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Unemployment and Re-offending: an International Literature Review

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Key Points

- Current policy considers employment to be a key drive in reducing re-offending.
- Offenders now form the bulk of the economically inactive.
- The association between unemployment and crime has been well established in almost all classic criminological theories.
- Disadvantages in education, training and employment are important factors associated with persistent offending.
- Employment is considered to be one of the most important vehicles in encouraging offender re-integration and desistance from crime using economic, psychological and pro-social incentives.
- U.K. and U.S. reviews over the last 10 years have been optimistic about the effectiveness of employment-focused interventions in reducing recidivism.
- Reviews of interventions targeted at adults are more positive than those focused on young people.
- There are a variety of barriers which constrain many ex-offenders from gaining employment. Specialist support and opportunity brokering can help overcome these barriers.

Introduction

The National Strategy for the Management of Offenders (Scottish Executive, 2006) observes that employment is a key component to reducing re-offending. Like the Home Office's five year strategy for protecting the public and reducing re-offending (Home Office, 2006), the National Strategy was published at a time when employment policy was increasingly geared towards addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged, including offenders, who now form the bulk of the economically inactive (Stewart 2006).

One of the main difficulties of investigating the relationship between unemployment and re-offending is the variation in quality of the methodology applied. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from many studies as very few programmes have been evaluated using standardised and validated methodologies. Nevertheless, it is maintained in the international effectiveness literature that employment is one of the most important vehicles for encouraging offender re-integration and desistance from crime (Bushway and Reuter, 1997). The literature review which follows examines a wide range of international evidence to investigate the extent to which the links between employment and desistance from offending can be supported more broadly.

The relationship between employment and re-offending

The association between unemployment and crime is considered to be well-established and, as such, has been consistently reported over the last 60 years. Several studies have asserted that those who offend are more likely to be unemployed than their peers and, when unemployed, are more likely to re-offend. For examples, see Andrews (1995), Farrington et al (1986), Gendreau et al (1998), and May (1999). Further, a meta-analysis conducted by Jones (2006) established the employment predictor domain as a moderately effective predictor of recidivism.

Theoretical background

Hirschi (1983) observed that unemployment encourages, and employment prevents, criminal behaviour. Although the extent of the effect can vary, there is evidence to support this notion at both an individual level (Sampson & Laub, 1993) and among the wider population (see Chircos 1987). Almost all classic criminological theories suggest that the presence or conditions of employment may reduce criminal behaviour although each theory emphasises a different mechanism linking the two.

Economic theories hold that criminal behaviour is subject to economic circumstances. That is, if an individual is earning money there will be less need or incentive for them to obtain goods illegitimately. This can also be seen in the wider population; Freeman (1999) for example, observed a correlation between the booming economy of the 1990s and the falling crime rates of this period.

Wadsworth (2001) argues that while financial incentives are doubtlessly an important factor, there are individual psychological rewards allied with employment that can be more influential. That is, certain characteristics of employment can encourage a sense of investment which can help diminish criminal behaviour. Wadsworth (2001) found education to have a similar effect and concluded that, even when controlling for other factors, individuals with higher levels of education, those who are employed, and

those working in higher quality jobs commit fewer crimes than individuals with low levels of education, those who are unemployed and those working in low quality jobs. Thus, risk of re-offending is not only reduced by providing ex-offenders with access to employment and decreasing the financial motivation to commit an offence, but also by increasing the incentives of employment such as investment in pro-social activities. At a community level employment provides structure to social interaction, influences stability, and creates opportunity. Developing policies and programmes that promote a sense of investment in employment is likely to lead to an array of socially beneficial outcomes, including a decrease in criminal behaviour (Wadsworth, 2001).

Uggen and Staff (2001) also emphasise the importance of the quality level of employment in reducing recidivism. A job's level of quality often refers to the level of job satisfaction, for example such jobs as food service work are considered low quality whereas skilled craft work can be considered high quality. Uggen and Staff (2001) found that a shift from low to high quality jobs can decrease the probability of criminal behaviour by approximately 11%. They do, however, concede that it is difficult to make definitive casual inferences based on the observational evidence from existing studies.

Social control theories also emphasize employment, claiming that adult criminal behaviour results from insufficient job stability and commitment (Sampson and Laub, 1993), while social learning and differential association theories stress the values, attitudes and behaviours learned in interaction with others at work (Sutherland and Cressey, 1978).

Programmes, services & interventions

To the extent that unemployment is associated with offending, it seems logical to explore programmes which promote employment for offenders as a means of reducing crime. It is reasonable to assume that if offenders are in work, this will reduce their likelihood of offending and there are some studies to support this (for example, Gendreau et al, 1998). Findings from the Lipsey study (1992) have been most frequently used to evidence the contribution of employment to reducing re-offending. In this study a meta-analysis of around 400 studies conducted over four decades was performed in order to obtain an effect size for each of the treatment methods on re-offending. Findings indicated that employment was the most effective of all the methods used to decrease re-offending with a capacity to reduce it by approximately a third. However, the methodology of this study casts some doubt over the reliability of its assertions. These studies started in 1950 and less than 1% of the studies involved in the meta-analysis focused on employment. Thus, many of the studies are outdated and the samples used are not necessarily representative. However, more contemporary studies discussed below provide better evidence of the positive relationship between employment and reduced re-offending.

A Home Office research study (2006) found that deficits in education, training and employment are the strongest factors associated with persistent offending. However, these results did not derive from a random sample and, therefore, can not be thought of as nationally representative. Nevertheless, support for these findings can be found in a Canadian survey which also found employment, vocational training and financial needs to be the strongest deficits among adult offenders (Motiuk & Nafekh, 1998).

Given this, it is prudent to examine how work in improving these deficits can affect rates of offending. Over the last 15 years there have been optimistic reviews on the effectiveness of employment-focused interventions in reducing recidivism. However, not all interventions are thought to work equally well

(Sherman et al, 1997). The relationship between employment and reduced re-offending is variable and it is increasingly being recommended that interventions aimed at reducing re-offending should address as many potential barriers as possible (McGuire, 1995). However, this may render it difficult to determine what aspects of interventions are responsible for positive outcomes.

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International reviews have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness or otherwise of a variety of interventions used to increase employment as a means to decreasing offending. Sherman et al (1997) conducted a systematic evaluation on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice in order to evaluate the effectiveness of American programmes. As previously noted it is difficult to investigate the relationship between unemployment and re-offending as the quality of the applied methodology varies. To address this, the Sherman et al (1997) study measured each intervention's level of effectiveness while using the Maryland Scale¹ of Scientific Methods to assess the quality of each study's methodology.

This review found only one crime prevention programme within the local institutional setting of "labour markets" that could be deemed to be effective. This programme was reviewed in a study by Mallar and Thornton (1978), which found that ex-offender job training for older males who are no longer under criminal justice supervision, was an effective method of reducing repeat offending. There were, however, several

¹ The Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods ranks each study from 1 (weakest) to 5 (strongest) on overall internal validity (Sherman et al. 1997).

programmes which involved placing “at-risk youth” in summer jobs or subsidised work programmes, all of which were found to be ineffective. This is perhaps not surprising given evidence from a study by Wright et al (2002) which investigated the effects of employment on youths. This study found that employment can increase delinquency as it leads to deviation from conventions such as school and does not advance the human and social capital normally generated in adult employment. Another study by Ahlstrom and Havighurst (1982) found that such programmes were unable to reduce either crime or arrests. Furthermore, Bloom et al. (1994) found short-term, non-residential training programmes for at-risk youths, such as the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) or the more intensive JOBSTART programmes, failed to reduce crime. The ineffectiveness of programmes such as these on youths, in contrast to the apparent effectiveness of programmes on adults, may be related to the evidence which supports the notion that, overall, offending rates decline with age regardless of ties to conventional institutions such as employment. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section. This led Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) to the conclusion that resources would be better targeted at helping to limit impulsiveness and manage low self-control for youths at risk of criminal behaviour in order to prevent future offending.

Nevertheless, Hurry et al (2006) concluded that there is fairly unequivocal evidence that interventions do make a difference to the employment rates of offenders as it found that 6 out of the 7 interventions used, significantly improved likelihood of employment.

Sherman et al (1997) found many programmes to be “promising”, i.e. programmes where the level of certainty from available evidence is too low to support

generalisable conclusions but where there is some empirical basis for predicting that further research could support positive conclusions. This included an intensive residential training programme for at-risk youth. One study of this programme found felony arrests (such as theft) were reduced for four years after participants left as they experienced an increase in earnings and educational attainment. Although the same programme was found to produce higher rates of misdemeanours (such as petty theft and vandalism) and traffic violations the findings point to a significant shift away from more serious crimes (Mallar et al., 1982).

Recently in the U.K., a rapid evidence assessment² of interventions which promote employment for offenders was conducted in order to provide an evidence base to inform policy-making in this area (Hurry et al., 2006). Similar to Sherman et al’s American study (1997), the U.K. study concluded that most intervention programmes have not yet been evaluated with enough scientific evidence to draw conclusions regarding their effectiveness. Nevertheless, Hurry et al (2006) concluded that there is fairly unequivocal evidence that interventions do make a difference to the employment rates of offenders as it found that 6 out of the 7 interventions used, significantly improved likelihood of employment. Hurry et al (2006) found that offenders in an intervention group are significantly more likely to be employed at least six months after completion than those in control groups. They found that effective programmes included prison work and vocational training, but that community employment programmes also appeared to be promising. This evidence was found to be stronger than that for interventions’ effects on recidivism most likely because the outcome to being measured was solely employment which provides a more straightforward chain of cause and effect than is the case with recidivism.

² Rapid evidence assessment is a new approach to harnessing robust research evidence which orders and filters evidence in a similar way to systematic review but in a more focused and timely manner.

The effect of age on offending

There is a debate on whether employment is a key factor in the reduction of crime over the lifespan, or if it is simply a common correlate of the well-established decline in offending behaviour with age regardless of ties to more conventional institutions such as employment (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). Indeed, studies which support the notion that employment reduces crime are mostly focused on young adults and adults who may be expected to be in full time employment, whereas research has shown that the effects of employment based programmes can vary depending on the individual's age (Farrington, 1994). Within this area there is a concern that employment can be detrimental to adolescents of school age who may not be mentally prepared for the labour market. Some commentators, such as Steinberg (1996) go further to say that "many students spend more time on the job than they do in the classroom". Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (Smith, 2006 a) shows that attachment to school is not only related to behaviour at school but there is also a wider relationship to delinquent and criminal behaviour. Attachment to teachers and the belief that school success brings later rewards are important dimensions of this relationship even when controlling for other factors such as social and family background.

Despite the apparent importance of school in reducing criminal behaviours, the question of employment protecting against offending or actually encouraging delinquent behaviour has rarely been addressed. The study by Wright et al. (2002) suggests that working can do both. It was reported that for younger adolescents, and across the sample as a whole, work increases the likelihood of delinquency. These effects have been seen to rival, if not surpass, the effects of family and structural variables and hold even when accounting for past delinquency. Furthermore, it was found that the more established in work an adolescent becomes, the more deeply they become involved in delinquency. These differential effects are perhaps understandable given that the types of employment

obtained by adolescents are generally not designed to build social capital or to provide exposure to the informal controls which are normally prevalent in the work experiences of adults. This study also points to a mutually reinforcing link between work and delinquency, suggesting that delinquency may have a role to play in increasing employment. Wright et al (2006) suggests that this could be due to the fact that employment offers the opportunity to make money to support consumption (for example, drug taking and alcohol) and because it may expose youths to less social control than family and school settings.

There does appear to be a shift in the positive relationship between employment and delinquency to a negative relationship at the end of the secondary school years, although it is still not understood what causes this change. Sampson and Laub (1993) posit that it may not be employment per se but rather the quality of the work which is the pivotal aspect. It is argued that by unquestioningly accepting that work in and of itself is beneficial to adolescents there is a danger of overlooking the developmental consequences of young people participating in an institution that competes directly with other socialising institutions (such as schools) for priority (Steinberg, 1996). Steinberg (1996) asserts that certain mechanisms, such as the quality or strength of attachment to work, can act to reduce criminal behaviour in later adulthood. Hence, older offenders are more likely to benefit from work programmes than younger offenders as they are more likely to become attached to the labour market. As these attachments are formed, it is then feasible that variables such as employment can act as turning points that redirect behaviour throughout life.

Farrall's (2002) research into desistance has highlighted the importance of the perceived significance of developments such as obtaining a new job or meeting a new partner etc. That is, it is not just these events and changes themselves that matter; it is what they mean to the individual that is significant.

McNeill (2006) believes that the lack of understanding regarding the relationship between offending behaviour and age is due to various approaches wrongly focusing on practice and modes of intervention without first understanding the process of change. This change, he posits, is often the result of influential relationships. Gill (1997) found that offenders themselves consider that assistance in getting into employment is critical in helping them stop re-offending. Given this, it is understandable how pivotal the presence of employment can be. This is supported by Rex (1999) who found that the level of commitment displayed by those on probation was affected by that of their probation officer, whose attitude and support seemed to inspire loyalty and responsibility in the probationers. While help with finding work and mending damaged family relationships appeared to be important to probationers, a more fundamental factor seemed to be differences in employment or family relationship experiences.

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from focusing exclusively on preventing further offending to also addressing the harm caused by crime through restorative processes and community sentences. This work also requires offenders to 'make good', thus enabling them to feel socially included to a great extent.

This led Farrall (2004) to propose that the focus of probation work be shifted away from offending related matters to desistance focused matters. McNeill (2006) has also suggested a new paradigm for social workers using evidence from research on desistance. Although this paradigm involves interventions, these are not primarily about technical management of programmes and disciplinary management of offenders as implied by the current use of the term 'offender management'. Instead, this paradigm aims to involve offenders in their own intervention planning. It suggests that social workers' remit would expand

Barriers to employment

According to Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963) many organisations will not want to employ offenders and reciprocally, having a criminal record may increase the likelihood of unemployment. Although employment has been advocated as means to reducing recidivism there are still many issues and barriers to helping ex-offenders into employment. Statistics show that two in three prisoners are unemployed at the time of imprisonment and one in seven prisoners claim to have never had a job (Home Office, 2001 a). Furthermore two in three of those with a job lose it when they enter prison (Home Office, 2001 b) and there is unwillingness among potential employers to employ an individual with a criminal record. Currently, 75% of all prisoners leave custody without a job, education or training (Home Office, 2001 a), so help during this period is critical. New Deal is a government programme for helping unemployed people into employment, particularly those from disadvantaged groups (including ex-offenders) by improving their employment prospects. The take up rate has not, however, been as high as expected, perhaps because New Deal requires Jobcentre Plus staff to disclose to potential employers that a client is an ex-offender; a fact that many clients are reluctant to disclose.

Currently the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974) states that an individual who has been convicted of a criminal offence, has served a sentence of less than 30 months in prison, can be regarded as “rehabilitated” after a fixed period providing they do not re-offend during this period. Once the period of rehabilitation is complete, the conviction can be regarded as “spent”, and therefore, the individual need not divulge it’s existence and cannot be prejudiced by it. However for reasons of public safety this does not apply in cases where the individual poses a risk and there are some categories of employment to which the Act does not apply, including work in the financial sector, in child care positions, care services, and health professions³.

It has been asserted that many offenders lack the

necessary skills and qualifications required for various jobs. For example, in England and Wales it was found that only half of prisoners have the necessary reading skills, one fifth the writings skills, and less than one third the numeracy skills required for 96% of all jobs (Prison statistics England and Wales, 2000). Within prisons there are opportunities for employment with nearly two in five prisoners working in prison workshops (Home Office, 2001 a). However, these jobs are low-skill, low capital workshop activities which are unlikely to help develop the social skills sought by employers, such as communication, teamwork and reliability. Many prisons are seeking to improve linkages by combining National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) with paid contractual work, and training staff and prisoners have reported that introducing an NVQ into the workshop improves participation and confidence. Currently around 5% of prisoners gain a NVQ level qualification (Home Office, 2001 a). There has been a great deal of progress in the provision of offender training and education in recent years. The number of basic skills awards obtained in prisons is rising, for example (Home office, 2005) with increased investment and improved basic skills-training for offenders in the community.

The role of statutory and non-statutory organisations

However, these measures cannot be effective on their own. Help is needed beyond the training stage. For example, less than 20% of ex-prisoners who had a job or were looking for one had received help while in prison and 60% of those who had not received help would have liked to (Home Office, 2001 a). Research by Bridges (1998) shows that ex-offenders assisted by probation services were twice more likely to get jobs than those where interventions were not made. Furthermore, personal barriers to finding employment such as low motivation and poor self-organisation can also present an issue. One study revealed that as many as 70% of those who had said that that they would be looking for a job and training on release had done nothing to make this happen (Home Office, 2001 a). This is an area

³ A Home Office (2002) review of the act suggested amendments aimed at reducing the rehabilitation period in England and Wales, but these were subsequently discarded and have not been pursued in Scotland either.

Conclusion

where flexible individual support and specialist expertise appear to be particularly useful.

Often in partnership with statutory bodies, voluntary organisations broker employment opportunities and also provide specialist support to the employee and employer in the months following recruitment. Social enterprising projects like Newlife Solutions, a specialist organisation running in the U.K., which provides training and consultancy on issues relating to the safe recruitment of ex-offenders, have been noted as especially advantageous to a particularly disadvantaged group of people with a wide range of other labour market disadvantages, such as housing problems and poor qualifications. These projects have been thought to play a key role in supporting ex-offenders to move closer to employment and raising their life and work aspirations (Doyle, 2006).

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Apex Scotland is a voluntary organisation offering a range of services which aim to help offenders and young people at risk of offending gain training and employment. Apex comprises many units across Scotland, which all work on the premise that increased employability can contribute towards reduced offending. Indeed, anecdotal evidence from individual cases and more concrete evidence from an individual study on an Apex service⁴ found that guidance provided by Apex Employment Development Advisors (EDAs) can often initiate significant first steps towards employability and, in many cases, away from offending. This kind of work links in with recent policy developments in the area of reducing re-offending.

There is considerable evidence positively associating employment and reductions in offending. There are various theories regarding the exact nature of this relationship, including theories of economic incentives, psychological investment in conventional lines of activity, and social control and learning theories.

No one theory is prominent, and adopting theory into practice has produced mixed results. Service reviews conducted in both the U.K. and U.S. show that various programmes have been found to be effective, ineffective or promising. While neither review drew firm conclusions about the effectiveness of the programmes studied, most were found to be promising. This indicates a need to conduct further studies into these interventions using improved methodologies.

Broadly, reviews of interventions targeted at adults are more positive than those focused on young people. This ties in with evidence which suggests that criminal activity declines with age regardless of any interventions used. It is also supported by evidence which suggests that employment is a more effective driver in reducing criminal behaviour in adults than in adolescents.

There are various barriers to employment, not only through the social stigmas offenders experience but also because offenders display various criminogenic needs associated with unemployment, including lack of experience, skills and qualifications. There is evidence to show that these barriers can be overcome with the correct resources and time.

⁴ This was a qualitative study of the Venture Trust Aftercare Service, carried out by Scottish Executive Justice Analytical Services.

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