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## **The Yearn for Social Justice: Getting Former Offenders Back into the Workforce**

Camille Jefferson

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Camille Jefferson

Prof. Anderson

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The Yearn for Social Justice:

Getting Former Offenders Back into the Workforce

Many criminals around the world encounter high amounts of abuse and neglect while being incarcerated, whether it be in a prison or jail. Some are not taken seriously and deemed useless to society, due to not being able to contribute. Ex-criminals are then confronted with another issue added on which involves not being welcomed into the workforce after serving their given time. Jails and prisons provide a variety of programs to improve public safety by making inmates more productive upon release. Ex-offenders should be able to get back into the workforce because they have already served their time, are punctual due to a rigid schedule, and are simply grateful for another chance. Denying ex-offenders the right to equal opportunity in the workforce would contradict the intentions of social justice and also promote recidivism. Being an ex-offender in society can negatively affect one's well-being, ultimately making them feel like they do not belong. Years, even months, of being incarcerated can take a negative toll on an individual's mental health. Sarah Sheppard, who is a freelance writer and advocates for mental health, emphasizes that "the stigma of having a criminal record can impact every aspect of your life. . . . To improve post-release outcomes and prevent reentry, we must work, as a

society, to mitigate the effects of stigma” (Sheppard). The more that society puts this issue on the back burner and continues to look down on ex-offenders, the crime rates will only worsen and the stats of recidivism, the tendency of a convicted criminal to re-offend, will only rise. The higher the rate of mental health issues, the higher the amount of crime that will transpire, putting everyone at risk.

Many ex-offenders realize that this could possibly be their last opportunity to transform into the best version of themselves and continue to be responsible and live better lives. According to editor David Sparkman, a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management stated that “82% of managers and 67% of HR professionals believe that the quality of hire for workers with criminal records is about the same or higher than that for workers without records.” In most cases when an ex-criminal is given a second chance to become successful, they will generally do the best they can to go down the right path in life. It is believed that they are more responsible after incarceration because they have been taught how to be responsible and accountable for their actions while locked up, making them useful employees in the workplace.

Ex-offenders tend to be more reliable than conventional employees because in most cases, they are afraid to return to jail or ruin their reputation even more than they already have. Terry Segerberg, who is the chief executive officer of Cincinnati-based Mesa Industries, says that the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts found that “93% of ex-offenders who secured a job shortly after leaving prison never returned to prison” (Segerberg). Ex-cons already know what it

feels like to serve time whether it be in jail or prison, and know that it is not a very pleasant place to be. In addition, they are aware that bad decisions may lead them to incarceration, so they will do whatever it takes legally to be the best employee. Not everyone will have the luck of getting hired multiple times.

An ex-offender being locked up allows them to reflect on their past, and be grateful for another chance at life, becoming motivated to succeed. The Charles Koch Institute states that “acquiring a second chance provides people with dignity and allows them to achieve their potential as contributing members of our community” (Koch 2019). Doing this enables former inmates to gain a sense of closure by serving their sentence and aids in giving them the support that is lacking to avoid subsequent criminal activity. Many of them know that it is highly unlikely that they will receive a third, fourth chance, etc. to get their act together. Someone that has truly learned their lesson will strive for the best possible outcome.

Furthermore, ex-offenders have gained the description of being punctual due to the rigid schedule that they had to become accustomed to, so they are used to hard work. Many inmates are given jobs and activities to do while serving their time. Inmates even receive a form of compensation for the work they complete. It is not much, but it lets them know that they are useful and can work when they get back out into the real world. As I mentioned earlier, both jails and prisons also offer programs, services, and classes, so that you are not totally hidden from reality. In Sarah Shemkus’ article, Gina Honeycutt, who is an executive director of the National Correctional Industries, believes that “working while incarcerated can teach inmates

not just technical skills, but soft skills as well. Many offenders have never worked a legal job and need to learn the basics like showing up on time, listening to a supervisor, and working as part of a team” (Shemkus 2015). This gives inmates first-hand experience on what to expect when released from prison, and it forces an inmate to have a set schedule in hopes to become organized and involved. Inmates having such a rigid schedule will make them strong candidates for employees. Not all conventional workers even have rigid schedules like inmates do. This will set inmates apart from regular citizens when it is time for hiring.

Though everyone does not have a perfect past, one might believe that once a felon, always a felon. There has been a theory created by Cesare Lombroso, who is known as the ‘father of modern criminology’ suggesting that the idea of criminality is inherited, in other words, something that you are born with based on genetics. I personally do not agree with this theory because I believe that everyone is made in their own image, and just because your mother or father has a criminal history does not necessarily mean that you will have one as well. It is unfortunate that society will always look past an individual's heart and only at their physical appearance or background. No one is supposed to stay the same, act the same, and think the same for the whole duration of their life. People change their ways, whether it be for the good or the bad.

One local example that comes to mind is that of Marian Hatcher, who is an ex-offender who believes that serving time actually changed her life in positive ways. Her testimony reads: Sheriff Tom Dart’s vision afforded me the multidisciplinary integrated treatment program at the Cook County Jail... The program addressed underlying stressors and unaddressed issues that

brought me to jail (and nearly prison) in the first place...In the long term, Sheriff Dart's program offered me the physical and mental safety that saved me from myself. It taught me coping and life skills, allowing me to live a healthy life. I became a productive member of society again and developed the sense of family and teamwork that I had been missing for so many years(Cook County Government 2013). Marian's testimony proves that it is never too late to turn your life around for the better. Therefore, we should judge people individually rather than categorizing people into different groups. Not even two people on earth are the same, let alone everyone that has been incarcerated in their lifetime. Instead of keeping those who have served time at the bottom, we should really be trying to lift them up, because you never know if one day it could be you in that situation.

There is also the argument that ex-offenders who have served time for violent crimes such as rape do not deserve to be accepted into the workforce. Though there should be limitations put in order, everyone deserves some sort of income, just maybe not the nicest. According to author Eugene Casey, who works in an employment agency, ex-felons with violent criminal records can find employment in truck driving, construction work, and self-employment opportunities. Casey is a credible source because he works with many ex-offenders in his line of work, trying to seek well-off jobs for them. Many, including myself, agree that someone who has served time for a violent crime, such as rape, should never be given a job that deals with the public, but there are jobs in the workforce like the ones listed above that do not. It is vital for ex-offenders to be honest when explaining their criminal history when seeking a job. Doing so will allow them to correct past mistakes that have been made and aid in living an honest life with their potential new career.

In the book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, the author reminisces over the many lessons he has learned while working with inmates on death row. Stevenson is employed as a lawyer who has served many years helping the condemned, the poor, and the incarcerated. One lesson he has learned is very powerful and I believe everyone can take something from it. The book states, "Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: *Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done*" (Stevenson 17-18). Stevenson, taking this lesson into consideration, shows that he has a high amount of self-awareness and that he is humble enough to face his wrongs. What I get from dissecting the lesson is that one wrong act, whether that be due to illegal decisions, mental illness, or poverty, does not fully determine the type of person you truly are or what the rest of your life should look like. As you get further along in the book, you realize that this does not only apply to prisons but to everyone that takes part in the justice system. Officers and judges also make many mistakes, and Stevenson believes that all should be given mercy and I could not agree more.

When discussing this assignment with my mother, who has been employed at the Cook County Sheriff's Office for almost sixteen years, she grew very intrigued and wanted to provide her insight and expertise on this topic. She stated that "It is very imperative and necessary to have groups and programs in place for offenders while incarcerated." Many offenders may have committed the crime; however, they are not necessarily terrible people. Some realize their mistake(s) and yearn for a second chance at living a normal life and earning an honest living after serving their time. However, society tends to view ex-offenders as a liability as opposed to an asset to the company due to traditional standards. In my opinion, not providing educational

programs and groups such as GED, mental health, and re-entry programs are setting them up for failure and recidivism. You are literally placing ex-offenders between a rock and a hard place.

She expressed:

I have interacted with several repeat offenders over the years and often posed the question, 'Why are you back?' Several of their responses were because they couldn't get a decent job and were forced to resort to the same criminal activity that got them locked up. I think it is important for me to make a conscious effort to positively pour into each offender I interact with.

A quote by Maya Angelou, a famous African American poet, and civil rights activist, reads, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel " keeps my mom grounded and humble. When offenders get released, my mom tells them, "Don't come back" while others may say "See you later".

Needless to say, life is all about second chances. I hope whoever reads this has gained a new perspective on how they should treat ex-offenders in the future. I am very grateful that I was able to get my mother's opinion on how she feels about this controversial topic, given that she is a correctional officer. Overall, her mission is to correct the inmates and transform them into better humans. There is no one on this earth that is perfect, and everyone has made plenty of mistakes in their lifetime, just maybe not as visible as others. We all are capable of making bad decisions as we are of making good decisions. When we all can come to terms with this



information and outlook, there will be no stopping society from making the world a better and more welcoming place to live in.

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