

Education, Employment and Offender Reentry

By Kiyokazu Matsuyama and Lettie Prell

Iowa, like many other states, has made a commitment to offender reentry. However, many state departments of correction are experiencing budget cuts, making it a challenge to adhere to offender reentry initiatives while maintaining institutional security and basic life care for incarcerated offenders. For many states, education budgets are part of reentry resources; in Iowa, corrections education funding comes from the corrections budget rather than the state department of education. (The Iowa state prison system is not considered a school district, unlike the way some prison systems are regarded in a number of other states). Regardless of the state or location, however, current economic challenges make this a critical time to ensure that funding for reentry continues to be a priority. Being able to demonstrate how more ex-offenders can become employed taxpayers and gathering research-based information about the components that make reentry effective may help.

The argument for continued funding of prison education is that it increases the employability of offenders upon release and results in reduced recidivism rates. Various studies have found a link between education and lower recidivism rates, including a Federal Bureau of Prison study estimating that 4.2 percent fewer offenders who successfully participated in at least one education course per each six months of their prison term were arrested or had their paroles revoked after three years of release compared to those who did not take the same number of education courses.¹

A three-state study conducted by the Correctional Educational Association in 2001 found “that simply attending school behind bars reduces the likelihood of re-incarceration by 23 percent.”² This study was able to obtain employment data from state labor departments in two of the three study states (Maryland and Minnesota). However, those findings did not find a statistically significant difference in employment rates of education participants versus nonparticipants, although the participants did receive higher wages compared to the non-participants.³

More recently, North Carolina used its state labor data to examine the effects of a number of correctional education and vocational programs on inmate employment one year following release. Among the findings were that inmates who completed basic skills courses or who obtained a GED had statistically higher wages one year after exiting prison than a matched sample of nonparticipants in each of those programs.⁴

Building on this research is a study conducted when Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) partnered with the Iowa Department of Corrections (IDC). The study, *Offender Re-entry and*

Employment in Iowa, examined the post-release employment of prison inmates. Researchers followed 3,691 offenders who were released from prison between July 1, 2005, and June 30, 2006, and remained in society. The study included offenders released to parole supervision, as well as offenders discharged from prison with no supervision. The Iowa Corrections Offender Network provided education data; IWC provided employment data. Employment data was gathered for a 10-year period, which includes the period before and after incarceration.

As shown in Figure 1, offenders who obtained a high school diploma or GED (with the majority achieving the latter) had higher employment rates for each of the post-release quarters compared to offenders with less than a high school diploma and no GED; differences were statistically significant for each quarter of the three-year follow-up period, even for the first quarter of 2009 during which the sharp drop in employment is most likely due to the current recession. (Note: There were always at least a few offenders in the community each quarter because some were incarcerated for only a short time.)

Figure 1. Qualified Employment Rate by Education Level

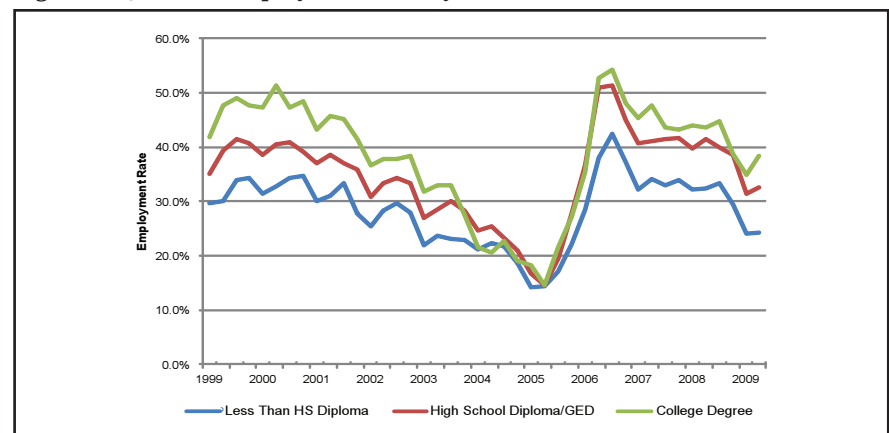


Figure 2. Average Quarterly Gross Wage by Education Level

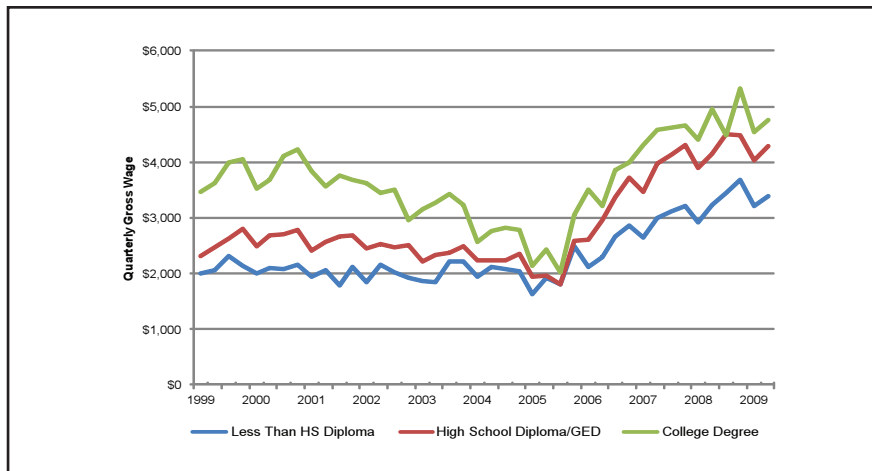


Figure 2 shows that offenders with high school diplomas or GEDs earned consistently higher wages for each of the post-release quarters compared to offenders with less than a high school diploma and no GED. In the years prior to incarceration, wages for the diploma/GED group were still higher than but closer to the no-diploma/no-GED group; however, post-incarceration wages for the diploma/GED group were markedly higher, and they were closer to wages for the college-educated group. Again, the higher wages continued throughout the three-year follow-up period for those offenders remaining out of prison. *Offender Re-entry and Employment in Iowa* contains many more analyses about post-release employment of offenders and may be used to inform existing and future reentry initiatives.

As with education, the effect of employment on recidivism has been a focus for research studies. Among them are those that seek to examine the effect that “good jobs” have on recidivism. In 1999, Christopher Uggen found a small but consistent relationship between job satisfaction and recidivism, net pay, and other variables related to both job quality and crime. For example, a shift from food service work to skilled craft work, associated with an increase in job quality score, decreases the probability of criminal behavior by about 11 percent.⁵

Data from *Offender Re-entry and Employment in Iowa* further show that the accommodation and food services industry employed the highest average number of female

offenders (comprising 50.7 percent to 64.6 percent of those employed, depending on the quarter), and it ranked second in employment of male offenders (comprising 17.8 percent to 22.5 percent of those employed, depending on the quarter). Despite the gender differences, reentry efforts aimed at improving the quality of post-release employment for all offenders appears to hold promise for further reducing recidivism; manufacturing jobs, for example, were among the highest paying jobs held by both male and female offenders, and the accommodation and food services industry jobs were among the lowest paying, according to the Iowa findings.

Findings by race and ethnicity were one last topic in *Offender Re-entry and Employment in Iowa*. Although each race and ethnicity showed at least a slightly higher average employment rate per quarter after the release period than before, non-Hispanic blacks and American Indians/Alaska natives had the lowest employment rates and the lowest wages compared to other groups.

Throughout most of the reported period, non-Hispanic Asians/Pacific Islanders had the highest average post-release employment rate per quarter (50.8 percent), followed by non-Hispanic whites (42.6 percent), Hispanic whites (35.2 percent), non-Hispanic blacks (28.7 percent), and American Indian/Alaska native non-Hispanics (23.0 percent).

Regarding wages, non-Hispanic Asians/Pacific Islanders had the highest average post-release wages per quarter (\$5,105), followed by

non-Hispanic whites (\$4,245), Hispanic whites (\$4,009), non-Hispanic blacks (\$2,444), and American Indian/Alaska native non-Hispanics (\$2,056).

The findings with regard to race/ethnicity suggest that efforts to boost employment for blacks and American Indians/Alaska natives would target the groups most in need of assistance.

IDC and IWD are reentry partners, and some staff at IWD work inside the institutions where the largest number of offender releases to the community occur. This innovative initiative is called Career Centers in Iowa Prisons and its goal is to improve offenders’ prospects of finding and retaining productive employment post-release. Reentry activities targeted toward improved employment outcomes would perhaps constitute a future area of research involving data sharing and analysis between IDC and IWD. For now the data have demonstrated how, through education, more ex-offenders can become employed taxpayers, and that is a sufficient call to action to preserve funding for offender education.

ENDNOTES

¹ Harer, M. 1994. *Recidivism among federal prisoners released in 1987*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Prisons, U.S. Department of Justice.

² Steurer, S., L. Smith and A. Tracy. 2001. *Three state recidivism study*. Lanham, Md.: Correctional Education Association.

³ Ibid.

⁴ North Carolina Community College System and North Carolina Department of Correction. 2010. *Prisoner education legislative continuation review*. Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Community College System and North Carolina Department of Correction.

⁵ Uggen, C. 1999. Ex-offenders and the conformist alternative: A job quality model of work and crime. *Social Problems*, 46, 127–151. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

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