Exploring Employer Perceptions of Hiring Ex-Offenders

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ABSTRACT

Procuring stable, long-term employment post-conviction remains a significant way to reduce recidivism. Despite the presence of federal incentives and on-the-job training programs, system impacted persons (SIP) continue to face numerous barriers when seeking employment. What remains unclear is why the stigma surrounding SIP is so persistent. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of employers and employment counselors who frequently engage with SIP as job applicants. Building upon current research, findings inform the possibilities for practice for probation and parole officers, case managers, social workers, and other advocates working with this population.

Introduction

The Prison Policy Initiative estimates there are nearly 7.2 million currently or formerly incarcerated persons and over 77 million individuals with a criminal record in the United States (US; Sawyer and Wagner, 2019; Shannon et al., 2017). Research has shown that recidivism rates greatly decrease if system-impacted persons (SIP) obtain satisfactory employment (Denver et al., 2017; Ramakers et al., 2017). Employing SIP upon re-entry to society significantly reduces future correctional costs related to incarceration. Thus, timely employment post-justice system involvement has significant implications for the larger society (Harper et al., 2020). We use the term system impacted persons (SIP) to describe individuals with current or former criminal justice system involvement. Using this term, we hope to reduce the stigma and dehumanizing language associated with having a criminal record (La Vigne, 2016).

Previous research demonstrates that, on average, over the past decade, the SIP unemployment rate in the US hovered at 27%, a rate much higher than the general unemployment rate of 3.7% (Couloute and Kopf, 2018; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In high unemployment, recidivism continues to be a concern, leading researchers to explore what can be done to improve the employment rates of SIP. Numerous programs throughout the country have focused on preparing SIP for employment, and recidivism rates are consistently used to measure program success (Denver et al., 2017; Truesdale-Moore, 2015; Yesberg et al., 2015).

The focus of this study is to provide insight into the perspectives of employment counselors and employers regarding barriers and facilitators to SIP employment. We utilize qualitative research methods to explore the experiences of employers and counsellors working with SIP job applicants in order to develop depth and insight based

on their perceptions. In reviewing the literature, we discuss research regarding employers' perceptions, especially how they assess risk, the timing of disclosing one's prior history in applying for jobs, economic labor trends, and the potential of mentoring to facilitate SIP employment.

Employer Perceptions of Hiring Ex-Offenders

Stigma associated with a criminal history is one common theme among studies regarding employer perceptions of justice-involved individuals. A criminal record often skews the application review process and leaves employers reticent to hire SIP (Agan and Starr, 2017; Carter, 2019; Denver et al., 2017; Sered and Norton-Hawk, 2019). Employers tend to disapprove of prospective employees with felony charges and histories of violent or sexual crimes more than those charged with misdemeanors and drug crimes (Atkin and Armstrong, 2013; Lloyd et al., 2020; Prescott et al., 2020). The stigma felt by employers toward SIP is often amplified when considering applicants who are racial or ethnic minorities, leading to higher unemployment rates (Decker et al., 2015; Western and Sirois, 2019).

Employers tend to scrutinize the behavior of SIP more carefully compared to non-SIP applicants, even if their behavior is similar and documented through less formal records, such as social media profiles (Sugie et al., 2020). This suggests that it is not simply a desire to mitigate risk that dissuades employers from hiring SIP, but the fact that they have been involved in the criminal justice system is a deterrent. However, there is little known about what specifically makes employers reticent to hire SIP, if not simply the risk of antisocial or other risky behaviors.

Employers are often concerned with the liability they may bear if an employee caused harm in the workplace, i.e. if the employer failed to inform other stakeholders of an applicant's history or chose to hire them regardless of past behavior (Heydon and Naylor, 2018; Levashina et al., 2017; Sugie et al., 2020). Employers are especially wary of SIP with mental health conditions due to potential financial burdens as well as questioning their ability to respond well to distressed employees (Berk et al., 2021; McArt, 2014; Ramakers et al., 2017). Some have suggested that providing legal protections and training for employers who hire individuals with criminal backgrounds or mental health issues could help reduce their perception of risk and alleviate concerns of liability (Kuhn, 2019; Kuhn, 2020).

Research suggests that organizations that have "formally assessed the risk and legality associated with hiring an applicant with a record" are more likely to hire a SIP than those

in which "hiring managers make largely discretionary hiring decisions" (Lageson et al., 2015, p. 196). Studies have shown that factors such as time passed since last crime and age can be used to assess the likelihood of recidivism, and such assessments could be utilized by employers to demonstrate that they have done their due diligence in the hiring process and avoid legal ramifications if an employee were to engage in criminal behavior in the workplace (Kuhn, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2020). Additionally, the crimes which employers tend to be especially concerned about, particularly violent and sexual crimes, are the least likely to be repeated by SIP (Prescott et al., 2020; Scurich and John, 2019). It appears that proper risk management and hiring those with criminal records may not be as contradictory as commonly assumed, although that assumption, albeit false, still has a significant impact on SIP employment.

While employers may be concerned regarding the risk of hiring these individuals, SIP performance appears to be comparable to, or even exceed, the work of other employees (Carter, 2019; Minor et al., 2018). Apart from those working in sales, "individuals with criminal records have a much longer tenure and are less likely to quit their jobs voluntarily than other workers" (Minor et al., 2018, p. 1). Perhaps partially due to this longevity and quality performance, past employers of SIP tend to have positive views regarding hiring those with criminal records (Atkin and Armstrong, 2013, p. 86). These findings suggest that the stigma and reluctance that SIP are regularly met with when interacting with potential employers are largely unfounded as work performance often disproves those negative expectations.

Employers who are older, have criminal records themselves, possess a "belief in redeemability," and have hired SIP in the past demonstrate greater willingness to hire SIP (Atkin and Armstrong, 2013; Reich, 2017, p. 127). Some researchers suggest that psychoeducation reduces stigma and increases acceptability, improving the chances of obtaining employment for those with criminal records or mental illness (Batastini et al., 2014, p. 530). While existing literature has touched on this topic, further understanding of the employer factors that impact willingness to hire SIP could facilitate increased employment.

The temporary help services sector is the leading employer of SIP (Nally et al., 2011), followed by construction, manufacturing, mechanic, and transportation sectors (Bumiller, 2015; Nally et al., 2011). Employers who were likely to hire SIP applicants described the common rationale behind looking past offending as needing to find a "good worker to do a bad job" (Bumiller, 2015, p. 351). Such positions often carry a higher risk with lower compensation, potentially limiting the economic success of SIP and increasing the risk for

health conditions or disability. Employers seeking to fill higher paying, less risky positions may have deeper, more competitive applicant pools from which to hire. Understanding and clarifying employer perceptions could help SIP and job mentors tailor their efforts to prepare SIP for success in the job market.

Hiring Process Factors

One element that influences SIP job opportunities is disclosing their criminal history to the employer (Ricciardelli and Mooney, 2018). Evidence suggests that the odds of being hired increase if applicants with misdemeanor charges delay their record disclosure until after the initial application screening phase to avoid automatic elimination (Griffith and Young, 2017; King, 2018; Kuhn, 2019). However, SIP should avoid waiting until the actual hiring stage to reveal their record, as employers may interpret this as an attempt to withhold the truth (Ross et al., 2011). The ideal time for disclosure appears to be once the applicant can meet with the hiring manager and advocate for themselves (Heydon and Naylor, 2018; Uggen et al., 2014). Research suggests that employer "perceptions of integrity were higher when the applicants pre-emptively accepted responsibility for their actions than when they blamed others" (Krylova et al., 2018, p. 799).

Voluntarily choosing to reveal and explain a past indiscretion can be beneficial (Krylova et al., 2018). However, explaining without taking responsibility or offering an apology leaves a negative impression on potential employers (Decker et al., 2015; Uggen et al., 2014). Many interviewees are unaware of how much they are legally obligated to disclose and consequently may share more information than necessary, which may diminish job opportunities (Denver et al., 2017; Shannon et al., 2017).

When applications require disclosure of a criminal record, the SIP risks being rejected before being allowed to prove themselves to the employer. Delaying the disclosure of a criminal record may improve an applicant's chances of employment, highlighting the potential effectiveness of policies that mandate the removal of criminal record questions on initial applications (Doleac and Hansen, 2020; Reich, 2017). States that have implemented these policies have experienced a decrease in recidivism and increased SIP employment (Doleac and Hansen, 2020; Flake, 2019; Shannon et al., 2017), yet other research examining federal incentives indicates their impact on employer willingness to hire SIP is minimal. Many employers are unaware of their existence, not particularly enticed by the meager amount, or more inclined to hire non-SIP applicants who qualify them for the incentive (Bumiller, 2015; Solinas-Saunders et al., 2015; Starks, 2018).

Economic Trends

Western and Beckett (1999) titled the US criminal justice system a "labor- market institution." When employment rates are lower, SIP are more likely to become employed in low wage earning jobs. When the market is closer to full employment, SIP applicants tend to be more successful locating better jobs. Conversely, recessions and other economic downturns generally reduce the employability of SIP. During the 2008 recession in the US, the SIP unemployment rate rose from 48% to 69.7%, compared to the peak unemployment rate of 10% for the general population in 2009 (Nally et al., 2011, p. 129; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The extreme increase in SIP unemployment may be due in part to the rise in social and economic insecurity associated with the recession, fuelling increases in fear of crime, further discouraging employers from hiring applicants with criminal records, as well as to overall increased labor market competition (Vieno et al., 2013). The economic repercussions of the current COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately impacted SIP; a survey of probation and parole agencies suggests "that 30% to 50% of supervised people have lost their jobs since the pandemic began" (Rice, 2020, para. 4). This challenge is compounded with the influx of unemployed applicants from the general population, increasing the competition for employment and providing employers with options other than SIP, which may appeal to their desire to minimize risk and avoid hiring justice-involved individuals (Rice, 2020).

Reentry and Mentoring Programs

Employers tend to look more favorably upon SIP when they have engaged in re-entry or mentoring programs. Multiple studies have suggested that successful completion of re-entry programs decreases one's chance of recidivation, poses as "evidence of desistance" (Heydon and Naylor, 2018, p. 387) to potential employers, and improves one's odds of employment (Zweig et al., 2011). Other benefits may include access to "daily support and guidance from worksite supervisors and job coaches—as well as peer support provided by other transitional jobs participants" (Zweig et al., 2011, p. 968). Participants of mentoring programs report predominantly positive experiences (Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013; Taylor, 2020); however, there is little research regarding the perceptions and experiences of employers with respect to mentoring of SIP employees.

Purpose of the Present Study

Economic conditions, re-entry program participation, hiring processes, and perceived risk are all well-established barriers to SIP employment; it remains unclear why the stigma surrounding justice involvement held by employers is so persistent. Their reluctance endures despite the evidence that suggests SIP are reliable employees and risk analyses

that reveal the perceived danger to be largely unfounded. We explore employment counselors' and employers' perceptions and experiences of hiring individuals with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system. Our aim is to contribute to understanding the continuing challenges faced by SIP job applicants, as well as to ways probation officers and social workers might mitigate those challenges.

Methods

The design and methods of this qualitative study are framed by a social constructivist paradigm in which we seek to examine how employers and employment counselors perceived and experienced the employability of SIP individuals. Social constructivism posits that individuals construct meanings of life experiences through interactions with others in social contexts. Thus experiences, perceptions, and social transactions interact to produce how people understand and make meaning of life events. Based on our review of the literature, employment opportunities are shaped, at least in part, by how employers understand and perceive the risks and benefits of hiring SIP applicants within the context of past experiences in employing similar applicants, as well as how they define available jobs, and perceive qualified applicants. We designed this study to elicit experiences and perceptions from our participants regarding employment opportunities for SIP. In the focus groups and interviews, we discussed topics related to employment barriers for individuals with a criminal record, employers' perceptions of risk and how they manage it, and policies that help and hurt finding employment for an individual with a criminal record. We also asked participants about future policy or practice changes that could help improve employment opportunities for those with a criminal record.

Study Participants and Procedure

Upon receiving IRB approval, we recruited ten participants through personal contacts and extended recommendations from public employees working with SIP to form a convenience sample of participants. All participants had experience as employers of SIP, and two had additional experience as service providers. All participants resided and worked in an urban area of the intermountain west region of the United States at the time of the study.

Using focus groups and individual interviews, we asked participants to articulate and discuss their perceptions of SIP employment and what they have learned from those experiences. Focus groups allowed for discussion and interaction among participants, allowing us to clarify and engage the topics shared. In-depth exploratory interviews place individual experiences and narrative at the center of the knowledge-building endeavor in

the context of a partnership between researcher and participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010) and have the advantage of being flexible, offering an opportunity for depth, and allowing space for unexpected responses or novel ideas. The use of more than one qualitative method allows the findings from each unique method to bring insight into the research process and triangulate the research findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted two focus groups (N=8) and two semi-structured qualitative individual interviews (N=2) with the participants. One focus group included four individuals (2 male, 2 female) currently employed at a state workforce development agency. These focus group participants held the position of Developmental Specialist, also known as employment counselors; their primary job function is to assist individuals in obtaining and retaining employment. The employment counselors have worked with a diverse clientele, including SIP. A second focus group was conducted with four male executives within a large, non-profit manual labor association. Participants within this focus group represent over 500 manual labor companies throughout the region, giving them ample diverse experiences and knowledge regarding human resource practices in a broad range of construction and contractor worksites. Both focus groups were conducted at the respected agencies, audio recorded, and lasted approximately 90 minutes each.

Interviews were conducted and recorded with two female licensed clinical social workers and managers at non-profit mental health organizations. Both individuals had over two decades of experience and regularly conduct interviews and make hiring decisions at their agencies, often hiring SIP for positions that do not require criminal background checks. Both clinicians have treated SIP in their mental health practice, allowing additional professional perspectives regarding challenges SIP may face in the job market.

One author transcribed the audio recordings of the focus groups and interview sessions for analysis. Two authors independently evaluated these transcripts and coded the data for predetermined and emerging themes related to employing SIP. We identified three themes that may influence employers' attitudes, policies, and practices towards hiring SIP, which we discussed below.

Results

This section presents the results of our data collection and analysis as they relate to participants' perceptions and experiences of hiring SIP. Below, the three themes identified during analysis are employers' perception of risk when hiring SIP, barriers SIP face when seeking employment, and facilitators that support SIP employment.

Employers' perceptions of risk shape and inform how potential employers view SIP job applicants, leading to or away from successful job placement. Finally, we present participants' discussion of skill development, on-the-job training, mentoring, and disclosure of one's criminal background as important ways to facilitate employment.

Employers' Perceptions of Risk

Participants spoke openly about the challenges in employing SIP and used the language of "risk;" to describe experiences. One employer in a focus group explained:

Of course, as an employer, you're gonna go with the person that's less of a risk because the person who has charges or has a criminal record is a higher risk for the employer. That's something that as an employer you don't really wanna take that risk if you don't have to. Sometimes we have to, though, like if you only have a few applications, you sometimes have to pick the best of the worst because none of them are perfect.

Employers prefer to minimize risk, only accepting it when necessary, perceiving it as selecting the best from among poor choices. A "good risk...", contributed another participant, "...is a SIP who has been out and can demonstrate that they won't recidivate because they have a proven record of good choices." While a prior conviction renders an individual as high risk in the employer's eyes, a lengthy post-incarceration trail of choosing education and employment may mitigate the earlier history.

Adult Probation and Parole Involvement

Employment counselors discussed concerns related to Adult Probation and Parole (AP&P) interfering on the business premises in their efforts to supervise clients.

Many employers don't want to hire someone with a criminal background because of adult probation and parole. They don't want AP&P barging into their place of employment and disrupting and requiring verifications. So, there was concern with this employer with looking at the bonding program, for example, but the takeaway is AP&P has got to be respectful and not just come in and act like 'we're the police and we can do whatever we want.' That really puts those who have a [criminal] background at a disadvantage.

Employers may sense that their business, as a place of employment, is at risk of disruption by AP&P. This added perception of broader risk may be more than they are ready to manage or accept, and thus the SIP applicant is less desirable.

Nature of the Offense

Participants also discussed the nature of the offense and how the offense might impact the type of business. One employment counselor noted: "Based on the charge, if it's a credit card company, obviously if they have some kind of fraud charges, then obviously they're not going to accept any of those individuals." Another participant mentioned theft charges as an obstacle: "retail theft seems to stretch along a lot of different industries; if they've had retail theft, [employers] think they will steal from them." Employers consider there is little to be gained by employing a SIP in a context that may allow them to re-offend.

Finally, employers are concerned about the potential negative impacts of violence or sex offenses on their workplace and their business:

The two things I hear mostly are violence; if they've had any type of violent charges most HR they don't want that individual in the workplace for obvious reasons; and secondly, followed by sexual offenses because of sexual harassment and that sort of thing. So I've seen employers really gun shy on those two, with concerns that if a person has a violent past they would bring violence or harassment in the work place.

The employer assesses the increased costs that could occur if the worker repeats this behavior in the workplace as too high a price to pay, and thus avoids considering them for employment.

Barriers to Employment: Stigma

Participants were aware of the role stigma played in obstructing the employment opportunities of SIP, especially for those with a history of mental illness.

The stigma of having a criminal record is almost like the stigma of having a mental health disorder. Like, 'Hi, I have bipolar,' or 'I have drug charges.' Both are looked down on in society.

Employers indicated their hope that stigma could be lessened by encouraging employers to view stigma across different contexts. Comparing mental illness to a criminal record in the context of obtaining employment is instructive. While mental illness and prior convictions carry stigma in society, the individual with mental illness has legal recourse, while the SIP does not.

Participants also recognized that stigma contributes to the difficulties SIP often have in finding and obtaining housing and reliable transportation, which ultimately impact their

employability. "When they get out, do they have reliable transportation to get to and from their worksite?" asked one counselor. Another participant concurred: "Just the transportation and the housing, for sure are the two other big ones." Lack of transportation may make a worker unable to comply with required hours and employment locations. For a SIP who lacks skills, housing, or transportation, "the WHOLE process is a barrier," one participant concluded.

Facilitators of Employment: Disclosure of Background

Participants expressed the importance of SIP job applicants knowing when and how to disclose their criminal background openly and directly. One participant observed, "the job seeker doesn't know how to speak about their offense, how to discuss it with an employer." Another participant agreed, stating, "they either try to hide it, or they give too much information, or they just aren't prepared to actually discuss it."

From the employers I've worked with in discussing this subject matter the number one thing that has come back across all industries is 'do not share your background at the interview.' Go through the interview process and then, once they offer you employment, based on your background or you clear the background check or it comes up, then talk about it. But what I've heard from at least twelve employers, they reported that at the interviews they start off, right off the bat, with their background and it just goes south. So it really keeps [employers] from being opened to the individual.

Economic Conditions

Structural conditions, such as low unemployment rates and the need to fill undesirable positions, were also mentioned by participants as aiding employment opportunities for SIP. One employer shared:

I would probably say that's based on supply and demand. Right now, the state has around a 3.1% unemployment rate; ...that is essentially full employment. ... construction is booming right now and part of the largest challenge we've had is developing that workforce and then training that skilled workforce and finding those folks. At the end of the day, the supply and demand plays into that.

High demand for workers opens opportunities for SIP job applicants, which may not have existed, especially during an economic recession.

Training, Mentoring, and Other Incentives

Based on their experiences, the employment counselors offered suggestions to improve job opportunities for SIP. On-the-job training and mentoring were at the top of their lists. Since many SIP lack skills, training periods to develop the skills and attributes an employer needs are critical.

On the job training is a federally funded program, it's been around for a long time, and it has fluctuated on the amount, but right now, it currently stands at \$4000, sometimes, you can get an extension to make it \$6000 or \$8000, with approval from a state program specialist. So what we look at is if an employer is looking to hire someone who qualifies for this program, DWS will look at reimbursing the employer up to 50% of the employee's wages for 6 months, or up to that approved amount. ... It's kind of like a carrot to dangle over their head to try to say, OK, I'm gonna take a chance on this person and hire them for a full-time job.

While on-the-job training teaches skills for the job, mentoring assists new employees with making good choices, understanding workplace rules and expectations. A good mentor, they said, "reminds the folks, make sure you're on time. If you say you're gonna be there, be there, and don't be calling in sick." The employers mentioned SIP employees who were successful and became mentors:

Their truck bosses are former federal prison inmates, twice convicted. A truck boss for ready mix company is a pretty important spot, so anyway they moved up. They were given a second chance or opportunity and they were able to work themselves up to truck boss and now have control over a number of employees. They're working as mentors to help new workers through the process of staying employed, staying hired, and not going back down a path they may have been down before. ...Success for some companies is really that mentoring relationship and really understanding the population that they are dealing with.

These employees started at entry-level, worked their way up to a mid-managerial position, and then began to mentor the SIP they supervised on the job; their success in this company is also the success of the employer, who is rewarded with strong and consistent employees and lower turnover. The final suggestion from participants was, "if a background check isn't necessary, don't require it." The indiscriminate use of the background check increases stigma and creates additional barriers for SIP.

Make the applications fit the job better. Don't try to just have this blanket application for every job, one size fits all. Put some thought into the kind of position it is and if it

doesn't require a background check, then don't have the box on it. But if it does up front, then, yea, ask it up front. But if it doesn't why have it on there? I have difficulty with these broad generalist sweeping things that end up disenfranchising or discriminating.

Participants believe employment applications could be fine-tuned to fit the specific job. The background check should only be used where needed and otherwise avoided. In doing this, participants hoped to minimize the stigma for SIP job applicants and challenge employers to assess the potential risk of applicants in a more realistic way.

Discussion

We sought to understand the perspectives of employers with experiences with SIP as job applicants. Through their experiences and perceptions, we explored the continuing challenges faced by SIP job applicants, as current statistics show this population continues to be unemployed at a higher rate than the general public (Blazier, 2020; Couloute and Kopf, 2018). Based on our findings, we discuss structural factors, such as policy changes and economic conditions, that may improve the employability of SIP. We then explore implications for social workers' and probation officers' to support SIP employment and the employers hiring them. In closing, we discuss recommendations and limitations of this research.

Structural Factors

Economic trends and conditions have an impact on SIP employment opportunities. Exacerbated by poor economic conditions, existing disadvantages impede adequate employment opportunities after incarceration (Nally et al., 2011; Sered and Norton-Hawk, 2019; Vieno et al., 2013). Full employment increases the demand for workers, and with lower potential applicant numbers, increases the hiring possibilities for SIP. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated unemployment, further challenging many SIP to find or maintain jobs. We examine possible policy responses to facilitate increased employment.

Policy Initiatives and Reducing Stigma

Policy initiatives, such as Ban the Box (BTB) and tax incentives, such as bonding programs, were discussed by participants. A civil rights campaign, BTB, was initiated by formerly incarcerated inmates and their families to help decrease prejudice and discrimination in hiring practices towards those who have a criminal record (Entin, 2015; Vuolo et al., 2017). BTB and related legislation do not prohibit employers from conducting relevant background checks as part of a requirement to work with vulnerable populations

(i.e., children or individuals with disabilities). Removing the box from the job application, however, may help some SIP exercise choice with regard to disclosing their background, and may facilitate employment.

Empirical research supports the idea that SIP employment opportunities improve if the job applicant can delay disclosure of criminal charges until after the initial screening phase (Doleac and Hansen, 2020; King, 2018; Reich, 2017). Participants echoed concerns regarding the prevalence of background checks, especially for positions in which the presence of a record seems to be less relevant. It is critical to examine which employment positions warrant a background check, and when does conducting one become an obstacle that unnecessarily stigmatizes SIP and obstructs their entry into the labor force. Existing research suggests that when background checks are standardized across job types, they are unnecessarily thorough and costly (Kuhn, 2019; Kuhn, 2020; Levashina et al., 2017), which, when considered in conjunction with our research, suggests that both employers and SIP would benefit if background checks were conducted more selectively (Doleac and Hansen, 2020; Reich, 2017).

BTB or similar initiatives may be helpful in diminishing stigma and discrimination toward applicants with a criminal record, not only in employment but also in housing (Griffith and Young, 2017). All participants mentioned stigma and discrimination in housing; one, an employment counselor, compared the discrimination against SIP to that experienced by the mentally ill, noting that the latter is prohibited by law. SIP are not currently a protected class or group within anti-discrimination policies (Batastini et al., 2017); it is legal to discriminate against them in employment, housing, and other social arenas, making re-integration difficult and increasing the risk of recidivism.

A criminal record often skews the review of their application and dissuades employers from hiring them (Agan and Starr, 2017; Batastini et al., 2017; Carter, 2019; Denver et al., 2017; Ricciardelli and Mooney, 2018; Ross et al., 2011; Sered and Norton-Hawk, 2019). The stigma surrounding SIP is amplified for those in the racial minority, as it compounds with existing racial bias, especially for Latino and Black SIP (Decker et al., 2015; Western and Sirois, 2019). Nevertheless, study participants and previous research suggests that SIP job performance appears to be comparable to, or even exceed, the work of other employees (Carter, 2019; Minor et al., 2018). This body of research supports the notion that the reluctance of employers to hire SIP is largely unfounded (Brent, 2019; King, 2018; Kuhn, 2019).

Support from Probation Officers and Social Workers

Participants reported employers' concerns regarding the potential intrusion of AP&P on the work premises and how this may influence the employability of SIP. Some employers may be apprehensive about hiring someone with a record, as AP&P may be prone to visit worksites, creating disruption and contributing to the stigma and discrimination of SIP (Agan and Starr, 2017; Ricciardelli and Mooney, 2018; Ross et al., 2011; Sered and Norton-Hawk, 2019). Workplace intrusions also threaten the employers' level of control and disruptions could affect employee morale, particularly among other SIP in the workplace. These factors raise the cost of hiring SIP and consequently hurt their chance of gaining or keeping employment. This insight can help inform AP&P, social workers, and case management procedures and encourage those supervising or advocating for SIP to communicate with employers as partners to minimize the negative effect of their presence at worksites (Brent, 2019).

Probation officers and social workers can assist SIP in learning constructive ways to discuss their background in advance of the job application process. While the prior conviction box may be removed from job applications with policy changes, SIP continue to face challenges when discerning the appropriate time to disclose a criminal record. Study participants warned against mentioning a record during the application or initial interviewing process, as such information often prompts disinterest and guardedness in employers before an applicant can promote their strengths, which is consistent with current literature (Kuhn, 2020; Uggen et al., 2014). Participants even advised postponing this conversation until a job offer has been officially extended, which contradicts some previous research regarding the timing of disclosure (Ross et al., 2011). Additionally, gaps in SIP work history may speak volumes to the interviewer, indicating their period of incarceration and providing an obstacle to receiving an offer when they might choose to disclose as recommended above. Ultimately, it appears that the timing of disclosure is a nuanced aspect of employment that SIP must navigate carefully and tailor to their situation.

In conjunction with the unfounded discrimination many SIP face on the job market, the perceived and inaccurate risk employers have about hiring SIP may be improved by social workers or probation officers offering more accurate and detailed risk assessments of their clients. It is not uncommon for parole or probation officers, as well as trained forensic social workers and case managers, to conduct risk assessments on clients (Schaefer and Williamson, 2018; Yesberg et al., 2015). Importantly, these risk assessments should be updated and offered to SIP and their employer. An updated and

accurate risk assessment may improve employers' perceptions of their SIP applicant (Denver et al., 2017; Dong et al., 2018) and could assist in decreasing the stigma and discrimination associated with a criminal history (Berk et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2018).

Finally, peer-mentoring of SIP, both on probation or parole, as well as within their employment, could significantly improve outcomes and employability of SIP (Marlow et al., 2015; Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013; Nixon, 2020; Sells et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). All participants expressed the success they have experienced when peer-mentoring is involved. Research has also supported the idea that peer-mentoring programs can improve recidivism rates (Nixon, 2020; Sells et al., 2020), employability (Sells et al., 2020), and self-empowerment (Marlow et al., 2015; Nixon, 2020), while also reducing social stigma (Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013).

Implications and Recommendations

This study builds upon previous research by exploring employers' perceptions of hiring SIP that may shape the realities of practice for probation and parole officers, social workers, and case managers working with this population. At a community and state level, probation and parole officers, case managers, social workers, or other advocates could facilitate SIP employment opportunities by educating potential employers and conducting accurate risk assessments of SIP job applicants (Berk et al., 2021; Denver et al., 2017; Dong et al., 2018; Schaefer and Williamson, 2018; Yesberg et al., 2015).

Advocates could also reach out to employment or human resources organizations, such as the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM), to educate them about the benefits of hiring SIP. Finally, encouraging SIP and the employers who hire them to share their success stories may help build morale and improve the future hiring of this population (Blazier, 2020). Impactful policy stories can have a powerful influence on local, state, and federal legislators who can develop policy initiatives and support funding options that improve SIP employment. Future research could help determine the efficacy of these potential approaches, as well as address the limitations mentioned below.

Ann Jacobs (2016) states, "A person's successful re-entry into society can be viewed through how adequately they can meet six basic life needs: livelihood, residence, family, health, criminal justice compliance, and social connections (p. 1)." Gainful employment is at the center of success for all these factors. The new federal administration is strongly focused upon promoting criminal justice policy and practices that reduce incarceration, increase redemptive and rehabilitative strategies, in addition to addressing race, gender, and income disparities in the criminal justice system. Thus, employing SIP upon re-entry in a post-pandemic job market is not only an important policy and social justice issue but

tantamount to the success of each System Involved Person, their family, support network, and the overall success and well-being of our society.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study relates to the demographic characteristics of the participants as well as the sample size. The study participants included a culturally homogeneous opportunity sample of employers and employment counselors in the Intermountain West with experiences employing SIP. The sample did not include individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, which limits the transferability of our results to other contexts. Study participants largely had experience in the construction and manual labor sectors and thus perceptions of employers in other sectors may vary.

Conclusion

Our exploratory research suggests that social workers and probation officers might fruitfully partner to facilitate SIP employment. They can strengthen the skills of employers with respect to accurate risk assessment and the development of on-the-job mentoring and coaching programs. Service providers may collaborate to offer education to SIP that helps improve job application and interviewing skills, oral skills in presentation of self and disclosure of background, and receptiveness to learning from mentors and employers.

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