

POLICY ESSAY

A SIGNALING PERSPECTIVE ON EMPLOYMENT-BASED REENTRY

Why Work Is Important, and How to Improve the Effectiveness of Correctional Reentry Programs that Target Employment

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Let me begin by saying that I do not know much about signaling theory, as discussed in the lead article by Bushway and Apel (2012, this issue), but I do know a little about criminal behavior and the factors that are important in designing programs that lead to reductions in recidivism. In a recent piece I wrote for *CPP* (Latessa, 2011), I discussed the failure of employment programs to reduce recidivism significantly and some of the reasons for it. Rather than rehash those remarks, I have several additional points I want to make.

First, work and employment is important for reentry and we should not ignore it simply because most studies have not shown employment programs to reduce recidivism. Second, the nature of risk factors is more complex than simply categorizing them into static and dynamic. There are different types of dynamic factors, and we can see this clearly when looking at employment. Third, if we truly want to incorporate employment into effective correctional programs, we need to employ techniques and approaches that have been found to be effective in changing behavior. I will start with the question of the importance of work.

The Importance of Employment

Few can dispute the value and importance of meaningful employment. Supporting one's self and others, developing the self-worth that comes from work and a job well done, having stakes in society and conformity, and building prosocial relationships and a sense of

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community are all things that employment can bring. Most of us also can identify mentors and role models from jobs we have had.

If we look at our own lives, most of us come to realize how important work is, and how that view often changes over the years. I know when I first started working as a teenager the clock never seemed to move. My sole goal was to make some money so I could put some gas in the car and go out with my friends. A job was simply a means to an end. As I got older, however, my view of work began to change. I took more pride in what I did, saw the value in work and the relationships it provided, and understood how it allowed me to support my family. Now I look at the clock and can hardly believe the day is over. Work has become a much larger part of who I am, and it is hard to imagine what I would do without it. What has changed of course is how I view work. Somehow it has become a central part of my life, not simply a way to earn some money. That certainly was not always the case.

I remember when my oldest child turned 16 and she told me she wanted to get her driver's license. I told her I supported her driving provided she get a job to help pay for expenses. She said, "work?" like it was a bad four letter word, and I said, "yes, work." She dutifully got a part-time job after school at a local bakery. On several occasions, I would take her three younger siblings up to the bakery and we would stand outside the window before going in and watch her cleaning the glass or doing some other mundane chore. They would often ask me why we were watching her work, and I would reply, "because I am enjoying it." Of course I had another motive. By watching her work, the others were seeing their older sister as a role model. Several years later, when my second daughter wanted to get her license, she prefaced it by saying that she also needed to get a job. Clearly my strategy worked. Now, suppose I had simply given the oldest \$50 a week instead of having her work? When it came time for daughter #2 to drive, she would have held out her hand and asked for money.

One difference between me at that age and my children was that my family did not have the means simply to hand me money. I had to work if I wanted spending cash. I could have easily given my children spending money, but I decided that if I did, they would not learn the value of work, of doing things that were sometimes tedious and unpleasant, and in learning the satisfaction of earning something themselves rather than having it handed to them. I also hoped that it would provide them with the desire someday to get a job that they loved, much like I had.

Of course what I am describing is social learning; the processes through which individuals acquire attitudes, behavior, or knowledge from the persons around them where both modeling and instrumental conditioning play a role. Social learning is not a theory of criminal behavior; it is a theory of human behavior, and one of the strongest theories we have about why we behave as we do. I like to say that although the process of social learning is complex, the concept is not. If you have children, you know this to be true because for many of us, we wake up one day and find that we have turned into our parents: the last people we thought we were going to be when we were teenagers.

So is employment important? Of course it is, but that does not mean that employment programs will lead to significant reductions in recidivism unless we go beyond simply getting them a job.

The Nature of Risk Factors

Since Lombroso, scholars have been working to identify risk factors. More recently, this work has advanced to where we now have several actuarial instruments that measure and gauge risk factors and then place offenders into categories based on probabilities of reoffending. Most of the new generation of tools include what are commonly referred to as static and dynamic risk factors. Static factors are those factors that are related to the risk of reoffending and do not change. Some examples might be the number of prior offenses, or whether an offender has ever had a drug/alcohol problem. Dynamic factors also are related to risk and *can change*. Some examples are whether an offender is currently unemployed or currently has a drug/alcohol problem. Dynamic factors are those that are usually targeted for change in most correctional reentry programs. There are, however, two types of dynamic factors: ones that can change relatively quickly (acute) and ones that require more time and effort to change (stable). For example, on the one hand, if someone is unemployed, it is conceivable that he or she could interview and get a new job almost immediately. As measured by some tools, he or she essentially went from being unemployed (risk factor) to employed (no risk factor) very quickly. On the other hand, other dynamic factors, many of which will be related to his or her success at employment, such as attitudes about work, lacking self-control, or having poor problem-solving or coping skills will require more time and effort to change. The mistake that often is made is failing to see the relationship between these factors.

When we take an offender that thinks work is for someone else, has no discernible job skills, and lacks self-control, and simply give him or her a day- or two-long job readiness program and then get him or her a job, we are unlikely to be successful in reducing the offender's risk to reoffend, even though it may seem that his or her risk has been reduced because the offender is no longer unemployed. The changing of attitudes, values, and beliefs and the learning of new skills will take considerably longer and will require modeling, graduated practice, and reinforcement. In other words, a behavioral approach that incorporates cognitive theories (what to change—the “what” and “how” offenders think) and social learning theories (the “how” to change it—model, practice, and reinforce).

Changing Behavior

In a previous essay (Latessa, 2011), I discussed the risk (who to target) and need (what to target) principles and their application to employment programs. Understanding these two principles helps us understand the limitations of targeting employment as a means of

reducing recidivism. I now want to turn my attention to the “how” of changing behavior, and the use of social learning and behavioral programs to reduce recidivism.

Behavioral programs have several important attributes. First, they are centered on the present circumstances and on the current risk factors that are responsible for the offender’s behavior. Hanging around with the wrong people, not going to work or school, and using drugs or alcohol to excess are examples of current risk factors, whereas focusing on the past is not very productive, mainly because one cannot change the past. Second, behavioral programs are action oriented rather than talk oriented. In other words, offenders do something about their difficulties rather than just talk about them. These approaches are used to teach offenders new, prosocial skills to replace the antisocial ones (e.g., stealing, using drugs, cheating, lying, etc.) they often possess, through modeling, practice, and reinforcement. Interventions based on these approaches are very structured and emphasize the importance of modeling and behavioral rehearsal techniques that engender self-efficacy, challenge of cognitive distortions, and assist offenders in developing good problem-solving and self-control skills. This approach should be used regardless of the target for change. For example, employment success is more likely if one’s attitudes about work changes and then one learns the skills necessary to be successful. Simply teaching an offender how to fill out an application or interview and then simply getting him or her a job will not be nearly as effective. Correctional programs, including employment programs that want to reduce recidivism, need to replace educational and didactic groups with a directive, skill-building, and cognitive behavioral approach. Third, behavioral programs use reinforcement appropriately. Thus, offenders are given positive reinforcement when they are doing well and there are consequences when inappropriate behavior is exhibited. This approach should be consistently done throughout the program. A recently study by Widahl, Garland, Culhane, and McCarty (2011) demonstrated how even an intensive supervision program can dramatically improve success when the ratio of rewards to punisher is at least 4:1.

So if we think about the application of behavioral programs to targeting employment, we should focus on preparing offenders to work by first targeting their attitudes and values about work, and then combine that with teaching those skills that will help them be successful at work. Putting them together is much more effective than one without the other. The simple analogy is that changing an offender’s attitude about work *and* teaching him or her which end of the shovel to use will be a more effective approach than focusing on just one over the other.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there is a difference between a reentry program that wants simply to help offenders and one that wants to reduce recidivism. The former may help them get a job and find a place to live, whereas the latter will focus on targeting criminogenic risk factors and then systematically training offenders in behavioral rehearsal techniques. Offenders should

be trained to observe and anticipate problem situations, and they should plan and rehearse alternative prosocial responses in increasingly difficult scenarios. This approach should be an integral part of our work with offenders, and it should be routinely done throughout all components of a program, even one that is focused on employment.

Although it can be argued that having an offender participate and complete a program (of any type) can be a signal that an individual is serious about change, it also can send the wrong signal if that offender continues to engage in criminal behavior. I often have heard the argument that even if recidivism is not reduced, other benefits can accrue from reentry programs. This assertion may be true, but like it or not, recidivism remains the primary measure by which we gauge the effectiveness of a correctional program. When asked whether a correctional program “works,” most do not care whether the offenders or staff like the program, if participants feel better about themselves, or even if they completed the program. They want to know whether the program helped change their behavior and whether those who completed are less likely to recidivate than those that did not complete or go to the program. Fortunately, a large body of research is available that clearly demonstrates that well-implemented correctional programs that target the right offenders, target criminogenic needs, and teach offender new skills and behaviors can have an appreciable effect on recidivism. Programs that do not pay attention to this research run the risk of being ineffective. The result can be an undermining of support for programs—the sending of the wrong signal.

References

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