Stigma and Recidivism: How Stigma Affects an Ex-Offender’s Ability to Find Employment

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Introduction

- Little empirical attention has been given to if, how, and why stigma impacts the lives of former prisoners.
- While the proliferation of self-help organizations and literature suggests that many of us believe that we can change our own lives, personalities, or behaviors, we do not necessarily extend this belief in the potential to change to others.
- This study will investigate the affect stigma has on released prisoners success in obtaining employment.
Recidivism

- For the purposes of this study, recidivism is defined as a relapse into criminal behavior that results in incarceration.

- Reentry Trends in the U.S.

- In a 15 State study, over two-thirds of released prisoners were rearrested within three years.
  - Bureau of Justice Statistics
Statistics and Race

- More than 6 in 10 persons in local jails in 2002 were racial or ethnic minorities, unchanged from 1996 (Bureau of Justice Statistics).
- Blacks and Hispanics together account for about two-thirds of the state prison population.
- Black men are six to eight times more likely to be in prison than whites.
- If white men were incarcerated at the same rate as blacks there would be over 6 million people in prison and jail (Western, 2007).
Stigma

- Social stigma has its roots in the early work of Erving Goffman’s classic book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*.

- According to Goffman (1963, p. 3) stigma is an attribute that extensively discredits an individual, reducing him or her “from a whole and usual person to a tainted discounted one”.

- Goffman (1963, p. 5) stated that “by definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human”.

Consequences of Stigma

- “It is generally understood that members of stigmatized groups are devalued and discredited and often suffer from social exclusion as a result” (LeBel 2006).

- By limiting access to important life domains, discrimination directly affects the social status, psychological well-being, and physical health of the stigmatized (Major & O’Brien 2005).
Stigma vs. Hiring Desirability

- Stigma can effect the hiring desirability of an ex-offender.
  - This effect will be studied

- Hiring desirability is operationally defined as the social appeal of characteristics that are used when deciding whether to hire a person or not.
  - Characteristics such as sophistication, dedication, intelligence, eagerness etc.
• One of the key factors to reducing recidivism is to help incarcerated felons obtain steady employment after their release.

• Not only does incarceration reduce pay and employment, it reduces the kind of jobs that are available to formerly incarcerated workers.
  – Career jobs requiring a high level of trust, skill, credentials, or well placed social connections are largely out of reach for those with prison records (Western, 2007).
Purpose of Study

• This study will investigate the hiring practices of employers regarding ex-offenders.

• This study will add to the existing research literature on this population.
  – There is very little research done in this field.
  – Previous research has failed to go deeper and find the specific reasons why ex-offenders can’t find adequate employment.
Hypothesis

• The top reason that employers will not hire ex-offenders is if they were convicted of a violent crime as opposed to a non-violent crime.

• Higher levels of education may also increase the chances of being offered a job.
Previous Research

- Giguere and Dundes first attempted to uncover the specific reasons ex-convicts are not hired by devising a hypothetical scenario. Respondents were asked whether their answers would change if sex, length of incarceration, etc. were different.

  - Employers’ greatest hiring concern was that ex-offenders may not have the necessary people skills for contact with customers. The other factors they found eliciting greatest employer apprehension concerned customers’ feeling uncomfortable if they knew than an ex-convict worked at their business (81%) and worries about coworkers’ discomfort in working with an ex-convict (77%).
Measure

• A survey will be delivered to non-franchise business in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. The survey will consist of eight questions in the form of a hypothetical scenario that will cover employers’ hiring practices regarding ex-offenders.
  – Type of crime committed (violent or nonviolent), amount of time served, previous work history, and education received (before incarceration and after incarceration).
• The survey will also include a likert scale after every scenario where employers will be asked what factors are most important and least important in hiring that particular ex-offender.
Hypothetical Scenario

- Bonquiesha, female, 32, African American, comes to your place of employment and applies for a job. She seems eager to work. She is dressed appropriately but has on heavy make-up. Before being incarcerated, she received her B.A. She has five years of previous work history. While she was incarcerated, she received a master’s degree. She was incarcerated for 5 years for assault with a deadly weapon, a violent crime, and was released six months ago.

- Would you hire this person?
Procedure

• Contact by e-mail or phone will be established for permission to participate in this study prior to delivering the surveys.

• Informed notice

• Three forms of the survey
  – Reduce primacy and recency effects
  – Scenarios presented in random order
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Selected References

