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recidivism irrespective of prior employment and offending?

Kolbeck, S., Lopez, S., & Bellair, P. (2023). Does stable employment after prison reduce a person's pre-prison employment and criminal history?

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

Research Question

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 employed gainers, 17% were stably employed, and 16.5% were employment dropouts.

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 43%) 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 43%, 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.

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.

Implications

Where previous analyses have called into question the role that employment might play in reducing recidivism, this study suggests that having employment can be impactful when that employment is relatively stable. Notably, this analysis attempts to hold constant what kind of a person’s work and criminal history looked like before their incarceration, but having stable employment before and after their time in prison is less impactful if similar employment is not found post-release. These findings underscore the value of educational opportunities, earned sentence credits, and policies by not only considering how they shape people’s ability to find jobs, but also their capacity to hold onto them.

Future scholarship might consider the impact of job type, given that this study only examined whether a person held employment and not the quality of that employment.

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“Our results suggest that far from abandoning efforts to assist returning citizens into employment, policymakers and practitioners should focus their attention on discovering why existing programs have not had more success in reducing recidivism and consider ways to improve them.”

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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.