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### Idle Hands are the Devil's Workshop? Exploring the Connections between Prison-Work Release Programming, Post-release Employment and Recidivism

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**Idle Hands are the Devil's Workshop?**  
**Exploring the Connections between Prison-Work Release Programming, Post-release  
Employment and Recidivism**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on evaluations of employment-based reentry programs. It begins with an overview of recidivism, touching on the both theory and empirical research framing employment as a pivotal factor in the reentry process. Next, it reviews the limited assessments of work-release programming and their findings. The final sections examine the structural factors which complicate reentry, specifically low wages and community disorganization. And identifies the benefits of incorporating qualitative methods in criminological research as it relates to evaluating programs, their impact, and tying findings to program adaptations and future implementation.

## Introduction

Year	State and Federal Prison Population	Variance %
1978	306,602	
1980	329,122	7%
1982	412,303	20%
1984	462,442	11%
1986	546,659	15%
1988	627,402	13%
1990	771,243	19%
1992	883,593	13%
1994	1,053,738	16%
1996	1,182,169	11%
1998	1,302,019	9%
2000	1,381,892	6%
2002	1,440,655	4%
2004	1,496,629	4%
2006	1,570,861	5%
2008	1,610,446	2%
2009	1,613,740	0%
2010	1,612,395	0%
2012	1,570,397	-3%
2014	1,562,319	-1%
2016	1,508,129	-4%
2018	1,464,385	-3%
2020	1,221,164	-20%
2021	1,204,322	-1%

Note: Data sourced from National Prisoner Statistics (NPS) Program, Department of Justice Statistics. See references for full citation

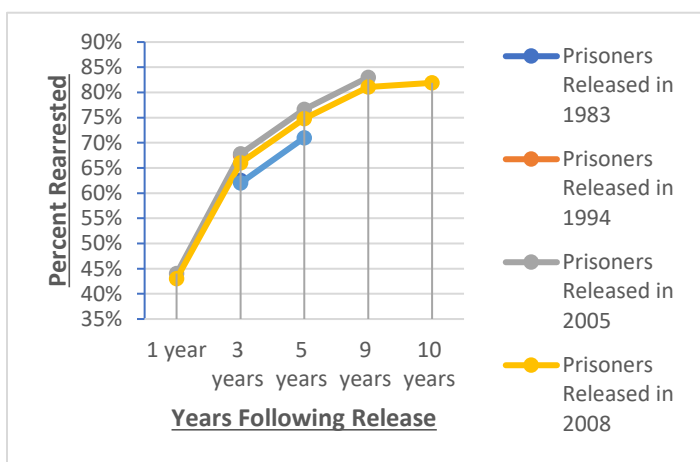
In the United States, over 1,200,000 persons were imprisoned at yearend 2021 (Carson, 2022) and over 1,600 adult correctional facilities housed them (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021). Prisons are generally comprised of those convicted of a crime and have one year or longer sentenced term (James, 2014). Prisons are considered a tool through which future crime can be hindered by individual *incapacitation* (Cullen, et al., 2011, p. 51S), and through such removal institute a diversion in behavior and curb future offending (Cullen, et al., 2011 p. 50S). However, not all correctional facilities are the same, as some are designed to better address the causes of incarceration or suit the needs of those housed there. Examples of different adult correctional facilities in the U.S. include those with a mental health/psychiatric focus, programs and facilities offering alcohol/drug treatment, facilities designed for geriatric care, as well as ones which implement community corrections/work release/prerelease programming. In fact, community prerelease and work release programming make up over 25 percent of all correctional facilities operated (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021).

The reentry process for the formerly incarcerated warrants significant focus. The sheer volume of U.S. prison system means hundreds of thousands are released from prison across the United States annually. In addition, 95 percent of all those imprisoned are expected to be released at some point (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). The formerly incarcerated routinely encounter barriers upon release including difficulties gaining post-release employment. This is especially true of stable and gainful work offering livable wages or increased earning potential (Looney & Turner, 2018; Rampey et al., 2016). While community prerelease and work release programming house less than 5 percent of all prisoners (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021) they offer promise in slowing the ‘revolving door of corrections’ (Apel, 2011, p. 939).

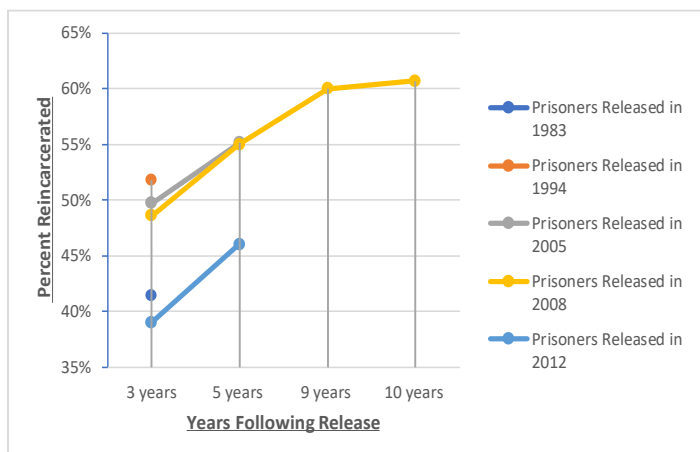
This paper focuses on evaluations of employment-based reentry programs. It begins with an overview of recidivism, touching on the both theory and empirical research framing employment as a pivotal factor in the reentry process. Next, it reviews the limited evaluations of work-release programming and their findings. The final sections provide context on structural factors complicating reentry, specifically low wages and community disorganization. They also highlight some of the benefits of incorporating qualitative methods in criminological research as it relates to evaluating programs, their impact, and tying findings to program adaptations and future implementation.

## The Rise of Prisons and Recidivism

Since the 1970s, the U.S. prison population rose steadily, peaking in 2009 with 1,613,740 inmates. Policies like mandatory minimum sentencing, three-strikes laws, or truth-in-sentencing focused on the punishment of offenders and resulted in longer sentences (Vieraitis, 2007). This punitive crime defense strategy proved consequential and strained correctional capacity. Also, its disproportionate enforcement contributed to overwhelming discrepancies in incarcerated populations, explicitly along class and racial lines (Conyers, 2013). Due in part to a decline in crime, slowed arrest rates, shifting political ideologies, the high cost of incarceration, pressure for social and racial justice, and convincing research (Clear, 2021) U.S. prison populations overall have decreased by almost 25 percent over the last ten years (Carson, 2022). Despite this



dramatic reduction in its prison populations the United States still has one of the highest incarceration rates, and highest number of people incarcerated, in the world. As such, associations with courts, sentencing, and prison has become a normative experience for millions of individuals, particularly communities of color, and their families (Franco-Paredes et al., 2021).



Recidivism, commonly defined as rearrest or reincarceration, is the primary measure of successful reentry into the community post-release and prison (Cullen et al., 2011). Disconcertingly, recidivism rates among prison releasees are challengingly high. Comprehensive nationwide statistics on post-prison release recidivism rates are scarce, but available data finds the three year rearrest rate has not been lower than 62.5 percent since 1986, and neither has the three-year reimprisonment rate of 41 percent that same year (Langan & Levin, 2002) until

a 2021 report found a 39 percent three year reincarceration rate (Durose & Antenangeli, 2021). Further, rearrests and reimprisonments increase as observation periods extend for longer periods. For example, five-year follow up statistics show upwards of 71 percent of prison releasees being rearrested, and over 55 percent returning to prison (Durose et al., 2014). By year ten, rearrest rates reach as high as 82 percent of those released being rearrested, and as many as 61 percent returning to prison or receiving a new prison sentence (Durose & Antenangeli, 2021). (See tables 2 & 3).

High recidivism and incarceration rates come with financial and social costs that are felt directly and indirectly. Direct monetary costs of recidivism and crime include the funding local, state, and federal governments must allocate to the human and physical infrastructure of law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and correctional services (BJS, 2022). For example, county and municipal governments spent nearly \$30 billion solely on corrections in 2017 (Buehler, 2021). Repetitive criminal acts of the previously incarcerated means victims can suffer financial losses like lost or stolen money, goods, or property as well as damages to goods or property (BJS, 2022). In Illinois alone, a single event of recidivism is estimated to cost over \$150,000 (Moreno et al., n.d.). Indirectly, communities suffer as areas with high crime and arrest endure disinvestment leading to blight and a reduction in the quality of life of members. Victims of crime can also be physically or psychologically harmed diminishing their ability to garner future wages thus jeopardizing the economic and social fabric of communities (BJS, 2022).

The United States has witnessed dramatic reductions in violent crime over the last three decades (Thompson & Tapp, 2022). Yet, prison's ability to reduce future offending is contested, and studies suggest prison itself may even have a criminogenic effect (Cid, 2011; Cook & Hanes, 2021; Cullen et al., 2011). Loeffler and Nagin's (2022) review of more than twelve imprisonment effect studies found imprisonment has little influence on one's likelihood to recidivate, suggesting research explore what happens outside prison walls (i.e. reentry) as the broader reintegration and treatment within society substantially influences one's ability to remain free of re-offense. Perhaps the most important variable in successful reintegration is employment. Indeed, research overwhelmingly suggests that an individual's employment status is highly related to recidivistic behavior; even when tested against the influence of pertinent variables such as defendant's age, charge severity, educational level, and race and ethnicity (Lockwood et al., 2015; Lockwood et al., 2016; Nally et al., 2014; Western, 2002).

### **Theories of Employment and Crime**

Scholars have theorized for decades that factors surrounding employment and the economy influence crime. For example, Merton's (1938) strain theory asserts criminal behavior is a product of existing discrepancies in one's goals and one's structural or legitimate means to attain them. This effect is particularly formidable when capitalistic ideologies, especially those which reward efficiency or achievement, penetrate the very institutions (e.g. families, schools) responsible for instilling and regulating cultural values and goals (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2012). If employment is to provide one the means to attain goals (e.g. status, needs, values) then a disassociation with, at a minimum, financially motivated criminal activity would be a logical result (Ramakers et. al., 2017). Economic theories like Becker's (1968) work follow similar patterns of logic, and view the income associated with employment as a mechanism which lessens the likelihood of one committing economically motivated crime (Lageson, & Uggen, 2013). Further, when the consequences of criminal activity outweigh the benefits of participation, like losing one's income for example, choices resulting in criminal behavior would be expected to dissipate (Ramakers et. al., 2017).

Hirschi's (1969) social control theory position the socialization experienced by those employed as a means of control, generally as a result of the conventional relationships obtained through employment, albeit co-workers or employers. These new relationships can create stronger social bonds through interactions and learning, as well as replace less conventional historical influences in one's life, thereby resulting in greater attachments to broader society, conformity, and law-abiding behavior (Ramakers et. al., 2017). While these theories focus on different aspects and influences in the process of criminal activity, such as social structures (Merton, 1938), social organization and socialization (Hirschi, 1969), or rational choice (Becker, 1968) they all position employment as a pivotal factor in one's everyday decision-making and lived experience (Ramakers et. al., 2017). Research into the reentry process of ex-prisoners also strongly supports the association between employment and recidivism.

### **Employment and Recidivism**

In line with theory, gainful post-release employment, has been shown to help individuals build attachments to society through the construction of social ties and connections with community, as well as support themselves and their family members and children (Latessa, 2012). For previous offenders, employment provides not only material rewards, but can also help reconstruct one's self-identity after being released (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). Employment influences peer networks, and for ex-offenders, has been shown to help substitute less positive influences in one's life with more prosocial ones (Wright & Cullen, 2004). Overall, those who find employment after prison recidivate at lower rates than those who do not (Kolbeck et al., 2022; Nally et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, employment is a hurdle for most post-release individuals (Bushway et al., 2007; Moses, 2014; Visher et al., 2005) and the unemployment rates of previous offenders are substantially higher than those of the general population (Nally et al., 2014). For example, a 2018 nationwide study of over 2.9 million ex-prisoners found only 55 percent reported any earnings during the first full calendar year of release (Looney & Turner, 2018). Another study found one-third of individuals in prison reported unemployment prior to incarceration (Rampey et al., 2016). For context, even the highest civilian national unemployment rate in decades of 14.7 percent in April 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.), does not come close to rivaling the unemployment rates of the previously incarcerated. Prolonged and consistent unemployment breaks family and social bonds (Brand, 2015), leads to higher incidents of depressive episodes and poorer mental health for those experiencing it (Pelzer et al, 2014), as well as increases excess morbidity at both the individual and population levels (Jin et al., 1995).

Post-release employment is further complicated by the criminogenic effects of incarceration in the form of labeling and barriers. Things like criminal histories and stigma against ex-prisoners are well cited as an inhibitor of employment, as well as a major contributor to crime and recidivism (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2002; Bushway et al., 2007; Page et. al. 2007; Moses 2014). Advances in technology have only made conducting criminal background checks easier more routine even while they remain a poor measure of guilt (Goggins & DeBacco, 2020; Murphy et al., 2011).

We know imprisonment is directly linked to ill-health, and future ill-health (Wallace & Wang, 2020) reducing one's human capital available to labor markets (Loeffler & Nagin, 2022). Beyond health, social stigma (Feingold, 2021; Schmitt & Warner, 2011) and criminal background checks (Holzer et al., 2007), other barriers such as low educational attainment (Page et al., 2007), inadequate housing (Schneider, 2018), poor mental or physical health (Solomon et al., 2004), racial or ethnic prejudice (Holzer et al., 2006) as well as outright prohibition (Schnepel, 2018) contribute to the underemployment and unemployment of formerly incarcerated individuals.

For those that do secure employment, their work is commonly temporary, low wage labor lacking benefits or stability (Ramakers et al., 2017; Schnepel, 2018). Inability to compete on the job-market hampers wages, concentrates employed post-release individuals in certain industries such as construction, food and waste services, basic administration work, and other help services (Lichtenberger, 2006; Schnepel, 2018). Average earnings for employed post-releasees range from \$2,300 a month in construction, to around \$1,300 for administration work and waste services (Schnepel, 2018). Other estimates found the wages of ex-prisoners range from \$1,300 to \$2,500 (Western & Sirois, 2019) a monthly average totaling only slightly above the national minimum wage of \$7.25. Importantly, intersections of low educational attainment, absent work experience, disparities in skill level, racial and gender pay gaps, as well as deficits in human capital cause the wages of post-release individuals to range widely. Looney and Turner (2018) found 45 percent of releasees had no earnings, average annual earnings were \$13,890, and only 20 percent earned more than \$15,000 one year following release. Nearly 95 percent of those incarcerated will be released (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.), and more than 443,000 persons were released from state and federal prisons in 2021 (BJS, 2022). High volumes of releasees mean hundreds of thousands are returning to communities annually, and correctional services have sought to address issues surrounding employment in one manner through the use of employment-based reentry programs.

### **Prior Research on Employment-Based Reentry Programs**

Employment-based reentry programs prioritize successful, long-term reintegration in society to improve community safety, employment outcomes, and reduce recidivism (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Drake et al., 2009; Solomon et al., 2004). These facilities gained popularity and expanded through the 1970s (Turner & Petersilia, 1996) but work-release facilities are conjoined with prerelease and community correctional facilities in the census of U.S. correctional facilities. Therefore, determining exactly how many facilities exist is not possible due to data constraints. We do know however, community-based facilities make up over 30 percent of all adult-correctional facilities, but they only house 4.6 percent of total prisoners nationwide. Most recent data show there were 451 community corrections/work release/prerelease facilities in the United States as of mid-year 2019 (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021).

Specific program conditions vary, but prison employment-based reentry programs generally allow enrolled participants, normally low-risk level individuals close to their release date, to exit standard correctional housing for work outside prison walls (Jung, 2014; Turner & Petersilia, 1996). After work, participants return to prison, a local jail, or a separate dedicated housing facility (Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Duwe, 2015).



Arrangements are designed to introduce aspects of independent living while also maintaining contact and supervision (Routh & Hamilton, 2015) in hopes of slowing the ‘revolving door’ of corrections (Apel, 2011, p. 939).

Prior research into employment-based reentry programs has mainly focused on programmatic ability to cost-effectively improve participants’ post-release employment outcomes and lower recidivism rates. Analyses of work release programs have found program participation increases post-release employment rates, as well as hours worked for participants; especially for those who complete programming (Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Duwe, 2015; Jung, 2014). In Florida for example, work release participants were five times more likely to gain employment post-release compared to non-participants (Bales et al., 2016). However, these gains in employment do not necessarily translate to higher incomes, and if they do, it is mostly a result of greater number of hours employed. Evaluations of work-release programming report little differences in hourly wage compared to control groups (Duwe, 2015) no differences at all (Bohmert, 2012; Jung, 2014) or did not report them (Routh & Hamilton, 2015; Bales et al., 2016). Overall, studies suggest work-release programming throughout the United States can significantly improve employment obtainment for participants and completers, yet post-release wages appear to remain hindered.

Cost-benefit analyses find work-release programs generate income for participants which can help with fines, restitution, personal savings, as well as contribute to millions in cost avoidance in incarceration (Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Drake et al., 2009; Duwe, 2015). For example, payments to the State General Fund from program participants, as well as estimated incarceration cost savings combined to a whopping \$5,922,000 net benefit over five years for the State of Kansas (Kansas Department of Corrections, 2009). Washington’s work-release programming generated benefits to the State of \$2,288 per participant (Drake, et al., 2009) and Minnesota’s EMPLOY program saved an estimated \$1.25 million over a three-year period, or around a \$700 benefit per participant (Duwe, 2015). Generally, findings suggest work-release programming has a high return on investment, and potential to serve as a viable alternative to traditional correctional housing and programming.

Yet, research into work-release’s propensity to reduce recidivism is less conclusive. Duwe’s (2015) study found program participation lowered the likelihood of rearrest or reconviction in upwards of 17 percent yet increased the likelihood of technical parole revocation by a dramatic 78 percent. Some researchers have found more modest reductions (1-10 percent) in recidivism and post-release criminal activity attributed to program participation (Bales et al., 2016; Drake et al., 2009; Kansas Department of Corrections, 2009). Others have found no direct or statistically significant evidence of prison work-release programming uniformly reducing recidivism for all participants, or all measures of recidivism (Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Routh & Hamilton, 2015).

Evaluations suggest inconclusive findings may be related to how reentry success varies widely per participant characteristics, such as type of crime, prior criminal history, as well participant gender, age, community or familial ties (Berk, 2008; Listwan et al., 2006; Turner & Petersilia, 1996). Others have suggested lackluster effects on recidivism are associated with the stand-alone format of service offered (Bohmert & Duwe, 2012) and suggest tailoring programming to address participant’s individual deficits (Routh & Hamilton, 2015; Zweig et al., 2011).

Others suggest coupling employment programming with educational opportunities and vocational training, as these types of in-prison programming have been shown to reduce recidivism among participants by as much as 43 percent (Davis et al., 2013). Addressing the educational deficits that plague previously incarcerated individuals and obstruct the obtainment of higher quality jobs could be a key factor to finding stable employment and increasing their occupational level (Ramakers et al., 2017). These types of opportunities are also desired, but not always available for enrollment. One study found as many as 70 percent of prisoners surveyed wanted to participate in skills-based training or educational/vocational programming, but only 23 percent had participated (Rampey et al., 2016). Nonetheless, generalizable conclusions of the effects of work release programming on diverse participants are difficult to assert, and further research that takes into account the nuances of offender reentry and that utilize refined methodologies is needed (Bales, et al., 2016; Bushway & Apel, 2012).

Research into the effectiveness of employment-based prison work-release programs is sparse and dated (several are almost 50 years old (Jeffrey & Woolpert, 1974; Rudoff & Esselstyn, 1973; Witte, 1977)). Additionally, more recent evaluations suffer from methodological issues such as excluding women and non-violent offenders. It is also clear that these programs do not substantially increase wages for participants, and findings related to their impact on recidivism are complicated as a result. These evaluations also focus solely on individualistic characteristics like prior criminal history and activity, sanctioned offense class, or demographics such as participant age, or race for their analyses. While these are relevant characteristics, no prior evaluations account for the structural aspects of the communities to which program participants return and as a result, their conclusions on the effects of work release programming, namely on recidivism, are less robust. Finally, contemporary evaluations of work-release programming have relied exclusively on quantitative techniques (Bales, et al., 2016; Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Duwe, 2015; Jung, 2014; Routh & Hamilton, 2015; Turner & Petersilia, 1996). These evaluations do utilize advanced techniques like propensity score matching to better estimate treatment effect, or large sample sizes to mitigate the effects of confounding variables. However, testimonies, oral histories, and personal narratives play an enormous role in constructing a basis of knowledge not accessible through quantitative methods of research (French, 2019) and incorporating the voices of those with lived experience of reentry is an opportunity to approach understanding the effects of these programs in a historically unexplored way and address gaps in knowledge. The final sections provide context on structural factors which complicate reentry, specifically low wages and community disorganization. They also highlight some of the benefits of incorporating qualitative methods in criminological research specifically as it relates to evaluating programs, their impact, and tying findings to program adaptations and future implementation.

## **Poor Wages Complicating Reentry**

We already know large amounts of people post-release do not have employment at all, and those who do suffer from a myriad of barriers normally resulting in poor labor outcomes. Evaluations of work-release programming report small differences in hourly wage compared to control groups (Duwe, 2015), no differences at all (Bohmert, 2012; Jung, 2014), or did not count them (Routhe & Hamilton, 2015; Bales et al., 2016). For instance, Illinois' Adult Transition Center participants earned on average \$1,968 per quarter after release (in 2023 dollars) (Jung, 2014). That is \$7,872 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.), which is 185 percent below the federal poverty line for a single individual (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

Research shows that those with higher paying jobs fair better upon release (LaBriola, 2020). For example, one study found post-release employment reduced the likelihood of returning to prison within two years by over 25%. Though among those employed, those highest paid were 50% less likely to return; essentially doubling employment's 'effect' on likelihood of reincarceration (Berger-Gross (2022). Other studies reify this finding and suggest that 'not just any job will do' (Ramakers et al., 2017, p.1812) but rather job characteristics like occupation level and longevity are associated with lessened criminal activity. Further, jobs which are good paying are more likely to be associated with other benefits (Schnepel, 2018), and for previous offenders could be more likely to provide the tangible rewards and social atmosphere theories position as primary deterrents.

If evaluations of employment-based reentry programs seek to measure how program participation influences dissonance from, or participation in, criminal activity (i.e. recidivism) then the results of studies ignoring the significance of low-wages and poverty's bearing on individual's lives are thereby skewed, as research tells us income and class are confounding variables and warrant significant consideration. This is a particularly important gap in knowledge revealed by a review of existing literature and evaluations of employment-based reentry programs. Prior evaluations consistently report increased wages and hours worked among program participants. Yet, the higher incomes of participants are due to greater number of hours worked. Despite increased hours worked, Illinois ATC participants would be 185 percent below the poverty line for an individual in 2023. Future research should do better to distinguish the effects of poverty and crime for participants, especially if poverty level wages continue to be reported among participants post-release.

## **Community Disorganization Complicating Reentry**

Decades of incarceration, over-policing, extended probation, and other interactions with the criminal justice system has destabilized communities, particularly those which are poor and of color (Remster and Kramer 2018). This, combined with the historical economic and racial segregation of U.S. means releasees are concentrated within certain geographies. In Chicago for example, a 2005 study found more than half of released male prisoners returned to just seven city neighborhoods (Visher & Farrell 2005). Large numbers of individuals removed from a community means they suffer from a loss of civic capacity, social capital and collective efficacy as relationships are disturbed and large numbers of members are not present to participate (Drakulich, 2012). These circumstances then limit both present and future community resources (Rose & Clear, 2001) and are associated with increases in child poverty, and future incarceration (DeFina & Hannon, 2010; Looney & Turner, 2018). With an estimated 10 million children having had a parent incarcerated during their childhood, the negative externalities of imprisonment in the forms of familial and social disorganization reaches generations of families and communities (Schneider, 2018).

Beyond the family, labor market research finds that the success of ex-prisoners reentering communities is sensitive to job availability (Yang, 2017), and notes that when higher paying jobs among sectors which are predominately accessible to the formerly incarcerated exist recidivism lessens for those prison cohorts (Schnepel, 2018). Theories attest that relationships through work and family foster social control (Hirschi, 1969) however it appears that incarceration patterns in their current form not only destabilize the family structures and local labor markets of the communities releasees reenter, but also increase levels of violence, crime and poverty which foster criminal activity as a result (Drakulich, 2012; Vieraitis et al., 2007).

Community disorganization is a criminogenic by-product of prison and one of the many collateral consequences of mass incarceration we experience societally. The effects of prisons on low-resourced and minority communities has drawn widespread attention, and challenges to, incarceration practices. Nonetheless, the absence of these factors and their consideration in empirical research into the effects of employment-based reentry programs causes two things to happen. First, outcomes of these studies either obscure the effects of familial and community characteristics causing other factors such as race, ethnicity, or class to absorb their influence, or they remain unmitigated factors unaccounted for, yet surging through, our studies. Second, and perhaps more importantly, ontological assumptions go unchecked as to the direction of relationships and where studies should orient their focus and direct their questions. Properly identifying the effects of participation, prison, or community structure are necessary as conclusions surrounding the effectiveness of reentry programs hold real authority and are used to craft policy which shapes the lives of individuals and communities across the U.S. (Nurand & Nguyen, 2023).

## **The Narratives Complicating Reentry**

Research is a powerful tool that shapes the ways we view topics, approach them, and ultimately understand them. Traditional boundaries between researchers and subjects concentrates power in the hands of researchers and the institutions that direct them. This consolidation of power means the topics explored, the findings validated, and the narratives disseminated tend to be homogeneous. Moreover, quantitative methodologies perpetuate this power imbalance, and thereby monolithic viewpoints, reaffirm the separation between researchers and subjects, and succumb to the same notions of legitimacy, soundness, and strength (Farrell et al., 2021).

On the other hand, qualitative methodologies are both complicated and complemented by disruptions and reflexivity in the research agenda, and by employing these methods one could improve a field which has been critiqued for its epistemological practices (Potter, 2015; Williams, 2017). Criminology also lacks in historical context and nuance, and scholars often only choose to include the history that they view as relevant (Yeomans, 2019). The discipline's historical truancy only exacerbates its inability to approach topics such as the role of politics, power, and the State more critically and with question (Frauely, 2016; Yeomans, 2019).

Participatory research is one form of qualitative work that positions those with lived experiences as the drivers of the research study with the presupposition that those most affected by the topic have insight academic researchers would not. This shift relinquishes power over the questions asked, how best to answer them, and the findings ultimately compiled and shared. Also, the formerly incarcerated have access to spaces traditional researchers do not, and people may divulge more information as a result of increased trust making findings more generalizable and accurate. Recommendations for program or policy adaptation derived from participatory research may be more feasible and accepted by the community responsible for generating them. An incorporation of their lived history could also lead research to include relevant community conditions, educational experiences, or childhood factors identified in the literature relevant to recidivism and arrest yet absent from empirical investigation from evaluators. Given the irregularity in findings related to recidivism and work-release, reframing questions and diversifying sources should extend beyond small variations in samples or statistical measures. Using participatory research evaluators could include different agents in the research process and produce more reliable and ethical studies (Farrell et al., 2021; Swaner & Sheppard, 2022).

## **Directions for Future Research**

Recidivism and reentry are multi-layered phenomena and their study requires an approach which incorporates multiple, and diverse, methods to more comprehensively develop an understanding of its complexity (Miller, 2014). Existing evaluations of employment-based reentry programming rely heavily on quantitative methods to determine program outcomes. In addition, a review of the existing literature reveals these evaluations exclude several important reentry factors such as the influence of job and community characteristics. Inconsistent findings relating to a primary program outcome (e.g. reduction in recidivism for participants) could be a result of inadequate methodology and insufficient data on behalf of evaluators.

A mixed-methods approach incorporating qualitative methods may be better suited for evaluating reentry programs, as the potential variation in program design and implementation across programs, providers, and states, means statistical measures may not appropriately treat and account for these variations. Nur & Nguyen's (2023) reviewed over thirty-one evaluations of custodial prison work or vocational programs and reported large discrepancies in key characteristics making conclusions surrounding their influence implausible to justify. They argue there not only needs to be a more cohesive literature surrounding these programs, but that process evaluations using qualitative methods to ensure intended and consistent program execution must occur in concurrence of any statistical evaluation efforts. Further, by detracting from overarching program outputs, and a binary view of success and failure, mixed-methods research can identify program elements of program effectiveness which would otherwise be ignored or skewed (Nurand & Nguyen, 2023).

Even well-established programs may not be prepared for evaluation. Evaluators must ensure there is standardization across data collection points, including generating and inputting data. Even if there is congruency, programs may not lend themselves to the reporting elements necessary for an evaluation, particularly if seeking to determine program impact or outcome. Performance measures do not always translate to outcomes, and often do nothing to tell us 'how' or 'why' the events occurred (Perrin, 1998). Evaluations seeking to determine program impact must have a viable comparison or control group derived from controlled methods, as well as longitudinal data points and study elements/design that allow for follow-up periods to measure impact or change. Documenting important program aspects (differences in programming per facility, variances in treatment staff or dosage, dynamics in participant engagement, etc.) is vital for increasing confidence in any statistical outcomes reported by evaluators (Miller, 2014). Often determining these, as well as identifying specific program influences necessary for consideration in an evaluation, requires field work on behalf of evaluators.

Triangulation is a methodological practice which prioritizes the convergence of multiple data points for topic in order to broaden prospects of comprehension as well as verify knowledge from other sources as they reappear across collection points (Carter et al., 2014). In fact, field work of this nature is commonly conducted prior to designing, funding, or implementing program assessments to assist programs in determining, or achieving, their preparedness for an evaluation.

For instance, an evaluability assessment is a tool commonly used to assist programs in determining their preparedness for an outcome evaluation. They can help programs determine the viability, feasibility and necessity of an evaluation; decide if an evaluation can contribute to improved program administration or management; as well as illuminate the tasks and changes needed for future evaluation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Community Toolbox, n.d.). Evaluations need congruency in many aspects of information reporting in order to effectively measure program features and outcomes, and may be in need of developing a logic model used to depict the dynamics between inputs (e.g. programming components), outputs (program impact), manners of measurement, and goals over time. Commonly, researchers utilize methods such as participant observation, interviews, or hold focus groups to gather the necessary data and help best assess readiness for evaluation, as lack of clarity surrounding key program elements to be measured would prevent the assessment of these features (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Community Toolbox, n.d.).

Studies utilizing interviews and participant observation have helped reentry programs reveal unaccounted barriers in program participation and improved our understanding into how different post-release experiences shape their activity. During in-person interviews, some Halfway House participants discussed barriers to reentry success such as transportation issues. Some also mentioned how the geographic location of their facility was far from their community, therefore they had to quit the job they maintained during program participation upon completion. Others mentioned the importance of social networks, and research revealed the intersectional aspects of barriers which were not necessarily derivative of program implementation, yet clearly influenced their ability to remain employed and crime-free upon release (Cantora, 2015). Other studies have identified specific program elements benefitting participants permitting a greater focus on successful elements for future consideration in research. Field work revealed collateral or secondary benefits to program participation like low inmate violence, which were previously unidentified as program outcomes. In addition, thoroughly examining program implementation across different sites through a combination of interviews and field research, researchers were also able to validate the quantitative conclusions on treatment effect were justified and not spurious (Miller, 2014).

## Conclusion

Remaining incarcerated for even a few hours can negatively affect familial, employment, or other life obligations, but long-term imprisonment is a disruptive force which imposes a number of deprivations like the loss of liberty, relationships, autonomy, and security (Sykes, 2007). In 2021, U.S. prisons housed 265 percent more prisoners than just 40 years prior. That same year, over 443,000 prisoners were released nationwide (BJS, 2022). Many of these individuals will return to already disadvantaged communities, and as a result face circumstances which heighten the likelihood of recidivism (including familial, housing, economic instability, and over-policing) (Drakulich, 2012; Lin et. al, 2010). If nothing changes, no less than 60 percent of them will be rearrested, and 39 percent reincarcerated within three years of release.

Evaluations of employment-based reentry programming report increased employment and hours worked for participants compared to those who do not participate in such programs (Bales et al., 2016; Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Duwe, 2015; Jung, 2014). They also appear to save money for governments by offering a lower cost of incarceration per inmate and help participants pay fines or restitution related to their sentences (Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Drake et al., 2009; Duwe, 2015). However, evaluations report large discrepancies in programmatic ability to reduce recidivism for participants, with some finding no impact at all (Bales et al., 2016; Bohmert & Duwe, 2012; Drake et al., 2009; Duwe, 2015; Kansas Department of Corrections, 2009; Routh & Hamilton, 2015).

Given the scope of work-release programming, as well as the enormous level of expenditure on corrections, more comprehensive findings related to recidivism are needed, especially for programs which have been found to improve employment obtainment as well as reduce the cost of incarceration per inmate. However, evaluations need to incorporate a broader range of factors, voices, and methods to improve inconsistency among findings and better understand employment-based reentry programs to determine their impact. For far too long, the correctional system has operated without evidence-based direction or logic; guided rather by rhetoric and unverified claims of success (Cullen et al., 2011). Scholars too must broaden their ‘criminological imagination’ and pursue explanations of social problems like poverty, recidivism, and crime whereby the phenomena *cannot* be solved with greater involvement of police, corrections, or the State within communities (Frauley, 2016) We know the cost if we sail the same course: county and municipal governments spent nearly \$30 billion on corrections in 2017 alone (Buehler, 2021). What’s the cost if we don’t?



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