



OPINION PIECE: When it comes to reducing the reoffending rate of released prisoners it is the quality of available jobs that matters

According to the Ministry of Justice the proven reoffending rate for released prisoners in the UK was 24.8% from October 2014 to September 2015. For juvenile offenders the rate lay much higher at 37.8%. In the US a similar study found that within three years of release, about two-thirds (67.8%) of released prisoners were rearrested. This coming Thursday IZA World of Labor will be publishing a new report by the economist Kevin Schnepel of the School of Economics at the University of Sydney looking at recent empirical research that measures the impact of employment opportunities on recidivism. Schnepel summarizes his findings in the opinion piece below:

Increasing the availability of high-quality job opportunities can reduce recidivism among released prisoners by Kevin Schnepel

Most individuals exiting prison have a hard time securing stable employment. The majority—around two-thirds in the US—return to prison within three years of release. Is employment the key to breaking this cycle of crime and incarceration? Maybe, the research says. It all depends on the job.

Employment is often cited as a critical turning point in the lives of former criminals [...] A simple comparison of recidivism rates between ex-inmates who work and those who don't indicates a strong positive correlation between unemployment and recidivism. Therefore, we expect a reduction in crime following an increase in employment opportunities.

Recognizing this relationship, governments, non-profits, and the private sector alike are launching programs and policies aimed at improving employment opportunities to reduce recidivism. While the effectiveness of many of these efforts is not yet known, the results from several large-scale randomized trials in the US surprisingly temper any expectation of a substantial reduction in recidivism associated with the provision of transitional employment opportunities to the formerly incarcerated. However, recidivism rates do seem to respond to changes in low-skill wages and the number of jobs available in certain industries. Specifically, leaving prison when there are more construction and manufacturing jobs available has been linked with reduced recidivism. A boost in food service and retail jobs at the time of release, by contrast, doesn't have a similar preventative effect.

[...] The transitional jobs provided by employment-focused re-entry programs, as well as work in the retail and food service industries, typically pay wages that are often at (or near) the minimum wage. If a released inmate is comparing the returns from illegal versus legal activity—a minimum-wage job just may not be enough to deter the illegal choice.

While the wage of post-release employment is a crucial factor, several other characteristics are also likely to contribute to how much crime a job can prevent. One important aspect that can vary substantially is the degree to which a job facilitates positive social interactions, or prevents negative ones. A job in construction, for example, often requires offenders to wake up early in the morning, which could limit their ability to socialize with criminal peers. On the other hand, transitional employment provided by re-entry programs could place released inmates on a work crew with other folks just out of jail.



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Given the research trends and findings, an important question arises for policymakers: How can we increase the quality, and not just the quantity, of legitimate work opportunities for released prisoners? That solution might make all the difference in keeping offenders out of prison for good.

Kevin Schnepel's detailed report *Do post-prison job opportunities reduce recidivism?* will publish this Thursday on IZA World of Labor. Please contact Anna von Hahn if you would like to read the report in advance of publication or for author interviews: anna.vonhahn@bloomsbury.com or +44 7852 882 770

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Notes for editors:

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