closer look at the National Supported Work Demonstration Project data. The National Supported Work Demonstration Project was a program designed to test whether or not 12 to 18 months of subsidized employment would equip difficult to employ people with the skills to obtain and retain unsubsidized jobs. The intervention was tested at 15 sites around the country. According to Uggen (2000), by applying statistical analysis using the ex-offenders age and tests for equality of survival distributions, he was able to contradict previous findings that found no link between work and decreased recidivism. Uggen (2000) asserts that work is a turning point in the lives of offenders aged 27 and above. Offenders in that age group are less likely to commit crimes when provided with even marginal employment.

More importantly, employment rates among African-American male ex-offenders can be up to six percentage points lower than similarly situated men of other races with a history of incarceration. In addition, the longer an ex-offender is employed, the greater the reduction in the likelihood of reoffending. Researchers, Morenoff and Harding, assembled a set of longitudinal

data from administrative records on individuals paroled in Michigan during 2003. The data was composed of records from corrections, police, and unemployment insurance databases. These researchers sought to investigate the connection between, employment, disadvantaged neighborhoods, and recidivism. The Morenoff and Harding (2011) study found that only between 22% and 36% of ex-offenders were employed over the duration of the study. The employment rate rose from 22% in the first quarter to a higher of 36 % in the fourth quarter of the study. However, the high employment rate of 36% is somewhat misleading because it excludes offenders who returned to prison or died during the study. Had either of these categories been included, the employment rate would have been lower.

To add to the dilemma of ex-offender employment, the recent economic downturn has struck this population especially hard. As a consequence, some have associated the resulting lack of job opportunities for ex-offenders, due to the Great Recession, with increased crime rates in their neighborhoods. Hannon and DeFina (2010) found that in weak regional communities where quality jobs are hard to find, prisoner reentry is more likely to be associated with additional crime. During his testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, leading John Jay University Criminologist, Jeremy Travis reported that employment, employment training, and job assistance as a part of a comprehensive program for ex-offenders could reduce recidivism between 15-20%.

Baltimore's Ex-Offender Unemployment Problem

In Baltimore City, at a given time, almost 50% of African-American males between the ages of 18-35 are under the control of the criminal justice system, either incarcerated or under community supervision. In light of these circumstances, hiring ex-offenders can't be viewed as a mere luxury, or, an act of "generosity". When we begin to view employing ex-offenders as a matter of public safety, we will begin to make progress on this issue. It is unreasonable to think that we can alienate such a significant portion of the African-American population from the job market without severe repercussions. Our murder and crime rates prove this to be true. In the past two weeks, President Barack Obama's administration announced that we will offer a new clemency program for drug offenders previously convicted and disproportionately sentenced under Draconian crack cocaine laws. This program could commute thousands of sentences. As a result, thousands of ex-offenders receiving early release could return to our communities over the next few years. Baltimore in particular has the potential to see a large influx of ex-offenders released early. The miss-management and subsequent collapse of Prisoner's Aide Society leaves a void in the services provided to ex-offenders in the Baltimore Area. This is a void MEND can fill.