



Crime and unemployment: What's the link?

Criminal justice professionals constantly try to find answers to three essential questions:

1. Who will commit a crime?
2. What factors reduce the likelihood of someone committing a crime?
3. How should offenders be treated to reduce rates of crime?

One issue is a clear and crucial factor: employment. Research has shown a positive correlation between having good, sustainable employment and the avoidance of criminal behavior. This is not a surprise: employment provides income, the opportunity to become a socially valued member of a community, to develop networks of support, and to build knowledge and self-esteem.

Perhaps most importantly, employment provides one way for people to connect with or belong to their communities. Those who develop a sense of connectedness with their community and become invested in its social institutions such as family, school or work are less likely to offend against it.

With the ongoing difficulties to finding employment and high living costs, the need for comprehensive and evidence-based employment support services for people with criminal records and other barriers is higher than ever. The benefits include safer communities for everyone and individuals with reclaimed lives.

Unemployment as a Criminogenic Factor

The latest Canadian data indicate that offenders have dramatically high unemployment rates: over 40%. Researchers have identified unemployment as a significant risk factor for criminal activity and property crime in particular. This does not mean that unemployment causes crime. There are many law-abiding unemployed citizens, but a lack of employment may be interrelated with issues of education, literacy and learning delays. The relationship between employment and criminal behaviour can also be influenced by other social and health factors, such as addictions, mental health concerns, developmental disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), poverty, discrimination and lack of stable housing.

Education has a clear relationship with stability and quality of employment. For example, unemployment rates in the general public is 12% for those with less than high school level education and 4% for those with university degrees.

Given the increasing demand for higher levels of education, offenders have more difficulty finding work upon release, which in turn might lead them to re-offend. Services that facilitate stable employment for those at risk of future or further offending such as high school equivalency courses and work experience in prison, can only have a positive impact on reducing criminal behavior.

Finding Work after Conviction and Incarceration

While it is hoped that release from prison will result in a transition to a more productive life, the reality is often not so straightforward. Many aspects of involvement in the criminal justice system can have long-term impacts that negatively affect one's ability to lead a more pro-social life. Many people find that their criminal record is an automatic barrier to finding work, as employers are increasingly using criminal record checks to reject any applicants with records of conviction.

Years spent in correctional institutions can also dramatically decrease employability, not only because of the glaring gaps on resumes. Many individuals have little knowledge of new technologies or the latest developments in their prior line of work. For example, with no internet access available in institutions, many people released from prison have no experience with email or the web, thus reducing their attractiveness to potential employers.



Finally, the experience of institutional life can in itself be a barrier to employment. The anti-social skills that are developed to survive “on the inside” can often hinder success in work and other situations.

It is due to all these issues that many people released from prison do not find work in their preferred field and end up working in low-paying jobs they do not enjoy. Researchers have found that it is not the job itself that is important, it is the stability and quality of employment that appear to act as preventative factors. Quality of employment can be measured in many ways, including skill level requirement, adequacy of salary, job satisfaction reported by the worker, working conditions, and hours. Jobs that are low-paying and require less skill, for example, have been shown to have the least potential for upward mobility and personal satisfaction. In this way, poor quality jobs, or underemployment, may in fact be as important a criminogenic factor as unemployment.

The John Howard Society of BC position

Employment has a strong correlation to personal success and provides an acceptable societal definition of oneself.

The John Howard Society of British Columbia believes that every member of society has the ability to contribute positively to their community; employment and volunteer work are vital ways in which such contributions are made. In the course of incarceration and rehabilitation, updating education and developing marketable skills must be a priority. Services related to mentorship, hands-on learning and the development of internal motivation are essential. A job promotes responsibility and a sense of purpose.

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