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Research Statement

My research focuses on the relationship between work and crime among newly released former prisoners. Criminological theories suggest that work should reduce crime by limiting opportunities for deviant behavior, strengthening prosocial attachments, and reducing financial incentives to engage in crime. Observational studies provide empirical support for these claims, lending credence to employment-focused prison programs. If work reduces crime, then increasing employment among reentering former prisoners should reduce recidivism. Unfortunately, jobs programs show limited success in helping many prisoners gain job skills, find and maintain work, and reduce their involvement in crime.

Strengthening our understanding of the relationship between work and crime is critical to designing effective employment programs for low-skilled, low-educated former prisoners with limited formal work experience. Interventions may not reduce recidivism rates if work, although correlated, is not causally related to reduced crime among former prisoners. Employment may reduce men’s incentives to engage in economically motivated crimes, but it may have limited effects on other crimes. Former prisoners who find work may continue to engage in criminal activity, especially when workplace settings provide new opportunities for crime.

Much of the best research on labor activity and earnings among current and former offenders uses data collected more than two decades ago. Given large-scale economic changes that have altered the landscape for low-wage and secondary sector workers, it is not clear that the jobs available will provide adequate wages, benefits, and security for individuals desisting from crime. At the same time, the wide availability and use of criminal record information by employers raises the possibility that emerging adults with criminal convictions will have significantly greater financial difficulties than previous generations experienced.

By the end of the year, I will have completed my dissertation, which is funded by a National Institute of Justice Graduate Research Fellowship. It investigates, first, whether the mixed and negative outcomes for some employment programs result from selection effects in who receives employment services. For instance, if treatment participants have fewer job skills than do men in the comparison group, then post-release outcomes in part reflect pre-existing differences that selected men into treatment. Furthermore, when prison programs are offered à la carte to prisoners—rather than as bundled sets of programs—the comparison group for employment programs combines true nonparticipants with people who participated in education programs or prison work. Thus, ‘contamination’ within the comparison group may lead to downwardly biased estimates of employment programs. After controlling for observed heterogeneity in treatment status (through use of group-based trajectory and propensity score models), I examine whether participation in vocational training programs reduces the likelihood of rearrest.

I am also interested in whether observed inverse relationships between employment and crime are due to characteristics of the jobs men find or due to characteristics of the men who find jobs. In the second part of my dissertation, I use structural equation modeling (SEM) to study men’s labor and criminal activities during the first 15 months of release. The cross-lagged panel
model examines whether crime weakens men's attachment to the labor force. The SEM includes factors that shape men's incentives to seek work, in order to identify whether labor force nonparticipation signals men's likelihood of reoffending. Men who have left the labor market may differ from men who remain employed or seeking work in ways that explain differences in recidivism. Finally, I examine whether financial and psychological stressors mediate the relationship between work and crime. SEM results will provide information about interpersonal and financial challenges that men face following release from prison.

I plan to extend research on the questions posed in my dissertation using the newly released Pathways to Desistance study (Maricopa County, Arizona, and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, United States). This study followed young convicted offenders from adolescence into early adulthood and collected high-quality longitudinal data on respondents' experiences as they transitioned into adulthood. Findings from future studies using Pathways data should provide insight into the role of employment and prison-based programs on young adults' transitions from crime during early adulthood.

In addition to quantitative secondary data analysis, I have contributed to reentry program evaluations in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and St. Louis, Missouri. As part of these evaluations, I conducted informal in-person interviews with staff members and participants to gather information about their experiences with the programs. I plan to continue work with community-based organizations providing employment services and supported jobs to reentering former prisoners and others involved with the criminal justice system; these evaluations will include quantitative and qualitative methods to glean insight into how programs work.