

The "Black Box" Behind Prison-Based Vocational Training Programs

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Abstract

Despite the great importance of prison vocational programs, studies have pointed to a wide variety of barriers that inhibit the released prisoner's chances to integrate into the labor market. The present qualitative investigation was designed to crack the "black box" behind six vocational programs implemented in the Israel Prison Service (IPS). Our findings based on the interviews with all the supervisors in the programs emphasized several factors that seem necessary for the success of the different vocational programs. The interviews show that training in a correctional environment poses a number of major difficulties for the respondents. Furthermore, a significant part of the prisoners' motivation to participate in the training programs is not necessarily related to the desire to find work after release. It was also found that a relatively long training, which makes it possible to find work in the field even during the period of incarceration, holistically addresses the various needs of the prisoner, and corresponds to the job market requirements, increases the chances of its participants to find employment also after their release from prison. When the characteristics of the various programs were examined, it was found that in addition to the characteristics of prisoners, one must also consider structural characteristics such: to what extent do the programs comply with the requirements of the Israeli labor market, confer a formal diploma at the end of the training period, or allow integration into the work force after release.

Keywords: Vocational training, Prisoners, Israel

Introduction

The literature shows a strong connection between lack of employment and involvement in crime, when finding employment represents a turning point in the life of the offender (Uggen, 2000). Therefore, there is a vital importance to vocational training and work within the confines of the prison. As a result, many prisons in the Western world operate professional training programs (Christofferson, 2014; Newton et al., 2016) whose purpose is to provide prisoners with the proficiencies, work skills, education, and preparation for placement in the labor market after their release (Visher et al., 2005). Ideally, vocational training should help the prisoners integrate into the labor market, maintain job stability, boost their ability to earn a living legally and through legitimate means, raise their self-esteem regarding their ability to earn a decent living outside the circle of crime, integrate into the community, and feel a sense of belonging to it (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999 ; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005; Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001; Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie., 2000).

In the study by Hesisi, Weisburd, Shoham and Zelig (in press), differential success rates were found among the various vocational training programs that operate in Israeli prisons. In this qualitative study we would like to examine what are the variables that may predict the success of a vocational training program as reflected in the words of personnel working in prison vocational training programs. The programs which were evaluated in this study are the following: electrical trades, aluminum welding and building, construction, landscaping, training for the job market, and hairdressing.

In this article we will describe the main themes that emerge from interviews with the supervisors and inspectors of the vocational training programs in the Israeli correction system.

Theoretical background

Integrating ex-offenders in the job market

The integration of ex-offenders in the labor market is of great importance. A number of empirical studies have found that inmates ranked the issue of employment as their top priority after release from prison (Bloom, 2006). Integrating into a legitimate job in the labor force allows the released prisoners to earn a living (Saylor & Gaes, 2007) and may neutralize, or at least reduce, their motivation to take part in crime (Bloom, 2006; Bouffard, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000). In addition, researchers noted that employment in the labor market increases the self-esteem of the released

prisoners, gives them a positive social network, a sense of belonging to the community, a normative daily routine (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005; Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001; Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000) and also serves as an informal control mechanism of their behavior (Sampson & Laub 1977; Uggen 1999; Uggen & Staff, 2001; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005; Wilson, 1997 ; Wilson et al., 2000).

In light of the difficulties of ex-offenders to join the workforce, researchers (Visher et al., 2005) and decision makers in prisons (Newton, 2016) have raised the need for an effective intervention that will increase the chances of released prisoners to integrate into the labor market. Indeed, over the past decades, many prisons in the Western world began to develop and adopt diverse programs for education, employment, and training which are designed, among other things, to give prisoners the skills, the proficiencies, and knowledge which are necessary to enter the labor market after release from prison and to retain their jobs over time (Bloom, 2006; Bouffard, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000; Lawrence et al., 2002; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005). There is currently a widespread notion that the period of incarceration provides the law enforcement system with an opportunity to teach the inmates job skills, proficiencies, and knowledge, and prepare them for vocational placement after their release (Visher et al., 2005), and thus, reduce the likelihood that ex-offenders will revert to crime in the future (Bouffard, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000; Bushway & Reuter, 1997; Davis et al., 2014; Newton, 2016; Visher et al., 2005). In this context, Visher, Winterfield and Coggeshall (2005: 295-296) noted that A good job not only helps the prisoner's daily survival, but is also a key to the rehabilitation of self-esteem, an attachment to a conventional lifestyle, and a sense of belonging to the community. Work organizes the behavior and patterns of interaction with other people throughout the day, and it plays an important role as a source of informal supervision over the behavior of released offenders.

Prison-based vocational training programs

Prisons in many Western countries operate programs for vocational training (Bouffard et al., 2000) of various kinds, such as educational instruction, vocational training, prison industry, and employment services (Lawrence , 2002). The training programs operating in prisons are different in many ways; for example, while there are prisons which allow their inmates to choose whether or not to take part in the vocational training programs, there are prisons where prisoners are compelled to participate in these programs (Davis, 2013). Furthermore, while there are training programs that operate within the walls of the prison, there are several

vocational training programs where inmates work under the supervision of institutions and organizations outside the prison (Bouffard, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000; NIJ, 2015; Glaze & Parks, 2012). Cooperation between correctional facilities and organizations outside the prison gives inmates valuable work experience and improves their employment opportunities after they are released from prison (Bouffard, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000). In addition, these programs are designed to help inmates get accepted to work and provide them with follow-up treatment after release from prison, including providing social, psychological and medical services, which are intended to help ex-inmates cope with the difficulties of re-integrating into the community (Lawrence et al., 2002).

While there are differences between the features of each program, the main aim of the program is to provide the prisoners with a positive routine, knowledge, tools, skills and work habits that will help them integrate into a profession in the labor market after their release from prison (Bouffard, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000; Lawrence, et al., 2002; NIJ, 2015; Visher et al., 2005). In addition, these programs are designed to instill in the prisoners a sense of commitment, responsibility, and motivation to join the work force (Gaes, Flanagan, Motiuk, & Stewart, 1999). To achieve this objective, vocational training programs in prison afford inmates the opportunity to acquire experience, job skills, and valuable knowledge in a range of professions, such as: computers (Gaes, 1999), hairdressing, auto mechanics, building maintenance, the electrical trades, painting, plumbing, food services, culinary art, gardening, custodial maintenance, upholstery, welding and heating, ventilation, air conditioning (NIJ, 2015), carpentry, electronic services, the arts and printing, construction, graphics, and more (Lawrence, et al., 2002). The types of training that are offered to inmates in prison vary according to the interests of the prisoners who take part in them, the budgetary considerations of the prison organization's decision-makers, the professions that are needed in the labor market, and the availability of instructors or teaching staff (NIJ, 2015).

The connection between vocational training and recidivism among released prisoners

There is a vast corpus of literature devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of training programs in prison with respect to reducing recidivism (Wilson et al., 1999). A recent study conducted by Davis and colleagues (Davis et al., 2013) examined the effectiveness of 88 programs for education and vocational training. The researchers based themselves only on studies published from 1980 to 2011 which were of high methodological quality (rank 2 or higher on the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (MSM)). The study results showed that prisoners who participated in vocational

programs were characterized with a 36% lower probability of recidivism, as compared to prisoners not participating in such programs. However, it is important to note that a large number of studies in the analysis were based on low methodological quality, and suffered specifically from the problem of "choice", since prisoners in the treatment and control groups were not assigned randomly to the groups and there was no attempt to create a match between participants in these groups. Another meta-analysis based on 33 empirical studies published between "1975 – 2000" examined the level of effectiveness of 17 vocational training programs, 27 education programs, and 4 employment programs that operated in prison to reduce recidivism. The study results revealed that prisoners who participated in the programs of education, employment, and vocational training in prison were characterized by a 39% recidivism rate compared to the inmates who did not participate in these programs, with a recidivism rate of 50% (Wilson et al., 2000). Specifically, inmates who did not participate in vocational programs in prison had a probability of returning to prison that was 1.55 times higher than those who took part in programs of this type.

Another systematic survey conducted by Aos, Miller, & Drake (2006) examined the effectiveness of 571 rehabilitation programs in prison. In this study, too, the researchers based themselves only on studies defined as of high methodological quality, and the research results showed that prisoners who took part in one of the three vocational training programs were characterized by a rate of recidivism that was 12.6% lower as compared to inmates who did not participate in these programs.

Beyond the rate of recidivism, numerous studies conducted in recent decades address the effectiveness of vocational training programs using additional outcome measures.

For example, in a meta-analysis by Davis (2013), based on the results of eight in-prison vocational training programs, it was found that released prisoners who took part in the training programs were more than twice as likely to be hired as compared to the released inmates who did not take part in vocational training programs.

Various studies suggest several factors that may contribute to the increased effectiveness of vocational training programs in prison. The findings of the studies mentioned above indicate that the training programs in prison are more effective when it comes to adult offenders (Bierens & Carvalho, 2011; Uggen, 2000), with a high risk evaluation (Bloom et al., 2007; Redcross et al., 2009; Redcross et al. 2012; Zweig et al., 2011) and with a negative history of employment (Dixon & Casey, 2013; Webster et al., 2014). In addition, studies attribute effectiveness to vocational training programs that are operated using a holistic approach and which award the prisoner a certificate upon completion of training. Programs that operate

according to the principles of a holistic approach provide a response to all the prisoner's psycho-social needs and thus help the prisoner cope with the difficulties of life that are entailed in returning to the community and integrating into the work force as soon as possible (Bushway & Reuter, 2002; Management and Training Corporation Institute 2005). Furthermore, receiving a formal certificate helps ex-inmates get accepted to a place of work and reduces the likelihood that they will take part in crime after their release from prison (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Passarell, 2013; Petersilia, 2011).

As mentioned above, in this article we sought to examine the relationship between participation in the types of vocational training programs in Israeli prisons and returning to criminal behavior after release and the possible explanations offered by the operators of the various programs for the results obtained in the quantitative section.

Method

Approximately 2,519 inmates participated in some type of vocational program (4.4%) between 2004-2012. 102 inmates participated in the electrical trades program, 163 prisoners participated in the program for aluminum welding or construction, 284 participated in the building courses (working at heights, roofing and siding, drywall, ceramic tiling, plumbing and painting), 224 participated in the hairdressing course, and 758 inmates participated in training for the work world (small business management, preparation for entering the working world, entrepreneurship, personal budget management, and business budget management).

In order to try to understand the quantitative research findings, a qualitative investigation was conducted, which was designed to crack the "black box" behind all the vocational training programs which were surveyed in the quantitative section. In the qualitative section, in-depth interviews were conducted with the head of the employment division, with the head of training and human resources, with all district officers in employment and training, with the Training Officer at the IPS National Training Center, and with the teachers who teach the training programs. Several prominent categories were singled out that are related to the perception of the IPS training system operators in the field of vocational training in the IPS.

Findings

The first category extracted from the interviews dealt with the motivation of the inmates to participate in the courses. A number of motivations of the inmates were mapped, beginning with participating in vocational training to obtain benefits in prison, attending in order to show a positive CV at the parole committee, and a motivation to learn a profession

in order to rehabilitate oneself and leave the world of crime. The second category extrapolated dealt with challenges and difficulties faced by the respondents in the ongoing work in prison. Under this category a number of difficulties were mapped, such as difficulty in finding candidates who fit the requirements of the courses and who would fulfill them and not waste taxpayer money; the difficulty of persuading inmates to join training courses; difficulties related to the characteristics of the prison population; and the difficulties in working with other agencies within prison. Perhaps these difficulties may explain the relatively small number of prisoners who participated in vocational training in the research period. The third category extrapolated from the study related to the benefits of vocational training. In this category three sub-categories were culled: a. The contribution of vocational training to inmates while they are in prison (a way to pass the time, pleasure, relaxation, enrichment, raising self-esteem, acquiring learning habits). b. The contribution of vocational training to inmates after release as a key for finding employment, c. The contribution of working in the area of vocational training, to the private lives of staff members, who described an enormous self-satisfaction in participating in the rehabilitation programs.

The interviews revealed that participants in the electrical trades program – the program which was considered to be the most successful program according to the interviewers- undergoes professional training of a relatively long duration of 350 hours, in addition, undertake to work in the electrical trades plant for two years, where they receive on-the-job training (ojt). In other words, their IPS training consists of receiving both theoretical and practical training. Another factor that may reduce the chance of recidivism is their chances of finding work after being released from prison. The interviews revealed that contrary to other prisoners, the chances are great for prisoners who studied and worked in electrical trades to be absorbed into the large aircraft industry, thus ensuring a smoother entry into society.

As for gardening, it emerges that training in this vocation also has a strong combination of theoretical and practical learning. In addition, gardening allows people a relatively easy absorption in working for gardening contractors or self-employed gardeners outside the prison, mainly for local government and public councils. Moreover, they say that being engaged in gardening during the course and outside of jail has a soothing therapeutic effect; thus, it may be that this specific occupation relaxes the prisoner and reduces the chances of recurring criminal behavior.

In contrast to those vocations, it was claimed that graduates of courses in aluminum and construction, who do not work regularly in their fields of training during their incarceration, have less chance to find employment in their field after release from prison. It was also found that the admission

criteria for these training programs is very flexible, in order to increase the number of applicants for the training program and therefore are unable to pick out the most suitable candidates. This, in turn, may detract from the effectiveness of the programs.

Discussion

In this study, one may learn a bit more about "what works" when it comes to rehabilitation programs in general and training programs in particular. Our investigation shows that there are few characteristics that help boost the success of the training programs. For example, it was found that training programs operating in Israeli prisons, similar to what is seen in the literature, are more effective when it comes to more adult offenders (Bierens & Carvalho, 2011; Uggen, 2000), with evaluation of high risk (Bloom et al., 2007; Redcross et al., 2009 ; Redcross et al., 2012; Zweig et al., 2011), a negative history of employment (Dixon & Casey, 2013; Webster et al., 2014), and among prisoners without job stability before entering the prison and inmates who entered programs close to their release date.

Likewise, when the characteristics of the various programs were examined, it was found that in addition to the characteristics of prisoners, one must also consider structural characteristics such: to what extent do the programs comply with the requirements of the Israeli labor market, confer a formal diploma at the end of the training period, or allow integration into the work force after release. In this context, one can see that vocational training programs targeted towards specific areas of occupation in the labor market, may provide participants in vocational training programs an advantage over other programs due to the experience, knowledge, and tools acquired during already the prison period. That seems necessary for successful integration into the labor market. Certificates and focusing on specific work areas should also afford ex-prisoners an advantage over other former offenders, thereby increasing their chances of finding work in a competitive market and even high paying jobs (Lawrence et al., 2002). All these are expected to reduce the risk that ex prisoners will return to crime after their release from prison (Shoham &Timor, 2014).

It was further found that programs where there is follow-up treatment or at least some vocational supervision of the released prisoner, there are better results. This finding supports Dawe's claim (2007) that the time lapse between the release from prison and the ex-prisoner's registration at a manpower agency or acceptance to work is a critical point that affects the future of the prisoner. During this period, many ex-inmates tend to return to crime; and therefore, researchers stress the importance that close upon the release date, the prisoner is allocated advisory services and vocational

guidance (Dawe, 2007; Newton, Day, Giles, Wodak, Graffam, & Baldry, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it emerges that in addition to the suitable matching of inmates with a particular program, the duration of the program, and its compliance with the demands of the Israeli market, the same characteristics that are true for all the rehabilitation programs, are also relevant in explaining the differential findings in this study, namely, training using a holistic approach and supporting the released prisoner in the period after the release from prison. Many researchers (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; Harper, 2007) attribute effectiveness to vocational training programs which operate according to the principles of the holistic approach. Such programs focus not only on imparting work skills but also on providing a range of services to meet the social, health, and emotional needs of prisoners after release from prison. In this context, it is important to note that when the prisoner leaves prison, he must deal with a combination of difficulties, including - search for a place to live, job search, and social stigma. In Israel where less than one-third of the released prisoners have follow-up programs and vocational supervision (Peled-Laskov, Shoham, Kozkoro, in press), it is of paramount importance to provide the released prisoners with social, health, and emotional services in order to preserve the gains produced in the vocational training programs during incarceration.

In the research period 2004-2012, only a relatively small number of prisoners participated in programs. Therefore, despite the differential findings between the various training programs, we recommend expanding the number of inmates participating in the programs, extending the training period, allowing inmates to acquire vocational experience during their period of imprisonment, treating the training program as a holistic treatment program, and maintaining contact with the employers or relevant organizations which may assist their integration into the work force even before their release from prison.

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