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Implications for Successful Reintegration

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Predictors of Stable Employment Among Female Inmates in New Jersey: Implications for Successful Reintegration

CYNTHIA L. BLITZ

ABSTRACT The ability of inmates to secure stable, legal employment for themselves upon release from prison has been shown to be a crucial element for successful community reintegration. These individuals, however, often fail to find employment due to a multitude of personal, relational, structural, and institutional barriers. Formerly incarcerated women are particularly disadvantaged in this respect, given their high rates of psychiatric and substance abuse disorders, and history of domestic violence in conjunction with low educational attainment and limited employment skills. The main goal of the current study was to delineate the relative importance of a variety of personal factors as determinants of stable employment for female inmates. Data were collected as part of a population survey of female inmates in New Jersey (N = 908). Female inmates who volunteered to participate in this study were asked to complete a short survey that included questions about their educational and work histories, their work skills, as well as their history of need in and treatment for behavioral health services. Findings from this study underscore the importance of both education and treatment for behavioral health problems as key determinants of stable employment. Recommendations for possible interventions are addressed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS Women, prison, employment, reintegration

The successful reintegration of inmates into their communities upon release from the correctional system continues to be an important objective of ongoing social and institutional efforts to reduce the level of recidivism within the inmate population in the United States (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). While many factors contribute to the success or failure of inmate reintegration (see Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle, & McPherson, 2004), inmates' ability to secure legitimate employment with sustainable wages has proved to be a crucial element in this regard (Finn, 1998; Fletcher, Shaver, & Moon, 1993a; Harer, 1994; Harrison & Schehr, 2004; Kerley & Copes, 2004; Needles, 1996; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 1996; Uggen, 1999). In addition, stable employment, characterized as having a full-time position over a period of time or the ability to remain employed regardless of job change (Kachnowski, 2005; Kerley & Copes, 2004) is crucial not only because it relates to positive economic and health outcomes, but also because it increases an individual's level of social functioning and self-efficacy to achieve personal reintegration objectives (Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002; Richie, 2001).

Achieving stable employment, however, is a significant challenge for people leaving prison. Many individuals leaving prison fail to find and retain legal employment due to factors such as low educational attainment, drug addiction, social stigma, and parole restrictions (Legal Action Center, 2004; Petersilia, 2000; Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan, & Blitz, 2005). This is particularly true for formerly incarcerated women. The ability of these women to achieve positive employment outcomes is diminished by low educational attainment, limited employment skills, and poor work history, all of which are quite characteristic of this population (O'Brien, 2001; Tonkin, Dickie, Alemagno, & Grove, 2004). These barriers are likely to be further compounded by more traditional barriers to employment experienced by women in the general population such as gender discrimination and difficulties balancing work and child rearing responsibilities (Amott, 1992; Danziger et al., 1999; Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995; Johnston-Anumonwo, McLafferty, & Preston, 1994; McLafferty & Preston, 1992), which explains why so many female inmates express concern about their prospects of finding employment upon release (Severance, 2004).

Formerly incarcerated women's prospects of finding and retaining stable employment are further diminished by the fact that, relative to their male counterparts, women incarcerated in state prisons are more likely to have psychiatric disorders and a history of physical and sexual abuse (Blitz, Wolff, Pan, & Pogorzelski, 2005; Mueser, Drake, & Miles, 1997; Robins & Regier, 1991; Teplin, 1990), which compromises their

readiness for work, as do substance abuse problems. Roughly half of the women in state prisons were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they committed their offense (Ditton, 1999). Evidence, although limited, suggests that most of these women receive very little, if any, medical or mental health treatment in the community (Blitz, Wolff, & Paap, 2006; Peters, Greenbaum, Edens, Carter, & Ortiz, 1998).

Given the importance of employment to successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated women and the multiple barriers to employment they face, it is surprising that only a handful of studies have addressed this issue (Tonkin et al., 2004). These studies provide important insight into the type and nature of barriers to employment experienced by formerly incarcerated women returning to the community by identifying a host of personal, relational, structural, and institutional barriers to employment, as well as examine such barriers from the perspective of different stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, correctional officers, and inmates themselves). Nonetheless, because the majority of these studies relied on small and non-representative samples of incarcerated women (Visher & Travis, 2003), they cannot fully delineate the relative importance of factors related to formerly incarcerated women's ability to find and retain stable employment. More precise research is necessary to facilitate the formulation of recommendations regarding the kinds of policy and institutional initiatives needed to improve the prospects of achieving positive employment outcomes for women leaving prison. For this reason, the current study uses a more comprehensive sample of female inmates to examine, retrospectively, their employment history with the goal of delineating factors that are associated with positive employment outcomes prior to incarceration and, thus, may increase the likelihood of employment upon release from prison.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DIFFERENTIAL EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AMONG FEMALE OFFENDERS

Female inmates generally have difficult economic circumstances prior to entering prison (Greenfeld & Snell, 2000). National estimates suggest that at time of arrest approximately half of female inmates at state correctional facilities were employed (36% full-time and 11% part-time) and half were unemployed (19% looking for a job and 34% not actively looking for a job) (Snell, 1994). In addition, approximately 37% of female inmates had incomes of less than \$600 per month and nearly 30% were

receiving welfare assistance at the time just before the arrest, which brought them to prison (Greenfeld & Snell, 2000).

In general, the available literature highlights four classes of factors—personal, relational, structural, and institutional (see Visser & Travis, 2003)—that seem to be associated with differential employment outcomes among formerly incarcerated women. Personal characteristics of these women that have been shown to place barriers on their ability to find and retain legitimate employment include low level of education, poor employment skills and work history, and the presence of drug addiction or a mental health disorder (O'Brien, 2001; Tonkin et al., 2004). Education is among the most important variables impacting a woman's prospect of finding and retaining legitimate employment (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). Education is needed to acquire skills that are valued by the labor market and many women in prison are poorly educated with over half not completing high school. Prisoners are twice as likely as low-wage workers of similar age to be high school dropouts (Bernstein & Houston, 2000). Research suggests that women in prison may also lack self-management and social skills, as well as positive attitudes toward legitimate work, that are essential for successful employment (Fletcher, Rolinson, & Moon, 1993b; Hardesty, Hardwick, & Thompson, 1993). Finally, drug addiction and mental illness are quite prevalent within this population, most frequently due to victimization and abuse (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999). Women with an active drug addiction or a mental health disorder may find it difficult to reach the level of physiological, psychological, emotional, and social functioning needed to achieve stable employment (Blitz & Mechanic, 2006; Danziger et al., 1999; Heflin, 2003; Mechanic, Bilder, & McAlpine, 2002; Moffitt & Pavetti, 2000; Montoya, Atkinson, & Struse, 2001; Nam, 2005; Olson & Pavetti, 1996; Romero, Chavkin, Wise, Smith, & Wood, 2002; Rosen, Tolman, & Warner, 2004; White, 2004). There is also some evidence that employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated women are further constrained by race (i.e., being African American), ethnicity (i.e., being Hispanic), and age (with younger formerly incarcerated women having more difficulty finding employment), though the underlying reasons for these tendencies are not clear (Harrison & Schehr, 2004; Myers, 1983).

Relational factors that are frequently cited as impediments to employment among formerly incarcerated women include family status and dysfunctional personal relationships with spouses, romantic partners, and family members. In addition, these women have a more difficult time finding and retaining employment when minor children depend on

them for both economic and emotional support (Fletcher et al., 1993a; Morash, Haarr, & Rucker, 1994). Having to care for their children and hold a job are often perceived as competing demands and many individuals have difficulty handling both, unless they get some help from relatives and other members of the community. In addition, because many women are forced to reenter the communities in which they resided prior to their incarceration (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis, Keegan, & Cadora, 2003; Travis & Petersillia, 2001), a number of them are forced to face once again relationships with family members and significant others, which are dysfunctional in nature and which are often characterized by victimization and abuse. Such relationships often have a serious psychological and emotional toll on women, which focuses their attention away from the issue of employment (Graffam et al., 2004), or compromises employment stability because of absenteeism or poor performance, leading to termination.

Structural and institutional factors that limit a woman's likelihood of finding and retaining stable employment include the state of the economy and the labor market, legal restriction on employment, and the social stigma surrounding individuals with a criminal record, which leads to discrimination against them in the job market. A depressed economy and a poor job market tend to impact negatively formerly incarcerated individuals' prospects of finding a sustainable job as unemployment levels are on the increase, competition for jobs is fierce, and pay tends to be lower as employers downsize (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). These unfavorable economic conditions are likely to be worse in the impoverished communities in which offenders are arrested and to which most of them return upon release (Burt, Aron, Lee, & Valente, 2001; Dennis, Buckner, & Lipton, 1991; Durham, 1989; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Rose & Clear, 1998; Travis & Petersillia, 2001; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). In addition, there are typically legal restrictions on employment for formerly incarcerated individuals. Such restrictions regulate the occupations that are off limits to these individuals (e.g., health care, child care, and law enforcement) and prompt employers to use background checks to exclude formerly incarcerated individuals from employment opportunities (Legal Action Center, 2004; Petersillia, 2000). One of the greatest barriers for individuals is the reluctance of employers to hire individuals with a criminal record because of the strong social stigma that is attached to individuals convicted of crimes (Albright & Denq, 1996). Some employers may further discriminate against individuals due to their race or other minority status. The presence of a criminal history further compounds racial bias (Pager, 2003).

Discussions of different ways to help women overcome these multiple and complex barriers to employment post prison are common in the literature. Of these, interventions targeted at women leaving prison seem to be the most promising at present, mainly because interventions targeted at relational, structural, and/or institutional barriers are far more complex to implement or are less feasible, given current economic and/or political climate (for a review, see Harrison & Schehr, 2004). Therefore, the main goal of the current study was to delineate the relative importance of key personal factors as determinants of stable employment for women leaving prison as a way of focusing inmate-targeted interventions on the most crucial personal factors. To achieve this goal, we chose to study retrospectively the relationship between personal factors and female inmates' employment history prior to incarceration controlling for some relational factors including marital status and number of children under 18 years of age. As many of these women are likely to return to the impoverished communities from which they came, we believe that learning about their past successful and unsuccessful employment experiences within the very same communities can help us project their future success or failure in achieving stable employment when they leave prison. Our belief is based on research indicating that inmates' pre-incarceration work history is a strong predictor of inmates' post-release employment outcomes (Bates, 2004; La Vigne, Visser, & Castro, 2004; Visser & Travis, 2003) as well as the patterns of findings emerging from our data (see Discussion). By identifying the personal factors most important in the prediction of past (pre-incarceration) employment outcomes we hope to draw clear recommendations regarding the kinds of female-targeted interventions in prison and post-incarceration that seem most promising in improving female inmate's likelihood of finding and retaining stable employment upon release from prison.

METHOD

Participants

Data were collected as part of a population survey of female inmates (N = 1,165) located at the only state correctional facility for women in New Jersey. The sole objective of this survey was to provide current data on the work history and behavioral health of the New Jersey female inmate population. Subject recruitment and protections were approved by the University Institutional Review Board. The survey, available in

English and Spanish, was administered over a three-day period in August 2004.

Approximately six individuals (team members) accompanied the researchers to the facility on each of the three days. All female inmates who were available to complete the survey were asked to do so including those in medical and administrative segregation. In the majority of cases, inmates were approached in a central meeting location and invited to participate in the study by completing the survey. In all cases, female inmates were provided with details about the survey; its objectives, that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that non-participation would not, in any way, jeopardize their current standing within prison or affect their parole status. The surveys were completed by women in a centralized meeting location, in their individual cells or on their units. In most cases, privacy was afforded to individuals by the location where they completed the survey and by their ability to sit separately from others.

Female inmates who volunteered to participate in this study were asked to complete a two-page survey that included questions about their education and work histories, their work skills, and their prospects of returning to the workforce after completing their sentences. The survey also asked for demographic information as well as any behavioral health needs and/or treatment they had or received prior to their incarceration and in prison (see Blitz, Wolff, & Paap, 2006). In all cases, team members were present and available to answer questions, assist with writing answers, and generally provide assistance where needed. All team members were trained to answer questions about the instrument and discussed any issues or questions that came up after each unit was visited. A small number of women (less than 25) were not given the opportunity to complete the survey because they were either off the premises or otherwise unavailable. Overall, 908 surveys were completed, representing a response rate of approximately 78%. No information was collected on the characteristics of non-respondents.

Variables and Measures

The primary dependent variables in this study are those concerning employment stability before incarceration. Two independent indicators of stable employment were used in this study: level and length of employment. Women were first asked a host of general questions about their employment history: (1) whether or not they were employed at the time of arrest, (2) whether or not they had kept the same job for a year,

(3) whether or not they had ever been fired from a job, and (4) the type of jobs they had held. They were also asked to describe their work history (never employed, employed on and off, employed most of the time) and level of employment (never employed, employed mostly part-time, employed mostly full-time) prior to incarceration. Next, they were asked more specifically about the two most recent jobs they held prior to incarceration. They were asked to report about the nature of the job (specific tasks completed), the length of time for which they held this job, and the level of employment (part- or full-time).

Other variables measured were age, race, marital status, number of children under 18 years of age, highest level of education, conviction status, victimization, and need and receipt of behavioral health treatment. Victimization was addressed in the survey by asking women if they had experienced any physical abuse or violence, emotional or verbal abuse, or sexual abuse prior to incarceration. Need and receipt of behavioral health treatment prior to imprisonment were assessed through a series of four questions to which the response options were either "yes" or "no." Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had (1) needed treatment for a substance abuse problem, (2) received treatment for a substance abuse problem, (3) needed treatment for a mental health problem, and (4) received treatment for a mental health problem in the two years preceding their incarceration. Conviction status was measured by the use of three questions asking whether this was a first conviction, the length of sentence and whether or not the individual was in prison on a drug-related charge. Finally, women were asked whether or not they had received welfare benefits or income support prior to incarceration.

RESULTS

Study Participants' Characteristics

Female inmates participating in this study ($N = 908$) were mostly African American (54%, with 30% of women being White and 14% Hispanic). Most (70%) were young (between 21 and 30 years of age), and about half (53%) were high school graduates (30% with some college or college education). Almost three-quarters were single, and 43% reported having no children under the age of 18. About 40% of women admitted being a victim of sexual abuse, half indicated being a victim of physical abuse, and 60% reported that they were abused verbally or

emotionally. More than half of the women had experienced two types of abuse and 32% had experienced all three types of victimization. About half of all respondents were first-time inmates serving a sentence of less than five years for a drug-related conviction. About 55% of the women reported needing behavioral health treatment prior to incarceration (N = 504). The majority of these women (55%) reported receiving behavioral health treatment some time during the two-year period prior to incarceration. Among those who reportedly received treatment, 35% were treated for a mental health disorder, 58% were treated for a substance abuse problem, and the remaining 8% were treated for both mental health and substance abuse problems. Finally, 9.5% of the women reported receiving welfare support under the SSI/SSDI program and 22.5% under the AFDC/TANF program, with 22.5% of all respondents reporting being insured under the Medicaid program.

Study Participants' Employment History

Half of all the women participating in this study (N = 908) reported being regularly employed prior to incarceration, 40% reported sporadic employment, and 9% were never employed. When further asked to describe their level of employment prior to incarceration, 63% indicated that they mostly worked full-time and 28% were mostly employed part-time. A comparison of these findings to national and state statistics about women's employment within the general population may be worthwhile here. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004), 56% of all adult non-institutionalized women nationally were employed in 2003, the majority of them (82%) full-time. According to the same source, a similar percentage (56%) of women in the State of New Jersey were employed in 2003, and 75% of them were employed full-time. In comparison with national and state statistics, then, a greater percentage (almost 90%) of women in prison in New Jersey were ever employed but a smaller percentage of them (about 50%) were employed full-time prior to incarceration.

In terms of number of jobs held and length of employment, 70% of the women in our study had at least two jobs prior to incarceration, which they were able to hold for a period greater than one year. Sixty-two percent of respondents had never been fired from the job, and many (42%) indicated that incarceration was the reason for losing their most recent job. Thirty percent of the women received some form of public support (namely, SSI or AFDC/TANF) prior to their incarceration. These were mostly women who were never employed or who

were employed part-time. While these findings suggest that most women in our study were able to achieve some level of employment stability prior to their incarceration, the types of jobs they held were generally low in terms of occupational prestige and, thus, less stable forms of employment. For example, 40% of the women who were employed prior to incarceration held jobs in service occupations such as child care, house cleaning, waitresses, and food handlers (compared with about 20% of women nationally and in New Jersey who work in similar occupations) and 30% held temporary jobs such as cashiers, security guards, and landscaping (compared with 11% of women nationally and in New Jersey). For additional comparison, fewer women in our sample (11%) held jobs under management, professional, and related occupations than compared with women nationally (36.2%) and in New Jersey (39.5%).(U.S. Census, 2000).

Study Participant Characteristics Associated with Stable Employment

Table 1 examines possible associations between characteristics of women in prison and stable employment prior to incarceration. As noted above, a history of mostly full-time employment and ability to hold a job for a period of one or more years is taken to represent employment stability. In contrast, sporadic, part-time employment and length of employment that is shorter than 12 months are treated as evidence of unstable employment prior to incarceration. The characteristics whose association to stable employment are examined here represent many of the personal and relational factors that are consistently mentioned in the literature as potential barriers to or facilitators of positive employment outcomes. Our findings generally support previous claims about the importance of these factors to inmates' ability to find and retain legitimate employment. As expected, full-time employment was more common among older females and those with higher levels of education. It was less common among African Americans and single women. It is also clear from the findings in Table 1 that the need for behavioral health services to treat drug addiction or a mental health disorder is negatively associated with level of employment, while receiving treatment is positively associated with the prospects of experiencing full-time employment. On the other hand, having one or more children under 18 does not seem to have any association with level of employment, despite the fact that it is frequently presented in the literature as an important barrier to employment. Similarly, having a history of any type of victimization

□ **Table 1: Factors associated with differential employment outcomes pre-incarceration among female inmates in New Jersey, 2004.**

	Level of Employment			Length of Employment		
	Never Employed (n = 88) (%)	Part-Time (n = 243) (%)	Full-Time (n = 331) (%)	χ ² (df)	Less than 1 year (n = 249) (%)	At least 1 year (n = 641) (%)
Demographics						
Age > 30	54	62	69	9.4 (2)*	60	72
African American	67	61	49	16 (2)**	54	52
Hispanic	14	12	15	1.0 (2)	18	12
High school education	51	58	62	27 (4)**	51	58
College education	16	25	35	37 (4)**	13	34
Personal circumstances						
Single	85	73	65	14 (2)**	82	64
Children under 18	57	63	54	5 (2)	61	54
History of victimization	62	71	68	2.2 (2)	73	66
Behavioral health						
Need substance abuse treatment	52	55	41	28 (2)**	56	41
Receive substance abuse treatment	26	31	37	12 (2)*	26	36
Need mental health treatment	35	36	25	24 (2)**	35	26
Receive mental health treatment	19	24	28	12 (2)*	19	25
Conviction status						
First conviction	48	49	58	6 (2)	46	61
Drug-related conviction	58	52	48	4 (2)	57	46
Length of sentence < 5 years	61	63	54	5.5 (2)	42.5	42.5

*p < .05; **p < .01.

does not seem to discriminate women with a history of full-time employment from other employed and unemployed women. Finally, there were no statistically significant differences in level of employment by conviction status. With three exceptions, the same pattern of findings emerges for length of employment, as an additional indicator of stable employment prior to incarceration. The first exception is that there were no differences in length of employment prior to imprisonment among African Americans but that Hispanics were slightly more likely to experience employment shorter than 1 year. Second, inmates for whom this was a first conviction were more likely to experience employment lasting a period of 1 year or greater. On the other hand, those convicted for a drug-related offense were less likely to experience an employment spell lasting 1 year or more.

Predictors of Employment Stability

Two logistic regression models were estimated to further delineate the relative importance of each of the factors examined above to stable employment among women in prison. The first model predicted a woman's retrospective likelihood of having mostly full-time employment prior to incarceration. The second model predicted this woman's retrospective likelihood of holding at least one job for a period equal or greater than one year. The same set of predictors was used in the estimation of each model that includes all the variables, whose association with stable employment was examined in the previous analysis (see Table 1), with the exception of whether or not a woman had children under age 18. That was not associated with any of the dependent variables. The results of logistic regression analyses are summarized in Table 2.

The findings in Table 2 demonstrate unequivocally that the strongest predictor of a woman's ability to secure stable employment prior to incarceration was her level of education. Women who had high school education had almost twice the odds of experiencing full employment than women with less-than-high school level of education and women with college education had an even greater likelihood ($OR = 4.7$) of being fully employed. More educated women also had exactly the same odds ratio of being in the same job for a longer period of time. Other than education, the likelihood of experiencing stable patterns of employment (i.e., a full-time employment and a greater length of employment) also increases when a woman received treatment for drug addiction and/or a mental health disorder and it decreases when women were not

□ **Table 2: Logistic regression models predicting full-time employment and length of employment pre-incarceration among female inmates in New Jersey, 2004 (N = 908).**

	Full-Time Employment		Length of Employment > 1 yr	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Demographics				
Age	1.5**	1.3-1.9	1.8**	1.4-2.2
African American	.55**	.38-.81	.34**	.25-.61
Hispanic	.94	.56-1.6	.42**	.24-.73
High school education	1.95**	1.3-2.9	1.8**	1.2-2.7
College education	4.7**	2.9-7.7	4.7**	2.8-8.1
Personal circumstances				
Single	1.02	.68-1.5	.78	.50-1.2
History of victimization	1.01	.71-1.4	.80	.55-1.2
Behavioral health				
Need substance abuse treatment	.59**	.43-.80	.57**	.41-.79
Receive substance abuse treatment	1.4**	1.0-2.0	1.2**	1.0-1.9
Need mental health treatment	.56**	.40-.79	.53**	.38-.82
Receive mental health treatment	1.8**	1.2-2.5	1.7**	1.3-2.6
Conviction status				
First conviction	1.1	.81-1.6	1.1	.79-1.5
Drug-related conviction	.99	.70-1.4	.87	.61-1.2
Length of sentence < 5 years	1.2	.91-1.7	.82	.53-1.6
Pseudo-R²	.37		.26	

Note: OR = Odds Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval.

** $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

able to receive treatment despite needing it. These two sets of variables (education and treatment) account for a significant proportion of the variance in the odds of experiencing full employment (about 32%) and length of employment (about 21%). The fact that the likelihood of stable employment increases with age and decreases with minority status is

also consistent with previous evidence. As suggested above, while this finding is certainly important in terms of drawing attention to the necessity of targeting disadvantaged populations with appropriate interventions, it may be less relevant to the design of effective interventions that are aimed to help inmates improve their prospects of finding and retaining stable employment by enhancing their human capital or helping them to eliminate their drug dependency.

The regression models shown above can be used to predict the probability that a woman with particular characteristics would have experienced full employment prior to incarceration. Specifically, using the estimates of the regression coefficients for the effect of race, education, and treatment receipt (see Table 2), a score representing her cumulative probability of experiencing full employment prior to incarceration based on these three characteristics was calculated for each woman in our sample. The women were then divided into groups with mutually exclusive characteristics (e.g., white females, with high school level of education, who needed but did not receive treatment for behavioral health problems prior to incarceration) and the average cumulative probability score was calculated for each group. The results of this analysis show that, on average, white females with high school or college education who needed but did not receive treatment for behavioral health problems had a cumulative probability of 56% and 80%, respectively, of experiencing full employment prior to incarceration. The same cumulative probabilities for white females who did receive the treatment they needed were noticeably higher (75% and 90%). Similarly, black females with high school or college education who needed but did not receive treatment for behavioral health problems had a cumulative probability of 39% and 70%, respectively, of experiencing full employment prior to incarceration. These average cumulative probabilities are lower than those observed for comparable white females. Similar to the pattern observed for white females, the cumulative probabilities of experiencing full employment were higher for black females who received the treatment they needed prior to incarceration compared with black women who did not receive treatment (60% and 80%), but were lower than the cumulative probabilities observed for comparable white females. These comparisons illustrate how higher levels of education and treatment receipt greatly improve a woman's probability of experiencing full employment, but that race is also a factor strongly related to employment.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings clearly underscore the importance of education and treatment for behavioral health problems as key determinants of stable employment among women in prison. Women with a high school level of education or greater are significantly more likely than their less educated counterparts to be fully employed and hold jobs for longer periods of time prior to their incarceration. Similarly, women who received treatment for drug addiction and/or a mental health disorder in the community are more likely to experience stable employment than women who needed but had not received behavioral health services. It is worth noting that the rate in which treatment was engaged within the study's population prior to incarceration ranged from 44% of women needing treatment for comorbid mental health and substance abuse problems to 58% of women needing treatment for a mental health problem, with between 30 and 45% of the women not receiving any form of treatment prior to their incarceration. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that the percentage of women in our study who experienced employment stability prior to their incarceration would have been significantly higher if more women received the treatment they needed. Taken as a whole, these findings reaffirm claims made in the current literature on offender rehabilitation regarding the importance of both factors to employment and recidivism among women leaving prison. Such claims are rarely based on findings drawn from large representative samples of offenders and from the use of multiple measures (both general and specific) of employment outcomes, as was the case in this study. In addition, because many key personal barriers to employment (e.g., race, ethnicity, victimization history, and having children under age 18) were compared simultaneously in this study, we are able to establish that low level of education and lack of treatment for substance abuse and/or mental health problem are the most important personal barriers to employment among women prior to incarceration, and most likely, post-incarceration.

While our findings both reaffirm and add to the current knowledge of factors influencing employment for women in prison, it is important to consider some of the study's limitations. First, all the data analyzed in this study, including information concerning employment history, were based on self-reports. Although we were unable to corroborate these self-reports, we have confidence in their accuracy, given the significant degree of internal consistency that exists between women's answers to questions concerning general employment (e.g., Have you ever kept the same job for a year?) and their answers to more specific inquiries about their

employment history (e.g., How long did you have the job before incarceration?). Second, our conclusions and recommendations below are based on our projection from women's past employment experiences to their future, post-incarceration employment experiences. While this projection from the past to the future may be seen as problematic, it is consistent with evidence demonstrating a striking similarity between patterns of inmates' employment before and after prison (Bates, 2004; La Vigne et al., 2004; Travis, 2005; Visser & Travis, 2003). In addition, because we asked women to report whether or not this was their first conviction, we are able to compare the work history of first-time offenders (about half of the women in our study) with that of women who have been incarcerated previously. These women can be reasonably considered ex-offenders who are reporting on their work experience after being released from prison. With the exception that women for whom this was a first conviction were more likely to be Caucasians and high school or college graduates, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of inmates. Consistent with the literature cited above, we found no statistically significant differences in the level of employment and the duration of employment between the two groups. For these reasons, we believe that projecting from these women's past work experience to their future work experience is plausible, assuming that the structural characteristics of employment for women leaving prison has not changed before and after their imprisonment.

From our findings, we can highlight several areas that future interventions might address to improve the chances that women who were once incarcerated find stable and rewarding employment. It is not coincidental that addressing the very same problem areas is also important in terms of trying to prevent incarceration of women from occurring in the first place. The most obvious recommendation based on our results is to better educate women with low levels of education, and to focus these efforts in particular on minority women. In many respects, prison is the ideal place to deliver such interventions. Women are a captive audience in this respect and can be easily motivated to make productive use of their time in prison by enhancing their education. While virtually every prison in the United States offers programs designed to help inmates improve their ability to have a better life outside (Travis, 2005), not all inmates have access to such programs and not all prisons dedicate the same amount of resources needed to meet the demand. In this respect, what is urgently needed is the development of a consensus about the objectives of such programs and the established standards of delivery and implementation that can inform policymaking processes

that will ultimately lead to the standardization and institutionalization of programs designed to enhance inmate education.

In addition, it is important to focus prison-based efforts on enhancing the skills of educated women so that they are prepared for the 21st century job market (Judy & D'Amico, 1997). In recent decades, the labor market has experienced transition from traditional blue collar and manufacturing jobs, the kinds of jobs inmates are most likely to be hired for, to technology-based jobs. To be able to obtain and retain competitive employment, inmates and particularly female inmates must acquire the knowledge and skills needed to perform these jobs. Recent evidence showing favorable results of prison-based training programs (Gates, Flanagan, Motiuk, & Stewart, 1999; Gerber & Fritsch, 1994; Wilson, Gallagher, & Mackenzie, 2000), should stimulate a system-wide development of training programs appropriate for prison populations. Finally, our findings also help to establish the importance of providing treatment opportunities for women with substance abuse and/or mental health problems before, during, and after release from prison. There is evidence that access to behavioral health services among inmates improves with the transition from the community to prison (Blitz, Wolff, & Paap, 2006), but there is still much room for improvement. More rigorous procedures for diagnosing and treating behavioral health problems in prison are urgently needed to improve the current state of affairs.

Educating and treating women in their communities as a way of improving their well-being and avoiding incarceration is clearly a matter of a broader social policy and, thus, a more complex issue to address through highly targeted interventions. It requires the type of public support, commitment, and resources that many communities would be hard pressed to generate. Still, given the overwhelming evidence about the positive effects of education and the delivery of treatment on disadvantaged populations, missing opportunities to support community-wide education and treatment initiatives is a luxury no community can afford. Through the current study we hope to achieve the same goal many other researchers have identified as the first step in this process: Increase public and policy awareness of the problems inmates face as they try to achieve positive employment outcomes, the key factors contributing to these problems, and their possible solutions. Without such awareness, there is little hope of making progress in helping inmates, especially women, reintegrate into their families, communities, and the uninstitutionalized population.

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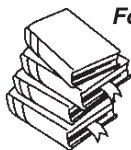
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