

Background

Roughly **seven in ten people released from state prison are rearrested** within five years, with **four in ten returning to prison within three years**. Efforts to reduce these recidivism rates often focus on helping individuals find jobs, yet the **evidence in support of post-prison employment preventing subsequent offending is mixed**.¹ One potential explanation for these mixed findings is a difference in how the value of employment is understood. While some believe that any job will reduce recidivism, others focus on the importance of finding consistent employment that a person retains for an extended period. Alternatively, it may be that the impact of employment on recidivism is overwhelmed by other factors, or that a job only helps some individuals stay out of prison, such as those with less extensive criminal records or people who did not have stable employment prior to their involvement in crime.

Research Question

What is the effect of stable employment on recidivism? Does this effect differ based on a person's pre-prison employment and criminal history?

Study Strategy

Scholars drew on a sample of 1,607 individuals released from prison in Ohio between October and December 2003 and August and October 2005, tracking the rate at which they were convicted of a new felony within three years. To analyze the impact of employment stability on recidivism, the researchers used the employment records of each person for the three years before and after their incarceration to place people into one of four categories:

- Marginally employed: lacked stable employment both before and after prison
- Employment gainers: lacked stable employment before prison but established it after release
- Stably employed: established stable employment both before and after prison
- Employment dropouts: established stable employment before prison but lacked it after release

Comparing recidivism rates across these four categories allowed the researchers to estimate the impact of stable employment on the chances of returning to prison after release. In addition, the analysis also considers how this impact might be shaped by criminal history, including the duration of previous terms of incarceration and the number and timing of past convictions.

Findings

Half of the sample (51%) fell into the marginally employed category, indicating that many of these individuals released from prison in Ohio could not secure stable employment either before or following their time in prison. Among the remaining 49%, 13.5% were employment gainers, 19% were stably employed, and 16.5% were employment dropouts.

"The results further reveal that stable post-prison employment reduces recidivism even for those with extensive criminal history and no meaningful connection to the labor market prior to prison."

– Kolbeck et al. (2023)

The recidivism rate among the stably employed was 12%, which was statistically indistinguishable from the rate among employment gainers (18%). By contrast, both of these groups were significantly less likely to receive a new felony conviction when compared to the marginally employed (recidivism rate of 41%) and the employment dropouts (recidivism rate of 29%).

Accounting for the influence of other factors on recidivism (e.g., education, prison behavior, sentence length, criminal history), the results demonstrate that the likelihood of recidivism among the stably employed and employment gainers is reduced by 58% and 61%, respectively, compared to the marginally employed.

The findings suggest that stable employment following imprisonment can substantially reduce recidivism, both among those who had this kind of employment prior to incarceration and those who obtained it only after serving a prison term. The results also suggest that having stable employment prior to incarceration does not protect as well against recidivism if similar employment cannot be secured post-release.

Finally, the analysis shows that the influence of stable employment on recidivism holds across levels of criminal history. On average, employment gainers had significantly more extensive criminal histories than employment dropouts but were roughly half as likely to recidivate.

Implications

Where previous analyses have called into question the role that obtaining a job post-prison plays in protecting against recidivism, this study suggests that having employment can be impactful when that employment is relatively stable. Notably, this impact appears to hold regardless of what a person's work and criminal history looked like before their incarceration, but having a stable job before entering prison is less impactful if similar employment is not found post-release. These findings underscore the value of educational opportunities, earned sentence credits, and other programs and policies that help people use their time in prison to hone skills that can help them find jobs. Future scholarship might analyze the effect of these policies by not only considering how they shape people's ability to find jobs, but also their capacity to hold onto them. Subsequent analyses could also consider the impact of job type, given that this study only examined whether a person held employment, and not the quality of that employment.

"Our results suggest that far from abandoning efforts to assist returning citizens into employment, policymakers and practitioners should focus attention on discovering why existing programs have not been more successful and how to improve them."

– Kolbeck et al. (2023)

Article Citation

Kolbeck, S., Lopez, S., & Bellair, P. (2023). Does stable employment after prison reduce recidivism irrespective of prior employment and offending? *Justice Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2023.2201330>

¹Measures of recidivism differ by type of criminal justice contact (e.g., rearrest or reconviction) and the period following release that is tracked (e.g., three years, five years). In this analysis, recidivism is defined as a new felony conviction within three years of release, which aligns with the definition from the National Institute of Justice: "Recidivism is measured by criminal acts that resulted in rearrest, reconviction or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following the person's release." <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism>