SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL REENTRY IN TOMPKINS COUNTY, NY: EMPLOYMENT

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A report commissioned by Ultimate Reentry Opportunity

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ULTIMATE RE-ENTRY OPPORTUNITY

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EMPLOYMENT REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

This qualitative research study, commissioned in 2018 by Ultimate Reentry Opportunity (URO) initiative, examines systemic barriers to effective reentry in Tompkins County. After being awarded an Engaged Research grant in the amount of $18,000 from Cornell University to pursue this study, co-principal investigators Jamila Michener, Joe Margulies and Paula Ioanide, obtained IRB approval and trained approximately 40 students at Cornell University and Ithaca College in human subject research with vulnerable populations in Fall 2019-Spring 2020. The study conducted 54 interviews with individuals living in Tompkins County who were 18 years or older and previously involved with the criminal justice system (prison and/or jail).

CHARACTERISTICS OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Of the total 54 individuals interviewed who were living in Tompkins County and were previously incarcerated in jail and/or prison, some broad characteristics emerged that are worth noting. As not all participants wished to disclose information about the characteristics outlined below, the numbers attached to the characteristics below do not always match the total sample size (n=54).

The gender breakdown of the total sample size was 17 women and 37 men (with 0 participants identifying as gender non-conforming or transgender). Of the 39 participants who self-identified their race/ethnicity, 22 identified as white, 14 as Black/African American, and 3 as Hispanic/Latinx.

The vast majority of participants (n=41) indicated that they were currently enrolled in a benefit program, such as DSS emergency housing, Medicaid, Section 8 vouchers, SSI, SSD, SNAP. Of the 15 participants who disclosed that they were homeless at the time of the interview, 8 were staying at St. John's Homeless shelter and 7 elsewhere (including the homeless encampment called "the Jungle").

Participants by Gender

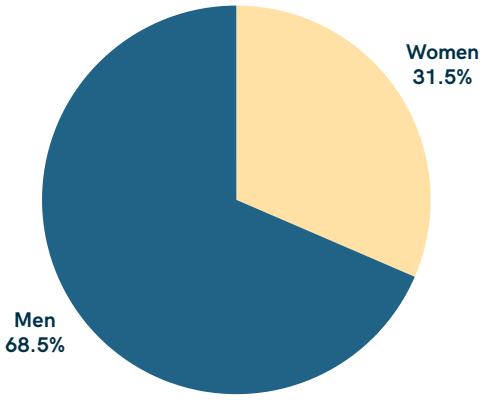


Figure 1: Of the 54 participants, 17 identified as women and 37 identified as men. There were no participants who identified as gender non-conforming or transgender.

Participants by Race

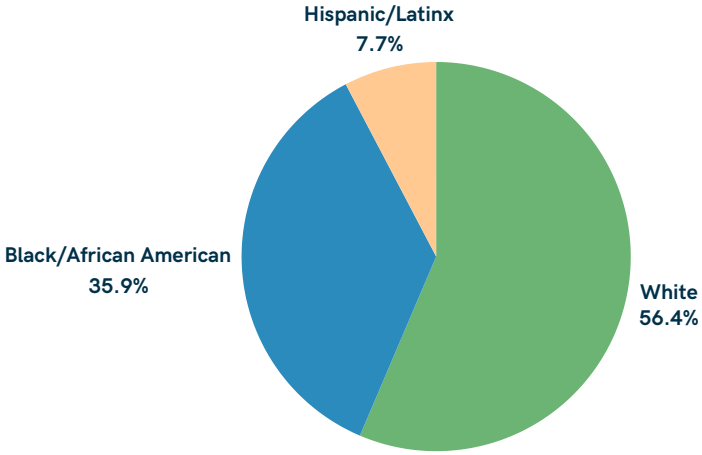


Figure 2: Of the 54 participants, 17 identified as women and 37 identified as men. There were no participants who identified as gender non-conforming or transgender.

Participants by Age

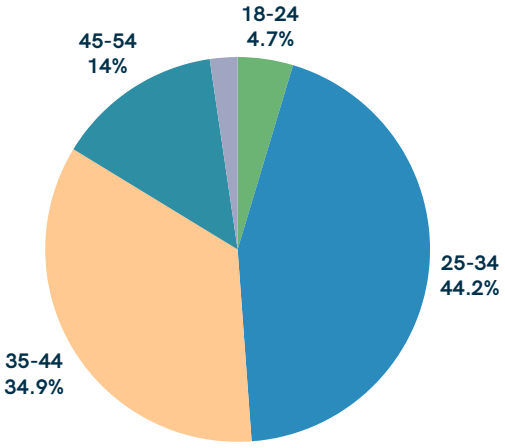


Figure 3: Of the 43 participants, the majority of students were ages 25 - 32, while no participants were ages 55 - 64.

Participants by Education Level

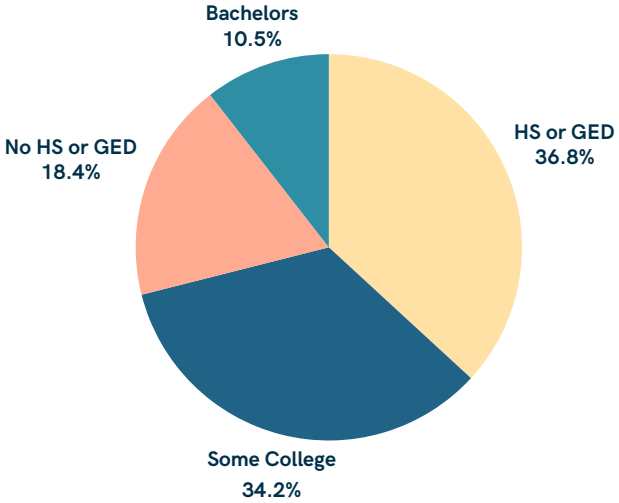


Figure 4: Of the 38 participants, the majority of participants had their high school degree or GED. It was the least common for participants to have their Bachelors degree.

EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES FOR PEOPLE IN REENTRY

Stable employment is one of the key factors to a successful reentry process. It is not only crucial to people's ability to obtain safe housing, transportation, and food security but also provides a structure that can improve one's social connections and emotional fulfillment. Additionally, one of the most important benefits of employment is that it can reduce involvement in unlawful activity. As the benefits from being engaged in lawful labor economies grow, illegal activity becomes less appealing (Schnepel, 2017). Yet, for many people seeking employment post-incarceration, the benefits of lawful labor economies are generally not available to begin with.

Using a nationally representative dataset, Couloute and Kopf (2018) found that among the five million formerly incarcerated people living in the United States, the unemployment rate was over 27 percent. Formerly incarcerated people are without jobs at rates higher than the total U.S. population during any historical period, including the Great Depression (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). Structural barriers make it extremely difficult to secure employment for people in reentry, especially in the period immediately following release. As Couloute and Kopf (2018) argue, "Although employers express willingness to hire people with criminal records, evidence shows that having a record reduces employer callback rates by 50%. What employers say appears to contradict what they actually do when it comes to hiring decisions." Hiring managers' perceived risks to the workplace, exclusion policies for people convicted of certain crimes, as well as stereotyping and biases make it extremely difficult for people with criminal histories to obtain jobs. Indeed, Couloute and Kopf (2018) show that the unemployment rates of formerly incarcerated Black women and men are significantly higher than those of White women and men (see Figure 5). This suggests that non-White racial identity, gender, and criminal history work together to compund discriminatory outcomes in employment.

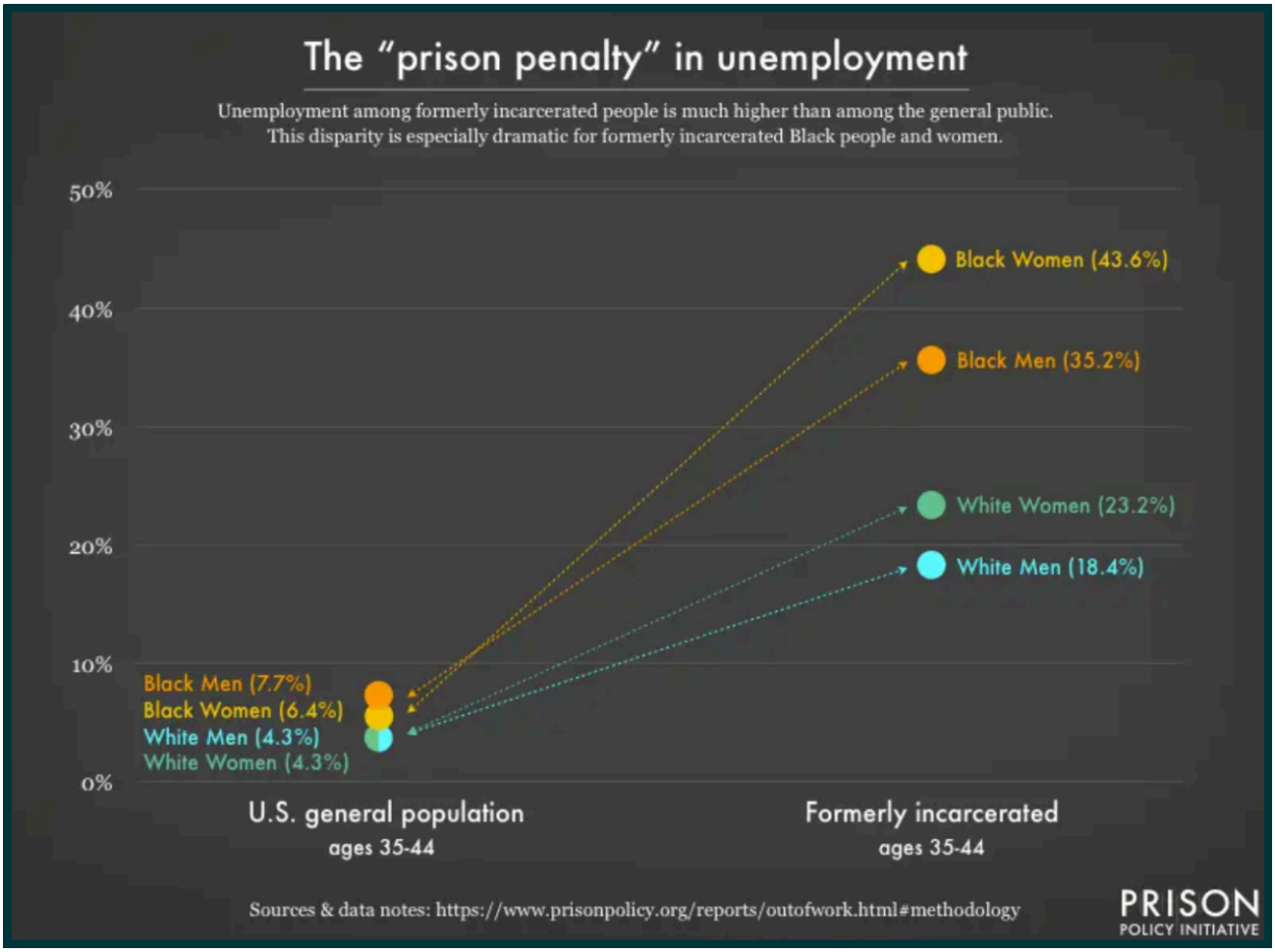


Figure 5. Unemployment rates for White women and men in the general U.S. population (ages 35-44) versus formerly incarcerated population (ages 35-44). Source: Couloute & Kopf (2018)

Other studies find that employers are more likely to make negative assumptions about applicants with criminal histories, asking them fewer questions than other candidates. As a result, employers are unable to understand a candidate's character and skill sets beyond their criminal backgrounds (Pager et al., 2009).

URO QUALITATIVE STUDY FINDINGS ON EMPLOYMENT

In Tompkins County, employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals are limited, and participants in the URO study mirrored nationwide trends. Of the 54 participants interviewed for this study, 36 interviewees expressed employment as a barrier to their success after being released. Of those 36 individuals, 19 (53%) mentioned experiencing an overall stigma in relation to their conviction status. Thirteen of those 19 individuals expressed an employer-based stigma around their conviction as an obstacle in trying to gain employment. Workplaces that were willing to hire people in reentry generally offered menial jobs with very low wages and few opportunities for advancement. People in reentry with college-level education or with specialized skills (obtained during or prior to incarceration) rarely found job opportunities that made use of their educational backgrounds or skill sets. Networks, personal referrals, and recommendations were the most significant factors in successfully finding employment. Interviewees also testified to structural barriers that prevented them from moving out of extreme poverty. Securing income, even at a very low level, sometimes meant losing eligibility for or reducing public assistance stipends. At other times, obtaining an income meant having to contribute to homeless shelter costs but not having enough income to move out of the shelter. People in reentry in Tompkins County expressed desires for employers who are willing to hear their testimonies of personal transformation rather than judge them solely by their criminal histories. They advocated for the creation of transitional employment programs that allow people in reentry to reacclimate to workplace environments and build up their work histories.

KEY BARRIER TO EMPLOYMENT: CRIMINAL BACKGROUND HISTORY

By far the most frequently mentioned theme expressed by the study's participants who discussed employment was employers' reaction to their past criminal records. Participant 45 articulated their experience with employers who conduct background checks:
"Like I told you, nine times out of 10, if the employer does not look at my background, they'll hire me on the spot; nine times out of 10. But as soon as they pick up and they look up the background check, they don't want to hear anything."

Participant 39, who was convicted for a sexual offense, stated, "I've applied to, like, 90 different jobs in Tompkins County and maybe a handful would hire me. And they're only, like, the lowest-paying jobs of all." Indeed, people convicted of sexual offenses are often automatically excluded from certain jobs and are among the most stigmatized job seekers.

The process of applying to many places and consistently being turned down due to one's criminal background sometimes leads people in reentry into a sense of defeatism. Participant 32, who has assault charges for being in fights when he was young, expressed, "I give up. Yeah. I ain't going to lie. Someone just says, 'Oh, we're going to run a criminal background check.' I'm like, 'Oh, man. Here we go.'" Participant 15, who had an arson charge for setting his own car on fire stated, "I was two days out of jail, and I was sitting down in front of people... one of them shook my hand and said, 'Hey man, I respect the fact that you've been out of jail for two days, and you're already trying to find a job, but your criminal record is just not going to do it for us.'" Even people with college degrees anticipated that their criminal records would function as a structural barrier to obtaining employment. As Participant 14 noted, "Because of my past and my jail, I'm going to have a very hard time finding a job even with a degree."

"Because of my past and my jail, I'm going to have a very hard time finding a job even with a degree."

People in reentry in Tompkins County felt a deep sense of frustration that their criminal histories functioned as a permanent stain, subjecting them to stereotypes, stigma, and biases that rarely allowed for the possibility that they may have personally transformed since they first committed their crimes. Participant 5 noted, "[I]t was hard to find a job, a lot of people judge you, a lot of people look at you a lot different, a lot of people see you as this bad person." Similarly, Participant 17 noted, "Just because I have a certain stigma behind me that I had caused an issue in my life, which I've now dealt with, should not be pulled up every single time I need a job or something, you know?"

Finally, similar to national trends, the discriminatory effects of having a criminal history when seeking jobs is compounded by racial discrimination. As Participant 10 expressed: "Racism is still an issue, that's a real thing... I want to check the "I'm a felon box" and I put down the date on there or whatever... And then I give it to an employer and I'm immediately discriminated against. Not only am I a person of color but I'm also now a felon, which makes it three times as hard to get a job. Because some employers don't even want to have to deal with people of color. Where I work at right now, there might be three or four people [of color] in a whole giant floor."

As discussed below, the intersectional discriminatory effects of criminal backgrounds, race, and gender disproportionately affect people of color seeking employment. This is a particularly acute problem nationally as well as in Tompkins County, as Black and Latino/a/x people are incarcerated at vastly higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups. In 2021, though Black people made up only 4.5% of the Tompkins County population (US Census), they made up 25 percent of arrests and 30 percent of those incarcerated in the Tompkins County Jail (TC Sheriff's Report, DCJS Data, 2021).

LOW-WAGE LABOR WITH FEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

Among participants who were able to secure employment, many expressed that the only jobs available for people in reentry are low wage, menial jobs that were subject to the ebbs and flows of Cornell University and Ithaca College's academic calendars.

"I won't be disrespected anymore for a minimum wage rate."

Additionally, these jobs offered little to no opportunity for advancement or higher paying jobs. As Participant 4 stated, "[W]hat they do have is really automatic jobs almost, I want to describe it like that to people who don't mind working in a dish room environment for minimum wage and it's also quite seasonal, of course, because students have the winter and the summer off and holidays off and breaks off." Sometimes these low wage jobs entailed having to put up with disrespect or mistreatment. As Participant 30 states, "I understand there's a joking way to talk about what you or somebody went through, totally. But I won't be disrespected any more for a minimum wage rate." Referring to the few places that work to place people in reentry in jobs, Participant 7 similarly noted:

"They're only putting you at shit jobs, not jobs that you could advance from.... It's nothing that wants you or makes you come to work. The only thing that's making you come to work is so that you don't go back to jail. So let's get jobs that people want, let's get jobs that people can advance."

Such low wage jobs with few opportunities for advancement or a sense of personal fulfillment again lead to a sense of defeatism among people in reentry, leading some to turn to more lucrative but unlawful labor economies.

SOCIAL SERVICES: DISINCENTIVIZING UPPER MOBILITY

Seventy-six percent (76%) of the total number of people in reentry we interviewed (n=54) stated that they were receiving some sort of public assistance. Maintaining these benefits often requires regular engagement with bureaucratic processes and procedures. A prevalent theme among those who discussed structural barriers to employment post-

incarceration was the impact of even very low wages on other social service benefits they were receiving. For example, while houseless people without income can live at St. John's Community Services Homeless Shelter, if they obtain a job, they are expected to pay $500/week to stay. With a minimum wage job, this could entail contributing 100% of their income solely towards housing. Earning an income can also reduce other social service benefits one receives, or render a person completely ineligible for certain services.

As Participant 43 explains:

"And yes, they help you get on your feet and get in a place but they want you to go to work for them. $40 a week... Now you're just getting enough just to pay for the hotel they're putting you in and you can't really get out of that; you know what I mean? At $40 a week you go broke -- take another job. And if you take another job, you cut down the assistance you get. So it's, okay, get another job, but there's no way in hell you're paying -- you're stuck right there; you know? Unless somebody comes in and gives you a hand, gives you some kind of money or something of that nature, you ain't going nowhere."

The structure described by Participant 43 essentially disincentivizes people in reentry from entering formal, lawful labor economies. People in reentry have to choose among 1) entering the formal labor market but not making enough income to survive and pay all their expenses independently; 2) making no income and barely surviving on the public assistance stipends that exist; or 3) working under the table or in alternative labor economies in order to preserve their income eligibility for certain public assistance programs.

"At $40 a week you go broke..."

Participants who had to meet court-mandated requirements (e.g., drug court, probation, parole) or drug treatment programs linked to maintaining Department of Social Services benefits often faced insurmountable challenges to keeping employment. The sheer number of appointments per week as well as the wait times for court-mandated or DSS appointments often kept participants from pursuing employment.

NETWORKS MATTER

The few participants who were able to secure employment post-incarceration expressed that personal networks, referrals, and recommendations were the most significant factor in their success. Participant 22, for example, noted the significance of their family networks:

"If you don't have any family, you're basically out here on your own. You have to find a way to survive. You have to get your identification and your Social Security card...it's hard when you're coming from inside because you don't have any references to get jobs. You don't have your references for apartments. So if you don't know how to network and move

around and maybe sell yourself a little bit, then you end up sleeping on the street, freezing."

Other participants indicated that personal referrals to jobs helped them bypass questions about criminal history or that letters of recommendation written by reputable people on their behalf helped them get their foot in the employment door.

EMPLOYMENT NEEDS: TRANSITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

When we asked people in reentry what kinds of employment-related services and opportunities they would like to seee, participants articulated a few core themes. First, they expressed hope that employers would stop judging them solely by their criminal histories and instead view them holistically as full human beings who have the capability to transform and learn from their past mistakes. The interviewees' experiences highlight the significant need for hiring managers to be trained to look beyond a person's criminal history–or "beyond the box"–in order to accurately evaluate the details of their record to make a fully informed decision throughout the hiring process. As Participant 10 states, "And I believe in ban the box. So don't ask me about my past, who cares about my past? Can I help the company flourish for the future?"

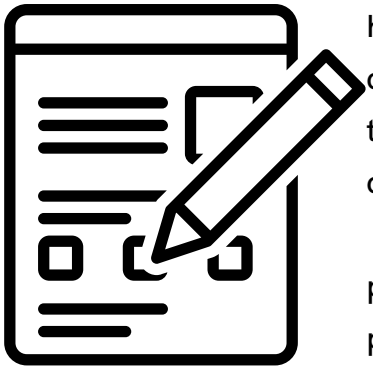
Second, many articulated the need for additional supportive services for people in reentry. OAR of Tompkins County, a non-profit serving people in reentry, was discussed as offering essential help in the reentry process. By name, Marie Boyer's ability to assist people with paperwork, public benefits applications, birth certificates, identification cards, and job referrals before release was also deemed to be helpful. Support while in jail or prison provides substantial help as it informs incarcerated people of important resources and prepares them to access those resources upon release. Kathy Lind in Day Reporting for people on probation was similarly mentioned several times as being essential to linking people with employers that considered people with criminal histories. Other organizations that were mentioned to provide helpful services related to employment included Challenge Workforce Solutions, Catholic Charities, Women's Opportunities Center, and Workforce New York.

Third, several participants expressed the need for transitional jobs earmarked for people in reentry or incentives to employers who hire people in reentry. Such jobs would not only allow people with criminal records to fill big gaps in their work histories post-release, but would also afford them the opportunity to reacclimate to workplace environments.

"So don't ask me about my past, who cares about my past? Can I help the company flourish for the future?

BEYOND BANNING THE BOX

In light of national and local statistics that show the profound effects of incarceration and criminal records on people's ability to access employment, many municipalities and states began adopting "ban the box" policies beginning in the late 1990s. Ban the box campaigns argued that asking applicants to state their criminal histories on their initial job applications functioned to deter formerly incarcerated people from applying. It also allowed employers to easily eliminate applicants with criminal histories in the initial review process, rarely giving people with criminal records the chance to move to the interview stage where they could elaborate on their rehabilitation and highlight characteristics and skills beyond their criminal histories.



Despite these good intentions, ban the box policies have produced mixed results for applicants with criminal records, particularly young men of color. In a study conducted by Agan and Starr (2016), researchers sent out 15,220 fictional online job applications to private, for-profit employers in New York City and New Jersey before and after the adoption of ban the box (BTB) policies. The study ensured similar work histories and resume characteristics in the fictional job applications in order to isolate criminal history and race as the only distinguishing variables among the applicants. Agan and Starr's (2016) study found that in the pre-BTB period, White applicants received 7% more callbacks than Black applicants. However, in the post-BTB period, White applicants received 45% more callbacks than Black applicants, showing that after BTB policies were implemented, the racial gap grew more than six-fold (Agan & Starr, 2016, p. 4). Another study conducted by Doleac and Hansen (2017) examined employment rates in jurisdictions before and after the adoption of BTB policies. The study found that in jurisdictions that adopted ban the box policies, the probability of employment for young Black and Latino men (ages 24-35) without a college degree decreased by 5.1% and 2.9%, respectively. However, for older Black men (34-64) without college degrees and Black women (25-34) with a college degree, the probability of employment increased. By contrast, the employment prospects for White men held steady or increased.

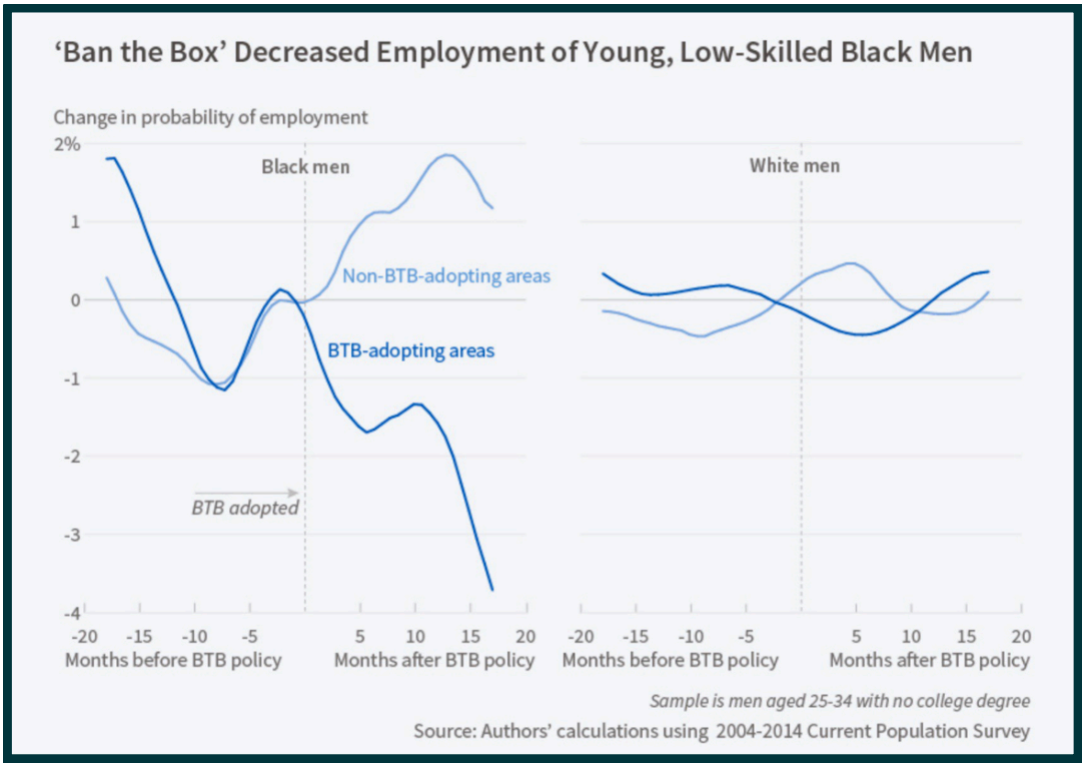


Figure 6. Probability in employment for Black men (25-34) without college degrees versus white men (25-34) before and after Ban the Box policies were adopted. Source: Doleac, Jennifer L., and Benjamin Hansen. Does "ban the box" help or hurt low-skilled workers? Statistical discrimination and employment outcomes when criminal histories are hidden. No. w22469. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016.

Doleac and Hansen (2017) suggest that these "findings support the hypothesis that when an applicant's criminal history is unavailable, employers statistically discriminate against demographic groups that include more ex-offenders" (p. 1). Essentially, for young Black and Latino/x men without college degrees, race functions as a proxy for presumed criminality. The stereotypical association between young men of color and criminality. Such stereotypical associations may explain why Pager et al. (2009) found that White people with criminal records were more likely to receive callbacks (17%) for job applications than Black people without criminal records (14%). These studies suggest that BTB policies alone are not sufficient for diminishing the discriminatory employment outcomes for people in reentry. Race- and gender-conscious initiatives and policies are needed to ensure that employers do not use race as a proxy for criminality when criminal records are not available.

One beneficial policy change took place in 2012 when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) stated that blanket exclusions of individuals with criminal convictions disproportionately impact Black and Latino job candidates, given the pervasive racial disparities in the criminal justice system. As a result, the EEOC now requires employers to conduct individualized assessments of job applicants by considering

other information such as the nature of the crime, the amount of time passed since the conviction, and the relevance of the misconduct to the job (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017). Individualized assessments are one initiative that can help eliminate blanket exclusion by teaching hiring managers and employers how to assess the relevance of past convictions and address prejudices against those with criminal records.

TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to making changes to the hiring process, transitional employment programs that specifically cater towards people in reentry can be extremely helpful in preventing recidivism and supporting successful reintegration into communities. Reentry employment programs provide justice-involved people opportunities to fill resume gaps, gain exposure to new technologies, expand their networks, develop reliability and interpersonal skills, and acquire referrals. Municipalities and organizations across the country provide these employment services to justice-involved people who are recently reentering society. Exodus Transitional Community, located in East Harlem, New York, is an example of an organization that provides educational employment-oriented training and holistic support. Their educational programs include soft skills training, GED classes, and one-on-one mentorship. With over 5,000 client cases a year, the organization has a recidivism rate of 4%. Seventy eight percent (78%) of the participants were able to secure a living wage employment (Price-Tucker et al., 2019). A main factor in this success is the types of jobs that are offered. A long term job with substantial wages post-release has proven to be a key factor since the impact of employment on recidivism can only be found when returning citizens hold jobs for longer than six months (Price-Tucker et al., 2019). In order to provide the jobs needed, Exodus Transitional Community partners with local businesses and governmental programs such as the Second Chance Employment Program and NY/NJ Port Authority, which was facilitated through Governor Cuomo's JFK redevelopment plan to ensure justice-involved individuals have equal opportunities for employment.

Homeboy Industries, located in Los Angeles, California, additionally provides an array of reentry assistance to former gang members and previously incarcerated individuals through their 18-month employment and reentry program. With an enrollment of 400 people a year, the transitional employment program consists of three phases. First, the program employs trainees in one of Homeboy Industries' Social Enterprises or at an internship, broadening their skill sets. Second, as people in reentry participate in classes, they also attend therapy, build life skills, and get

other assistance such as removing tattoos that are gang-related or visible on their face, neck, and hands, as these can make it difficult to secure employment. Third, people in the program take the skills they have acquired in earlier phases to another agency or work environment (Homeboy Industries, n.d.). Over the 20 years that Homeboy Industries has been helping with the reentry process, the organization has estimated their recidivism rate at 35% compared to the national rate of 65% (Sharpe, 2016). Each year they serve 9,000 people who come seeking their services (Homeboy Industries, 2019). Their funding comes from a combination of individual donations and corporate donations, as well as having been awarded County contracts with the purpose of funding their gang intervention program (Zavis, 2010).

The City of Chicago has been funding a transitional jobs program that employs similar strategies to help formerly incarcerated people overcome employment barriers and transition into work. Through a temporarily subsidized employment program, the City provides job readiness training, career planning, and other supportive services that work to develop experience and skills (Chicago Jobs Council, 2011). While Homeboy Industries and Exodus Transitional Community are both not-for-profit organizations that operate on sponsors and donations, Chicago's transitional jobs program is funded by a mix of public and private funds including federal grants, City of Chicago corporate funding (supporting basic city operations and services), the Chicago Housing Authority, and private foundations. From 2007 to 2009, Chicago's transitional employment program participants reported a ten percent increase in their employment. However, this increase faded after individuals left the transitional jobs (National Transitional Job Network, 2012). An evaluation study found that the transitional jobs programs did not significantly affect key measures of recidivism over the two-year follow-up period, as around half of the studied group was arrested or sent back to prison for violations of parole, not new crimes. This points to the bigger issue of how these programs are structured. As seen with Homeboy Industries, reducing recidivism is possible, but the major difference between these two programs was the amount of case management involved.

Case management is a vital aspect in the transitional reentry process that can better help to facilitate long-term success. Case managers work in similar ways as mentors by working closely with reentrants to ensure their progress and keep them on track along the way. Case managers can guide individuals through the transitional program at their own pace and help create an effective treatment plan that supports them throughout their

transition (GEO, 2019). Case managers can even work with individuals pre-release to make the community hand-off process that much smoother. The system of community hand-off (pre-release and post-release) and case management is complex as it can involve multiple jurisdictions and agencies, but it ensures the continuity of care that can successfully reduce recidivism and and improve reentry outcomes (Warwick et al., 2012).

In 2007, the National Institute of Corrections and the Urban Institute launched the Transition from Jail to Community (TJC) initiative "to address the unique challenges of jail reentry and thereby improve public safety and enhance the success of individuals returning to the community from local jails" (Warwick et al., 2012). Their approach to the pre-release transitional program involves an initial screening of the jail population to determine each individual's risk to reoffend. The initial screening is deployed in two stages: **(1) risk screening to determine which people are at greatest risk to recidivate; and (2) a full assessment to identify the needs that must be targeted to reduce recidivism (Christensen et al., 2012).** The screening instrument used to determine risk level should be one that can be administered quickly, easily, and reliably. In the five TJC learning sites that implemented elements of the TJC program, they selected the Proxy Triage Risk Screener which is scored on an eight-point scale and consists of three questions (current age, age of first arrest, and number of prior arrests) (Christensen et al., 2012). The scores range from 2 to 8 with scores of 2 to 4 generally indicating low risk, scores of 5 or 6 indicating medium risk, and scores of 7 or 8 indicating high risk. The screening proxy can be administered by a booking officer in less than a minute, relying on self reported data (Christensen et al., 2012). This screening is intended to apply to everyone entering the jail system and is suggested to take place at the initial booking. By the end of the learning period for the participating TJC sites, risk scores had been captured for nearly the entire jail population and the various sites used the collected information to make suggestions about which types of programs certain individuals should be placed. Usually those who are identified as medium to high-risk individuals are provided an in-depth assessment, case management, and programming in order to provide the right interventions needed to have a smooth post-release transition (Christensen et al., 2012). Case management is a crucial component of the transitional program: "it can bridge the services received inside the jail facility and those received after release in the community, connecting clients to appropriate services and improving interagency information-sharing and continuity of care" (Warwick et al., 2012). To be effective, the process must involve strong coordination and collaboration among key

stakeholders to work within the existing systems to create successful transitions for individuals entering back into the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Tompkins County currently lacks the infrastructure for transitional employment opportunities with reliable case management and wrap-around services. The study's findings suggest that people in reentry face significant obstacles to employment post-incarceration, with people of color facing the compounded effects of racial and past criminal history discrimination. Stable, living wage employment opportunities are needed for people in reentry, but notably, with significant case management support. In a pilot transitional employment program for people in reentry at Finger Lakes ReUse, then-supervisor Anise Hotchkiss quickly learned that reentrants required a significant amount of case management support that the organization could not provide. Thus, in light of our study's qualitative findings as well as research on ban the box policies and effective transitional employment programs, stakeholders in Tompkins County should include the following factors to improve employment prospects for people in reentry:

- **programs that use a racial equity lens rather than colorblind ban the box policies alone;**
- **programs that offer skill-development or certification programs at living wage rates with permanent, living wage employment prospects;**
- **individualized case management and employment planning pre- and post-release;**
- **training opportunities for employers to diminish the impact of bias for reentry applicants and people of color;**
- **legal assistance for people with criminal records to obtain certificates of release and to clean up RAPP sheets.**

In conclusion, employment cannot be considered in a silo. As our Housing and Health Reports indicate, approaches to eliminating systemic barriers for people in reentry in Tompkins County must be considered through the intersections of affordable, safe housing options, access to health services and insurance, access to transportation, and employment.

METHODS

The Data Development Working Group of the Ultimate Reentry Opportunity (URO) initiative commissioned a qualitative study to assess systemic barriers to successful reentry for formerly incarcerated people in Tompkins County. Co-principal investigators Paula Ioanide, Jamila Michener and Joe Margulies began the qualitative study by obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for human subject research through Cornell University. Inviting students at Cornell and Ithaca College to participate in the qualitative study, they trained approximately 20 undergraduate students in human subject research (all students were required to obtain approval via Cornell University) and interviewing methods for vulnerable populations.

Recruitment for participant participation took place by posting flyers in locations frequented by people in reentry: OAR, Day Reporting, DSS, Homeless Shelter. The criteria for participating in the study included: 1) must be residing in Tompkins County, 2) be 18 years or older, and 3) have been previously involved with the criminal justice system (prison and/or jail). The flyer included information that participants would be given $100 Visa gift cards for their time and participation. A phone number operated by co-principal investigator Joe Margulies was listed on the flyer. Students conducted interviews in pairs, with one person asking questions and a second as notetaker. Students met participants in public places like the Tompkins County Public Library or Gimme Coffee.

Participants were given their $100 Visa gift cards prior to beginning the interview. After being read an informed consent statement, each participant was asked to verbally consent to participating in the study. Participants were also asked to verbally consent to being recorded. Interviews were audio recorded on digital voice recording devices owned by Cornell University or Ithaca College. Interview questions were open-ended but focused on asking participants to speak to their experiences post-incarceration in relation to finding a place to live, securing a job, accessing transportation, receiving health care, and negotiating judicial oversights like probation, parole, and drug court.

Once the 54 interviews were completed, the audio files were submitted to a professional service for transcription. Six undergraduate research assistants reviewed all transcribed interviews for identifying information; co-principal investigator Paula Ioanide then redacted any information that could reveal the identity of the participant from all transcribed interviews.

A group of 10 undergraduate assistants, under the supervision of Jamila Michener and Paula Ioanide, used Dedoose software to code the transcribed interviews. Codes and subcodes were developed by identifying key areas and factors that have been identified by research to be important components to successful reentry: housing, employment, transportation, health, education, judicial/court processes, stigmatization, impact of trauma prior, during and post incarceration, and availability of social resources and non-profit based services. After all interviews were coded in Dedoose, interviews and memos were reviewed for descriptor data such as gender, race/ethnicity, age group, veteran status, marital status, homelessness status, parental status, whether participants were receiving public benefits, highest education completed, employment status, self-declared substance use disorder, number of arrests and convictions, date of most recent incarceration, amount of time spent in most recent custody, and time elapsed since last custody. We imputed the descriptor data into Dedoose, allowing us to see trends across qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

Dedoose was used to determine the most frequently discussed barriers to reentry across all interviews. We cross checked the most prominent barriers mentioned with descriptors like race, gender, and age to assess whether certain groups mentioned certain issues disproportionately. By reviewing all interviews that mentioned housing, a group of six undergraduate students under the supervision of co-principal investigator Paula Ioanide were able to determine thematic patterns related to employment.

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