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## **Employment Assistance and Offender Desistance: An Evaluation of Recidivism in a Faith-based Re-entry Program**

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### Cover Page Footnote

<sup>1</sup>Caitlin J. Steckley, Graduate Assistant in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of North Florida served as Principal Author with advising by Dr. Michael Hallett, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of North Florida. Emily Friedman and Rachel Simmons served as Co-Authors.

# Employment Assistance and Offender Desistance: An Evaluation of Recidivism in a Faith-based Re-entry Program

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## Introduction

With the onset of mass incarceration in the United States, researchers have been highly focused on re-entry programming and “what works” to reduce the astounding recidivism rate of roughly 70% within three years (Alpher et al., 2018). Though there have been mixed results regarding the effectiveness of employment re-entry programming, it has been argued that employment programming may be a “desistance signal” regardless of its aggregated effects on the recidivism rate (Bushway & Apel, 2012). That is, desistance - the cessation of offending by previous offenders - is understood not to be a dichotomous variable, but rather a gradual process (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Bushway and Apel (2012) argue that employment programming, as well as other forms of re-entry programming, may be a way for offenders to use their personal agency to signal to others that they are more likely to desist from future crime. In the current study, we evaluate the association between employment and recidivism with a sample size of 546 ex-offenders participating in Prisoners of Christ (POC), a faith-based re-entry program located in Jacksonville, Florida that offers transitional housing, food subsidies, health care, substance abuse treatment, and employment assistance. For this article, we will be focusing

<sup>1</sup>Caitlin J. Steckley, Graduate Assistant in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of North Florida served as Principal Author with advising by Dr. Michael Hallett, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of North Florida. Emily Friedman and Rachel Simmons served as Co-Authors.

on POC's employment and recidivism outcomes and discussing their potential interaction with the faith-based approach. Through both quantitative data and qualitative interviews, we have captured a comprehensive picture of what can be accomplished through an integrative approach to offender re-entry. We hypothesize that employment and rearrest will be significantly correlated. However, by way of the desistance signaling model proposed by Bushway and Apel (2012), we further argue that regardless of the strength of the correlation employment is significant because it works as a signal from the ex-offender that he is more likely to desist. This signal may be further strengthened through the faith-based aspect of Prisoners of Christ if we evaluate the interaction between desistance signaling theory, identity theory, and theories of social control (Sampson & Laub, 1990; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Bushway & Apel, 2012).

## **Literature Review**

### *A Theoretical Framework*

There are three main theoretical frameworks which have guided our hypothesis: desistance signaling theory, identity theory, and age-graded theory of social control. Bushway and Apel (2012) theorize that though employment program studies have yielded mixed results, the programs are nevertheless important to the re-entry process because they provide an opportunity for the ex-offender to signal to others that they are ready to desist from future criminal behavior. One important aspect of Bushway and Apel's theory is that the desistance signal is initiated by the ex-offender through his self-agency. As Bushway and Apel put it:

We are not interested, in this context, in the causal impact of [the program] on recidivism. Rather, we are interested in using the information conveyed by successful completion of a challenging program to differentiate between individuals with the same level of involvement in the criminal justice system (2012, p 22).

Additionally, the level of difficulty involved in the acquisition of a particular signal's completion requirements enhances the strength of the signal itself. Most importantly, however, is the signal's role in distinguishing a desister from a non-desister. This relates strongly to identity theory in that Paternoster and Bushway (2009) envision a diverged path in which the offender views both a prosocial desisting self and a feared criminal self. When the agency is in the hands of the ex-offender, a signal of desistance will be correlated with a desire to identify as a desister and, in-turn, follow the prosocial path of desistance. The stronger the desistance signal, the greater the likelihood that an individual has chosen the prosocial self and dedicated themselves to the desistance process.

Outside of the self-agency of the offender, studies have emphasized the importance of employment for the purposes of both personal fulfillment and informal prosocial networks (Latessa, 2012; Farabee et al., 2014; Ramakers et al., 2017). Sampson and Laub's (1990) age-graded theory of social control stresses the importance of the life-course and the social bonds that can be established through informal social control networks. Legitimate employment and other informal networks created throughout the life-course influences the potential desister's actions. Schwartz (2020) conducted a study of the "safe umbrella" effect inside of a transitional housing program for ex-offenders in Chicago. According to her findings, many ex-offenders are aware of the social stigma associated with their criminal histories, making prosocial ties to the "outside" world even more daunting. However, if an ex-offender is able to anticipate the stigma and counteract it through networks of informal social control, then the potential negative effects of stigma on the desistance process may be mitigated.

If an ex-offender secures gainful employment while participating in the POC program, the likelihood of creating prosocial bonds and increasing informal social control improves

through the increased likelihood of job retention and prosocial contacts. Additionally, through the POC program at large, ex-offenders are exposed to informal networks which can influence their sense of self and lead to both a choice to pursue the prosocial desisting self and signal to others that they are on the chosen path of desistance. Together, the “safe umbrella” of POC and the employment opportunities that follow as a result of their employment assistance may combine to produce an extraordinary impact on the desistance process.

### *Employment and Desistance Research*

Employment alone cannot be marked as the sole indicator of desistance. Recent studies have found a significant correlation between job retention in ex-offenders and the job market itself (Nally et al., 2014). Ex-offenders tend to be less marketable in various employment industries due to their criminal records, lack of education, and lack of consistent job experience. Even if an ex-offender decides to choose his prosocial identity and desist, he may be faced with challenges outside of his personal control such as lack of job opportunity or social stigma associated with “static” historical factors which cannot be changed and may lead to assumed homogeneity amongst the ex-offender population (Brennan, 2012; Latessa, 2014; Schwartz, 2020). Cook et al. (2014) conducted a study that evaluated employment programming alongside “reach-in” services which were provided before a prisoner’s release. Their results concluded that the “reach-in” elements had a positive effect on employment and earnings, but recidivism data was more inconclusive. Considering that both the experimental and control groups still earned unlivable wages, this study supports that there may be a difference between a desistance signal and simply keeping a job.

If an ex-offender is able to secure a job initially, studies have found that most job opportunities available to this population are transitional and therefore short-lived (Nally et al.,

2014; Ramakers et al., 2017; ). Not only does this reduce their personal satisfaction with their employment, but without a more long-term employment opportunity the ex-offender is unable to create more permanent networks of informal social control. These temporary jobs do not generally provide informal social control networks, meaningful fulfillment, or livable wages creating much less of a buffer to antisocial behavior and crime than the “employment” label may initially convince. Ramakers et al. (2017) find that jobs with higher occupational levels or jobs that an ex-offender returns to are more likely to significantly reduce recidivism. This creates a strong argument against the idea that gaining employment of any kind will affect recidivism rates. Instead, familiar and reliable networks and jobs that provide a sense of security appear to be more indicative of an ex-offender’s continued ability to desist.

Although the argument for employment reducing recidivism has been exposed through its weaknesses, desistance signaling has far more empirical and theoretical support (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Maruna, 2012; Mears & Mestre, 2012). In addition to being legitimate on its face, desistance signaling has received a lot of support in recent years. Skardhamar and Savolainen (2014) conducted a research study to test the time order of desistance and employment. Their results show that in many cases the desistance from criminal behavior precedes the attainment of gainful employment. Such a discovery lends that desistance may very well be the chosen path before employment is achieved, supporting Bushway and Apel’s theory of signaling. In other words, as Farabee et al. (2014) suggest, “Employment is perhaps a product (or outcome) of reentry efforts, as opposed to a causal factor...” (p.318). The general consensus is such that employment may *indicate* change in the individual but does not distinctively *induce* change within the individual if other factors are not first addressed. This again leads us to emphasize the

potential positive effects of a program such as POC which addresses both employment opportunities and other necessary elements of the desistance process.

## **Methodology**

### *Quantitative Sample Population*

Our original dataset consisted of 606 clients who began their participation in Prisoners of Christ from the years 2015 to 2019. For the current study we used a convenience sampling method. Demographic and program participation information was retrieved from those who worked at POC at the time of the study. The program criteria made no clear distinction between program “completers” and “non-completers” as many participants would flow in and out of the program and its various offerings, making “completion” almost impossible to define. However, in the interview phase some clients were referred to as “completers” which indicated to us that they had spent their time at POC with no major infractions and had since moved on from the program. Our study included mainly male participants (86.8%) with an underrepresentation of females (13.2%). The dataset includes 56.9% African American participants, 40.8% Caucasian, and 2.3% Hispanic. These were the only racial categories identified in the dataset. The age of participants was calculated from the date of birth given on the record to the date of data reconfiguration. The ages range from 20 to 69 with an average age of 43.04. Not all ages were acquired and accounted for.

Along with the demographic information, POC supplied us with categorical information on their clients including residential status, violent versus nonviolent conviction status, sex offender status, employment status, and education. Of the participants included in this study 19%



have been labeled sex offender. Any participation of those with sex offender status should be noted considering the anomaly of their participation in any re-entry program.

### *Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis*

We divided the responsibility of data collection evenly, with each member of our team taking an equal portion of the dataset. To collect the rates of rearrest we entered the name and date of birth of each program participant in the Duval County Jail and Florida Department of Corrections public databases. For this particular study we used “recidivism” rate to refer to the instance of rearrest, including technical parole violations as well as new offenses and reconviction. We did not count recorded violations as recidivism if the charges were subsequently dropped. Rearrest was marked as “yes” or “no record” with dates of rearrest provided when possible. We documented the specifications of the rearrest as best we could with the limited information available through these two databases.

During data collection, 60 clients in the original sample were dropped due to missing information reducing our sample population to 546 participants ( $N = 546$ ). Once we recorded whether each client had recidivated, we used a Chi-Square test ( $X^2$ ) to determine whether or not our sample was statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). We then ran the Phi test ( $\phi$ ) to evaluate the strength of the correlation between employment and rearrest. We chose the Chi-Square and Phi methods because these tests are the most appropriate for our categorical variables. Phi is used for a 2 x 2 contingency table as the appropriate measure of association. This two-step method was useful as it first indicated whether or not we should reject the null hypothesis and then allowed us to determine more precisely the strength of the statistical correlation between the variables of employment and rearrest.

### *Qualitative Sample Population*

Once the quantitative data was collected, we subsequently conducted qualitative interviews with those previously involved and those still involved in POC at the time of the study. In total, we conducted fourteen interviews with each lasting roughly 45 to 90 minutes. All researchers were present for most of the interviews, with one or more being conducted by the primary researcher alone. Our interviewees were primarily male, with only one female being interviewed along with her husband. All other interviews were conducted with a single interviewee. Our sample was not representative of the population as we used convenience sample with a small sample size. Our original interviewees were scheduled based on availability with substitutes filling in when needed. For this study we were unable to continue interviews due to time constraints and the unpredictable nature of COVID-19.

### *Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis*

We conducted a total of fourteen interviews ( $N = 14$ ). The purpose of the interviews was to provide supplemental information on the initial rearrest data. We wanted to know if the recidivism rate was significantly related to the various aspects of the program and, if so, how the individual viewed their desistance process. We took a phenomenological approach to the question construction with a focus on the faith-based aspect of the program. We were interested in the conversion narrative (Maruna et al., 2006) and how the ex-offenders viewed their personal experiences. For the sake of this article, we will be focusing on the qualitative outcomes which relate to the employment aspect of the POC participants. We will also touch on how the faith-based element of the program potentially interacts with the employment and rearrest outcomes.

We followed standard procedure of providing a consent form that allowed each participant to review the standardized questions in advance while also explaining that their participation was completely voluntary. These standardized questions were previously approved by the University of North Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We did ask permission from each participant to record the interviews and all participants granted permission except one. All researchers took adamant notes, so this did not interfere with our narrative collection. Aside from the standardized ten questions, we did ask follow-up questions when it was appropriate. Once the interviews were complete, each member of the research team transcribed a subsection of the interviews and took notes individually in order to provide intercoder reliability on common themes.

## **Results**

### *Quantitative Results*

In the current study, our test results indicate that 40.95% of the employed participants have been rearrested as compared to 59.05% of employed participants not being rearrested ( $n = 359$ ). In the unemployed category, the percentage of difference between the two groups is far less impressive with 49.73% of total unemployed participants being rearrested while 50.27% of unemployed participants have not been rearrested ( $n = 187$ ). We used the Chi-Square test ( $X^2$ ) in Excel to determine if our sample population was significant. Our sample size ( $N = 546$ ) was acceptable for the Chi-Square test and social science research more generally. The quantitative results indicate a statistically significant difference between the employed and unemployed categories, leading us to reject the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ). The null hypothesis assumes that there is no significant difference between groups; therefore, when the Chi-Square test results indicate that there is a less than 5% chance ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) that the difference between groups is random the

alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) is accepted. The  $p$ -value was lower than 0.05 ( $p = 0.0496$ ), leading us to accept the alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ). The  $p$ -value indicates that there is a 4.96% chance that the relationship between the two variables has occurred randomly in the current study.

Alternatively, there is a 95.04% probability that the relationship between employment and rearrest is not random. Therefore, we proceeded with our secondary analysis of the strength of the correlation between the employment and rearrest variables. Tables 1.1 to 1.3 depict the observed and expected results and Chi-Square values. Expected results were calculated using the standard formula ( $\text{Row Total} \times \text{Column Total} \div N$ ).

### ***1.1 Observed***

|                    | <b>Arrested</b> | <b>Not Arrested</b> | <b>Grand Total</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Employed</i>    | 147             | 212                 | 359                |
| <i>Unemployed</i>  | 93              | 94                  | 187                |
| <i>Grand Total</i> | 240             | 306                 | 546                |

### ***1.2 Expected***

|                    | <b>Arrested</b> | <b>Not Arrested</b> | <b>Grand Total</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Employed</i>    | 157.8021978     | 201.1978022         | 359                |
| <i>Unemployed</i>  | 82.1978022      | 104.8021978         | 187                |
| <i>Grand Total</i> | 240             | 306                 | 546                |

### 1.3 Values of Chi-Square Test

|                                    |             |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Pearson's Chi-Square Value:</i> | 3.852418465 |
| <i>Degrees of Freedom (df):</i>    | 1           |
| <i>p-value:</i>                    | 0.049674315 |

In order to test the strength of the relationship between employment and rearrest we computed Phi ( $\phi$ ). The Phi test is used as a measure of association between two categorical variables. The scale of Phi is 0.00-1.00 where a stronger relationship is indicated when  $\phi$  is closer to 1.00. For the current study, we used the Pearson's Chi-Square value (3.852) to calculate Phi ( $\phi = \frac{\sqrt{X^2}}{N \times m}$ ). The correlation between employment and rearrest was calculated as  $\phi = 0.0839$ , indicating a very weak correlation between employment and rearrest. The weak correlation between the two variables in addition to the statistically significant difference indicates that there may be other variables unaccounted for in the current analyses which affect rearrest outcomes. Tables 2.1 and 2.2 show our calculations for the Phi equation using the previously shown observed and expected data.

### 2.1 (O-E)<sup>2</sup>/E

|                    | Arrested  | Not Arrested | Grand Total |
|--------------------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| <i>Employed</i>    | 0.7394541 | 0.579963976  | 359         |
| <i>Unemployed</i>  | 1.4195936 | 1.113406778  | 187         |
| <i>Grand Total</i> | 240       | 306          | 546         |

## 2.2 Phi

|                                   |             |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>nr. of rows (r):</i>           | 2           |
| <i>nr. of columns (r):</i>        | 2           |
| <i>q</i>                          | 2           |
| <i>Pearson's Chi-Square Value</i> | 3.852418465 |
| <i>Phi (<math>\phi</math>)</i>    | 0.083998283 |

### *Qualitative Results*

The qualitative results support our assumption that regardless of the correlation between employment and rearrest, the individuals use their employment status as a signal of desistance. Further, their employment seems to be the result of an honest decision to choose the prosocial identity. When we transcribed the interviews and evaluated thematic patterns separately, we used intercoder reliability to then compare our findings. We found that the participants discussed many themes that related to our original theoretical frameworks.

Repeatedly, the POC participants discussed their ability to buy new vehicles and houses and improve their credit scores. One of our interviewees in particular described the importance of financial stability in the midst of the re-entry process: "I preach saving money cause for guys like me if money gets short you go back to what you know." This statement emphasizes the importance of legitimate stability and livelihood versus temporary job placement. The attainment of these material goods reflects a potential increase in human and social capital and a definite increase in the likelihood of desistance when an ex-offender signals through their employment retention and dedication to the attainment of legitimate assets. Such statements illustrate the necessity of legitimate employment opportunities as articulated by Ramakers et al. (2017) and

emphasize that self-agency can be expressed through potentially less obvious outcomes than that of employment alone. In a separate interview, our interviewee stated that his future "...is moving up in management...having my own place even if the first step is to move out in a nice one bedroom, it's whatever." Here again we see an emphasis on material assets and legitimate employment mobility, however, we also see a heightened level of goal-orientation. Employment may very well be the difference between being able to support one's self in life legitimately versus criminally, however, legitimate employment also parallels a change in values. These men are aware of their criminal histories, acknowledge the need for change, and divert time and effort to prosocial goals such as property ownership and promotion.

Through a combination of the POC program, their faith, and their personal decisions to make a change, the POC participants have expressed a desire to transform their lives and focus on creating a more prosocial identity. Even more importantly, they have *acted* on that desire. All of the POC participants that we interviewed articulated a conversion narrative (Maruna et al., 2006) which was born from their faith in prison and led to their participation in POC: "To me, from what I've learned, the coming and growing as a Christian and then coming to a strong Christian program, that really is a deal maker." Their gainful employment seems to be a result of their desistance rather than the change agent itself with a preliminary requirement of internal transformation. Most of the participants received their employment opportunities through informal networks at Prisoners of Christ. These men felt that their world was more forgiving than that of the "outside," an indication that Schwartz's (2020) "safe umbrella" potentially carries over to other re-entry programs and assists with internal change. As one participant articulates, "You're looking for grace and mercy...so you have to give grace and mercy."

## **Discussion and Limitations**

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations to the current study. Our quantitative data was gathered through only two public databases, making our search noncomprehensive. Some data was missing and discarded, reducing our sample size significantly. Additionally, our research design is cross-sectional instead of longitudinal which creates an inability to track the rearrest data over an extended period of time. Rearrest is most likely within the first three years of release (Alpher et al., 2018), so this limitation is especially daunting for those who had an initial start date at POC after the year 2017. Our sample population, though large for the quantitative portion of our research ( $N = 546$ ) is a convenience sample indicating that it may not be representative of the general population. In our analysis we were unable to account for variables aside from employment and rearrest. Additional analyses are needed to better identify if there is a causal relationship as opposed to a spurious correlation. Our qualitative research has a very small sample size ( $N = 14$ ) and was limited due to time constraints and the restrictions of COVID-19.

### *What It All Means*

When we study desistance, we are not studying an individual act but the intersection of acts of the individual. In order to identify this intersection, we have to explain the empirical relationships but arguably with greater triumph assess the phenomenological perception of the desister. The comparable results between the quantitative and qualitative analyses are promising. The Chi-Square test indicates a statistically significant difference between the employed and unemployed categories. However, the correlation between employment and rearrest is weak considering the Phi measurement of association. The Phi result along with the qualitative portion



of this study provides valuable context which supports our assumption that employment alone does not adequately affect rearrest. Desistance signaling is also supported through the Phi test and qualitative interviews. Though employment can indicate desistance, it is evident that the individual has to experience an internal change strong enough to manifest an external result.

Through the interviews it is also apparent that certain environments encourage the individual's desire to desist thus encouraging the manifestation of the desistance signal. Though macro-level factors such as the state of the economy may greatly influence the prevalence of employment opportunities, the informal networks which are created through re-entry programs provide strength in numbers. The social capital afforded to the participants of POC help to bolster the effects of their personal desires to desist while also providing more legitimate pathways to a prosocial life. Through the faith-based environment especially, ex-offenders are given a second chance which suggests that the "safe umbrella" in these organizations may provide them with an even deeper level of forgiveness. Though this is not empirically tested in the current study, the qualitative results yield encouraging insight and may suggest that the faith-based program design strengthens the likelihood of both employment retention and desistance.

### *Future Research*

Brennan (2012) argues that when researchers use aggregated data and the meta-analytic approach to evaluate employment programming, an "empirical bulldozer" is taken to the latent group of desisters which may otherwise give us valuable information and insight to the desistance process. Similarly, Sampson (2012) advocates for a greater use of observational studies. He argues that policy is mostly impacted by empirical research, with this "golden standard" being expected in the social sciences even though the empirical rules do not account for the human aspects of diversity and free will. Perhaps then, if we follow this line of thinking

we may find it useful to conduct more mixed-methods research studies to gain both empirical insight and observational insight. Future research on the re-entry of ex-offenders should focus on the mixed-methods approach. Due to the complexity of re-entry and its need for a more individualistic design, mixed-methods studies can improve our understanding of how multiple variables effect heterogenous groups. In desistance research especially, we should be constantly increasing our efforts to understand the latent groups in order to potentially expand on their successes and identify how multiple variables interact to produce the desired desistance outcome.

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