The Relationship Among Criminal Justice History and Psychosocial Variables on the Likelihood of Identifying as an "Ex-Offender"

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Abstract

More than 700,000 individuals return from prison to the community each year. These individuals face many challenges reintegrating into the community, sometimes due to being labeled an ex-offender. Ex-offenders have limited citizenship rights and may be restricted from housing, employment, voting rights and other opportunities. Despite this knowledge, it is not clear whether individuals exiting the criminal justice system identify as ex-offenders, or if there are certain characteristics that increase the likelihood that an individual will identify as an ex-offender. This study examines the relationship among criminal justice history (e.g., type of conviction, incarceration history, time since last conviction) and psychosocial variables (e.g., self-esteem and social support) on the likelihood of identifying as an ex-offender among a sample of 390 adults who lived in sober-living homes and had been convicted of a crime. Participants responded to a survey online, through the mail, or with assistance from a local sober-living home recruiter. Approximately 70 percent of the sample self-identified as ex-offenders. Logistic regression analyses were employed to identify correlates among criminal justice history, psychosocial variables and self-identification as an ex-offender. The results have important implications for targeting interventions based on self-identification among individuals exiting the criminal justice system.

Introduction and Background

The purpose of this study is to identify how one's criminal justice history and certain psychosocial variables affect their self-identification as an ex-offender.

- The United States has 5% of the world's population but has 25% of the world's prisoners. 1 in 32 adults are under some form of correctional control[1].

- Around $70 billion are spent on corrections every year and it is likely only two-thirds of those formerly incarcerated will end up back in prison[1].

- Negative impacts of ex-offender stigmatization is well documented, demonstrating that ex-offenders are systematically devalued and excluded from a vast range of social domains and relationships[3].

- Two-thirds of those released from prison committed non-violent crimes but still face the same restrictions as those who have committed violent crimes[2].
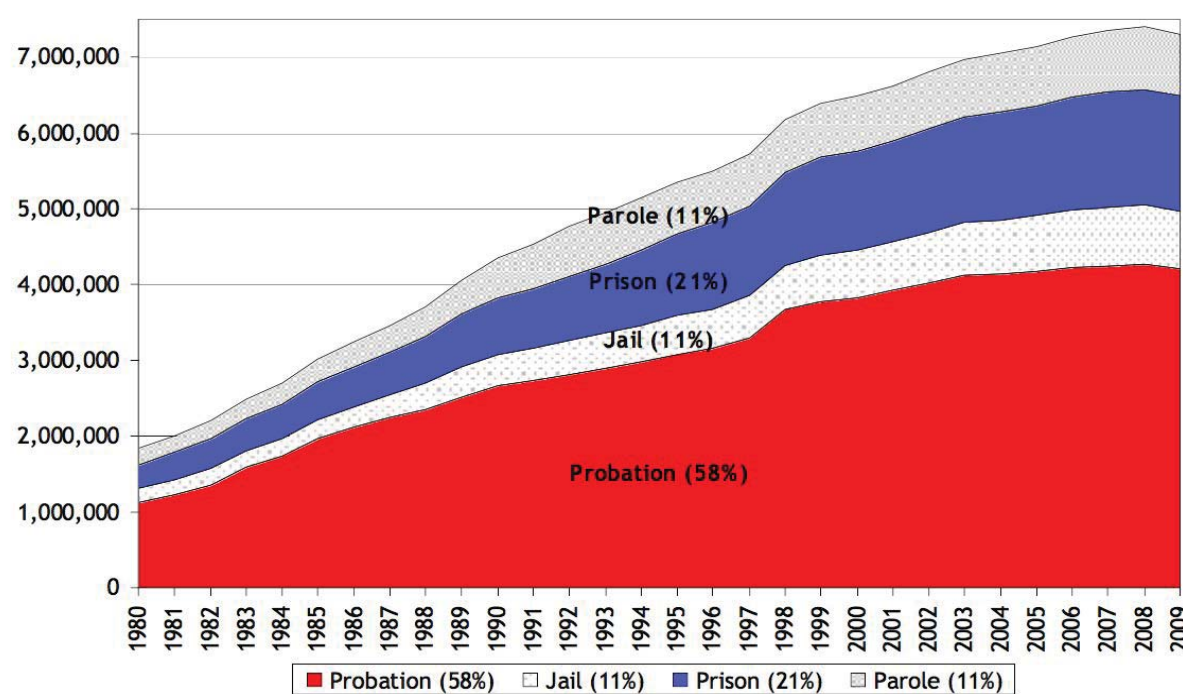

Figure 1: Correctional Populations in the United States 1980-2009[4]

Methods and Materials

Participants: All participants lived in Oxford Houses, which are democratic, sober living communities for individuals in recovery from substance abuse. 508 participants filled out an anonymous survey. Of these, 390 had been convicted of a crime and are included in the present study.

Procedure: Participants were asked to fill out a survey, online or through mail, regarding variables related to their criminal record and perceived social support. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality for participation. An incentive for completing the questionnaire was a raffle for a $25 gift card.

Measures: We measured demographic characteristics; criminal justice variables; and used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS: Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988) to evaluate social support from family (M = 5.16; SD = 1.76), friends (M = 5.77; SD = 1.31) and significant others (M = 5.86; SD = 1.34).
  - 12-item, 7-point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

Analysis and Results

Demographic characteristics included age, gender, education level, and length of recovery.

Logistic regression analysis was conducted with the following variables:

- Race
- Misdemeanor
- Employment Status
- Gender
- If they have of a violent offense
- Social support from family, friends and significant others
- Felony conviction
- Family members incarceration
- Gender

The overall model was significant, $X^2(10) = 78.29$, p = 0.00; R^2 = 0.28. Correlates of identifying as an ex-offender included having a felony conviction (b = 1.77; SE = 0.33), having a conviction for a violent offense (b = 1.06; SE = 0.48) and having family members who were currently or formerly incarcerated (b = 0.71; SE = 0.28).
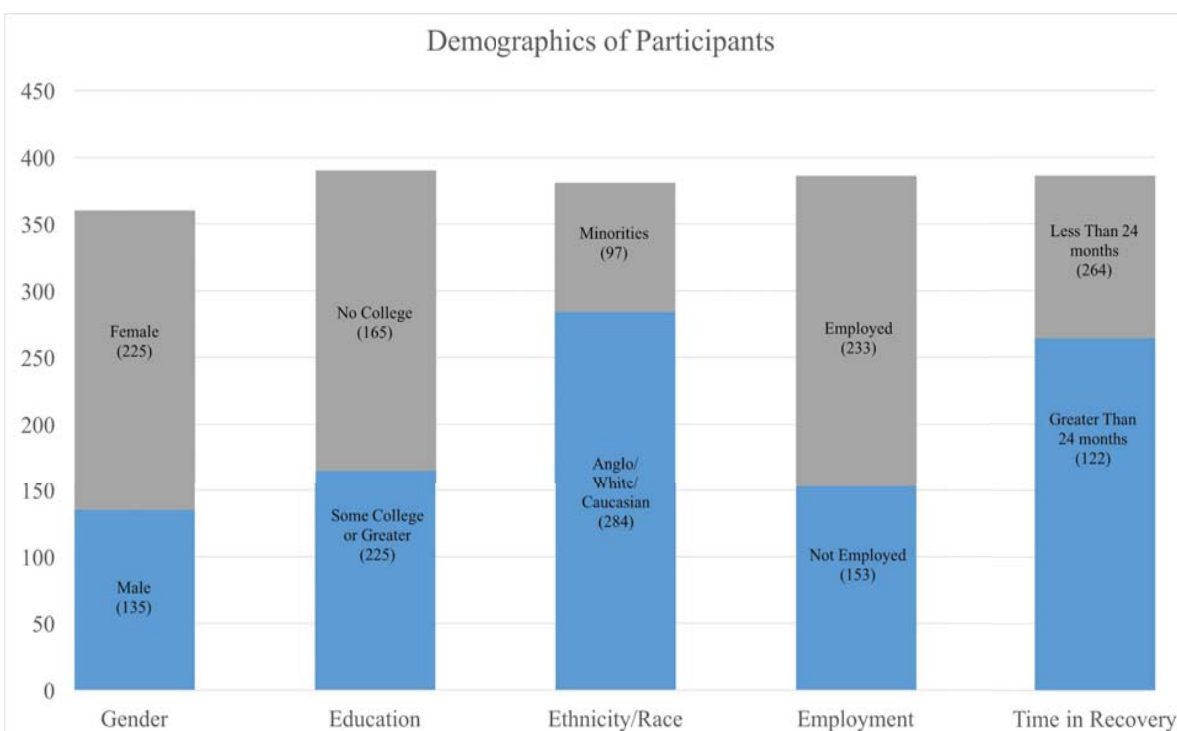

Figure 2: Demographics of Study Participants

Logistic Regression Model

Variables	B	S.E.	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B) Lower	Upper
Gender	.218	.275	1	.428	1.244	.726	2.132
Race	-.011	.312	1	.972	.989	.537	1.822
Misdemeanor Conviction	-.027	.408	1	.948	.974	.437	2.167
Felony Conviction	1.776	.325	1	.000	5.905	3.125	11.157
Conviction of a Violent Offense	1.060	.484	1	.029	2.885	1.117	7.452
Family Member Incarceration	.708	.281	1	.012	2.031	1.171	3.522
Employment	-.086	.271	1	.751	.918	.539	1.562
Social Support From Significant Others	-.052	.087	1	.552	.949	.800	1.127
Social Support From Family	-.154	.154	1	.317	.857	.633	1.160
Social Support From Friends	.134	.142	1	.346	1.143	.865	1.510
Constant	-.018	.814	1	.982	.982		

Discussion and Conclusion

Three variables in our model significantly increased the likelihood of identifying as an 'ex-offender:'

- Participants who were convicted of a felony were 6 times more likely to identify as an ex-offender.
- Participants who had been convicted of a violent offense were 1.1 times more likely to identify as an ex-offender.
- Participants who had family members who were currently or ever incarcerated were 2.03 times more likely to identify as an ex-offender

Interestingly, only criminal justice variables affected the likelihood of identifying as an ex-offender. Demographic variables and social support from friends, family and significant others did not affect the likelihood of identifying as an ex-offender.

Research should continue to examine correlates of identifying as an ex-offender. In this sample, only criminal justice variables were significant, but there were several limitations in this study, including a cross-sectional sample, and disproportionate numbers of women and White participants.

Implications

Labeling individuals who commit crimes as felons increases the likelihood of them identifying as an ex-offender. This suggests that courts and criminal justice systems should try to divert individuals into programs that allow for no felony conviction. In addition, it could be helpful to review laws that label crimes as violent. In some states, a violent offense may not actually reflect person-to-person violence. Finally, it is important to understand the intergenerational effects of incarceration, as those who had family members who had been incarcerated were more likely to identify as an ex-offender. Future research should examine how identifying as an ex-offender influences social and behavioral outcomes, such as employment and quality of life.

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