

**Title:** Anticipated Stigma and Defensive Individualism during Post-Incarceration Job Searching

**Author names and affiliations:**

Bradley Ray, PhD<sup>ac</sup>

Eric Grommon, PhD<sup>a</sup>

Jason Rydberg, PhD<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis  
School of Public and Environmental Affairs  
Business/SPEA Building, 801 West Michigan Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202 USA  
Phone: 317-274-8701

<sup>b</sup> University of Massachusetts Lowell  
School of Criminology and Justice Studies  
Health and Social Sciences Building  
113 Wilder Street  
Lowell, MA 01854

<sup>c</sup> Corresponding author

**Abstract**

Obtaining employment is one of the most difficult challenges for individuals released from prison. This research explores the strategies recently released male parolees employ in attempting to find work, with specific attention to the role of anticipated stigma from their ex-convict status. Through the use of in-depth longitudinal interviews, this research contributes to our understanding of returning prisoner's experiences in job searching. We find that although a majority of the sample anticipated stigma as a barrier to employment, those who did expressed an extreme-self-reliance consistent with defensive individualism. This reluctance to draw on social networks, may ultimately be counter-productive to the search for employment.

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## **Introduction**

Recent research has focused on understanding the multiple and interconnected barriers facing inmates as they transition back into society (Morenoff and Harding 2014; Harding, Morenoff, and Herbert 2013; Western, Braga, Davis, and Sirois 2014). One factor that is especially important in successful reintegration is employment. Finding stable employment helps returning prisoners secure income to meet their basic needs, establish a role in the community, foster a positive image, and reduce the risk of subsequent criminal behaviors (Hagan 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Sampson and Laub 1993; Tanner, Daviesum, and O'Grady 1999; Uggen 2000). Returning prisoners face a host of obstacles in obtaining employment. Employers are often unlikely or unwilling to hire someone with a criminal record because of general distrust (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2006; Holzer 1996; Kasinitz and Rosenberg 1996; Pager 2003) or fear of negligent liability (Connerley, Arvey, and Bernardy 2001). Federal and state laws forbid certain types of employment opportunities for those who have been incarcerated (Petersilia 2003; Uggen, Manza, and Thompson 2006). Additionally, prisoners return home with few employment skills, low levels of educational attainment, and little or no resources; yet, the search for and/or obtainment of employment is often a required condition of parole (Travis 2005; Uggen, Wakefield, and Western 2005).

Another barrier that all returning prisoners encounter is the stigma of a criminal record (Anderson-Facile 2009; LeBel, Richie, and Maruna 2015). Stigma can have an adverse impact on many aspects of the reentry process but especially on employment opportunities (Maruna 2014). However, little research has examined the processes through which returning prisoners attempt to secure employment and how stigma plays a role in this process. The sociological research on employment seeking commonly highlights the importance of social networks, with

findings that suggest most jobs are found through personal connections and that using these connections can result in better employment outcomes (Chapple 2006; Elliott 1999; Granovetter 1995; Lin 1999; Pogrebin, West-Smith, Walker, and Unnithan 2014). Yet, access to social networks are not equally distributed among returning prisoners. Some research suggests that minority groups are less likely to have personal connections that can provide employment opportunities (Hong, Lewis, and Choi 2014; Wilson 1990; Wilson 1996) while others propose that disparities might also be understood as an inability to mobilize available connections (Lin 2001; Newman 1999).

This latter understanding of social networks and job-seeking among underprivileged groups has been advanced by Sandra Smith's (2007) research on poor Black job seekers which illustrates that even when individuals have access to social networks, they may not utilize these networks in the job search process. She argues that regardless of whether or not individuals have access to social networks, they may choose to not utilize these networks in the job search process because they are cognizant of how their joblessness is viewed by those in their social network. Therefore, instead of relying on others for assistance in finding a job, they adopt a self-reliant approach in the hopes of repairing their reputation. Referred to as *defensive individualism*, this approach is essentially used to save face; individuals feel distrusted by their network and do not want to further harm to these relationships by relying on them, possibly compromising their position in the labor market. At the same time, defensive individualists assert that failure to find employment is a personal failure, the result of deficient motivation and effort, rather than larger structural factors such as discrimination or the economy. Individuals thereby embrace the American individualist approach whereby each person is responsible for his or her own fate.

The present study uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with a panel of 30 males recently released from prison on conditional parole supervision. Analyzing these data illuminates our understanding of returning inmates' employment histories and job search strategies, how anticipated stigma management influences these strategies, and how defensive individualism is used to cope with this stigma. The findings add to our understanding of how inmates subjectively understand the job search process and anticipated stigma, but also how they orient resources towards obtaining employment during the reentry process.

### **Returning Prisoners and Stigmatization Barriers to Employment**

The labels of *ex-con*, *felon*, or *prisoner* are attributed a high degree of stigma and persons with these labels are often stereotyped as dangerous or dishonest (Harding 2003; LeBel 2008; Young 1999). These labels can have a negative impact on many aspects of a returning prisoner's reintegrative process, and literature suggests that employment outcomes are particularly subject to stigma effects. These studies examine whether ascribing the ex-con label to an individual influences the willingness of employers to hire them and overwhelmingly suggest a negative impact. This effect has been found to vary in severity by the sector of employment, the type of crime committed, the race of the soliciting individual, and qualifications (Atkin and Armstrong 2013; Giguere and Dundes 2002; Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2004; Pager 2003; Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, and Morgan 2010).

A growing number of studies have examined how returning inmates subjectively understand experiences of stigmatization in seeking employment. Perceptions of stigmatization are common. Among a large sample of returning prisoners 70% noted that their records had negatively affected their job searches two to eight months after release (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, and Yahner 2011). Similarly, returning inmates often perceive rejections and a lack of interviews

to be directly attributable to their criminal record (LeBel 2012). Despite these perceptions, over time many returning inmates obtain employment though at rates that are much lower than the general population suggesting that returning prisoners may face and have to overcome stigma perceptions to achieve employment (Visher et al. 2011; Bucklen and Zajac 2009).

Returning prisoners do not experience stigma passively. Winnick and Bodkin (2008) examined the process by which returning prisoners anticipate, manage and overcome stigmatization and found that individuals with high levels of perceived stigma tend to use adverse coping strategies such as withdrawing or keeping their criminal history secret to avoid negative reactions. However, the authors also highlight the importance of social networks in coping with stigma finding that returning prisoners with positive social relationship were more likely to anticipate using positive coping strategies (Winnick and Bodkin 2008).

### **Social Capital and Job Searching**

Research on the job search process consistently highlights the importance of one's social capital in finding a job, as it links individuals to both the formal and informal networks of the workforce (Elliott 1999; Granovetter 1995; Lin 1999). This literature suggests that job searchers have more success at finding opportunities using informal social networks than formal means (Elliott 1999; Royster 2003), as nearly half of recent hires report finding a job through personal connections (Chapple 2006; Granovetter 1995). Yet, the use of social networks for jobs or job information does not operate the same for all job searchers; compared to White males, reliance by racial/ethnic minorities on social networks does not lead to similar job attainment advantages and can sometimes lead to worse employment outcomes (Lin 2000; Mouw 2003).

In particular, returning prisoners have few social capital resources at their disposal (Petersilia 2003), with several potential explanations. Long periods of incarceration can

deteriorate past relationships (Lopoo and Western 2005) and reliance on a key member of one's social network to fulfill basic post-release needs might create strain and damage relationships over time (Harding et al. 2013). It is also possible that these individuals had weak social networks prior to incarceration; Blacks are vastly overrepresented in U.S. prisons (Pew Charitable Trusts 2008) and are also likely to have the smallest social networks with few influential contacts (Lin 1999). Compared to White men, racial minorities are likely to have fewer employed contacts (Rankin and Quane 2000) and to find themselves in networks that lack individuals with high-ranking positions who might help secure employment (Reskin 1993; Royster 2003). Moreover, reliance on personal networks, as opposed to informal networks, might also result in a homogeneous insular network with few connections to new opportunities and influential others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Further, the social networks of returning inmates may consist of individuals who were currently or previously involved in crime, thereby reducing conventional employment opportunities (Sullivan 1989).

More recently scholars have suggested another mechanism to explain why social networks and social capital might not lead to job attainment among disadvantaged groups; suggesting it is not necessarily the lack of job information or influential contacts, but that these individuals do not mobilize their contacts in a way that helps them to find a job (Lin 2001). For example, studies suggest that low-wage Black workers may be more hesitant to refer family or friends for jobs than their White counterparts for fear that it might hurt their own reputation or to save face with their employer (Royster 2003; Smith 2007); this finding is especially salient in black communities where there is concentrated poverty (Hamm and McDonald 2015). Moreover, through social connections poor Black job searchers become cognizant of how their joblessness is viewed by others in their social network. As such, rather than rely on others for assistance,

self-reliant approaches blending the repair of one's reputation and a generalized reluctance to use social connections are adopted while searching for a job.

How returning inmates incorporate anticipated stigma management and social capital into their job search strategies immediately upon release from prison is complex and not well understood. This research explores returning inmates feelings of anticipated stigma, as well as the various techniques used to seek employment upon release. Given the relativity with which strategies are used over time, particular emphasis is placed on generating insights on the pathways taken by returning prisoners that lead to employment prospects.

### **Data and Methods**

The data used in this study come from a series of prospective, longitudinal, in-depth interviews with male parolees in a small industrialized Midwestern city. All participants were subject to conditional release, and were identified during the pre-parole assessment process by staff from a local parole field office and members of the research team. Criteria for eligibility included anticipated release to the project site and favored high or medium Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) risk assessment scores (Brennan, Dieterich, and Ehret 2009). COMPAS is a validated actuarial tool used to predict recidivism risk and is used at the project site to inform case management decisions and supervision schedules. High and medium risk parolees are supervised more closely than lower risk parolees. Among eligible participants, researchers monitored conviction offense types to assure variability of representation. The modal offense types of the participants in this study are consistent with national trends on the conviction offense classifications of state prison admissions (Guerino, Harrison, and Sabol 2012); with persons, property, and drug offenses in descending order.

Employment opportunities at the study site are bifurcated with growth in high skill technology positions – likely out of reach of individuals recently released from prison (Bellaire and Kowalski 2011) – and low skill service industry opportunities. While the study participants were serving their prison terms, the National Bureau of Economic Research (2010) documented an 18 month recession. The study participants were paroled close to the trough, when the study site was experiencing unemployment in excess of national rates. During the recession the loss of employment positions was concentrated in manufacturing, potentially compounding employment difficulties experienced during the reentry process.

After being selected for inclusion, each participant was informed of the study during pre-parole and were referred to the research team upon release. The first 39 eligible participants who consented to participation formed the final sample. The present analysis focuses on 30 participants who completed at least one follow-up interview.<sup>1</sup> The first interview was administered shortly after release, at which point an interviewer provided additional explanation about the study, answered questions and concerns, and obtained informed consent. Wave 1 interviews occurred in spring 2009 and wave 2 interviews occurred in fall 2010. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to facilitate discussions. Participants were remunerated \$20 for their time after each completed interview. Table 1 provides the participant demographics for the sample used in this study.

[Table 1 about here]

The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (Version 7) was used to manage sequential coding processes in this research (Scientific Software Development 2013). All

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<sup>1</sup> Returning inmates are a transient population and implementing a longitudinal design is difficult. Given attrition from transfers, parole failure, and absconding, the number of participants unable to complete a follow-up interview is not surprising. There were no statistically dependable differences between participants who completed one interview and those who completed more on demographic, current offense, criminal history, and risk level measures.



interview transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, and coded using an open coding technique where patterns and themes surrounding employment were identified. Authors then conferred on the themes that emerged and a second round of coding was conducted to identify themes surrounding stigmatization and social capital. From here an iterative analytic induction process was used where broad codes were continually refined as subcategories were identified. For example, within the broader themes for *job search strategies* subcategories were identified and similarly, for *anticipated stigma*, sources of stigma were identified and subcategorized. Finally these codes were linked across participants to look for patterns.

## RESULTS

### Prior Employment

Consistent with the extant literature, we found that the sample had sporadic prior work experiences that were primarily in low-skilled jobs (see Visser et al. 2011). Some of the participants reported having no prior work experience (n=5). Of these, one was enrolled in college prior to incarceration, while the others reported being incarcerated for the majority of their adult life. Among those with prior work experience, the jobs most commonly mentioned were construction-related work (n=11), food service jobs (n=6), and factory work (n=4). When reporting how they used to make money, about a quarter of the sample with prior work experience (n=7) had never been on payroll, making them hesitant to say they ever had a “job.” Indeed, most of the participants reported engaging in multiple “odds and ends” jobs or frequently moved job-to-job. Willie<sup>2</sup> says that he was always self-employed and paid “under the table...I just did little odd jobs for a guy that owns a lot of houses.” Likewise, Tim describes his prior

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<sup>2</sup> To provide confidentiality all of the names used in this research are pseudonyms.

work as “on and off.” Most recently he worked as a construction laborer, but describes having many “odd jobs...I worked at a carwash, I worked at a book binding club, I hung drywall, I worked on cars on the side, like breaks, like simple stuff.” Overall, the participants characterized their employment backgrounds as continuously fleeting and unstable.

[Table 2 about here]

### **Job Search Strategies**

During the first interview, participants were asked what they were currently doing, or planning to do, to locate a job. Displayed in Table 2, five job search subcategories were created to classify strategies individuals were contemplating, were using, or had already used to find employment. The strategies that emerged were the use of employment agencies, applications, disability services, previous employers, and social networks. Half of the participants (n=15) used only one strategy, eight used two of the strategies, and six used three strategies. One of the participants [Henry] did not report any job seeking strategies because he had already secured employment before the first interview. The most frequently referenced strategy was using an employment agency (n=18). Many participants took part in a prisoner reentry program towards the end of their incarceration that attempted to link returning inmates to job agencies associated with “felon friendly” employers. However, several participants reported hearing about these agencies only upon release. In working with these agencies, the sample reported receiving help in submitting applications, interview training, and creating resumes that played up their skills and downplayed their incarceration status. About one-quarter of the participants reported planning to submit applications on their own (n=8), apart from agencies. These participants were planning to look through newspapers but many said they would just be walking around, from business to business, filling out applications and looking for employment opportunities.

As it was a condition of their parole, finding employment was discussed with a sense of urgency among most of the participants. Most reported a willingness to take any job to get back on their feet. On the other hand, three participants noted that their primary strategy was to restart federal or state disability benefits and services. Brian, who suffers from grand-mal seizures, and Willie, who incurred a closed head injury as a teenager, were chiefly concerned with disability payments when asked about employment. Similarly, while Ken reported feeling well enough to work and wanted to take some side jobs to make money, he discussed his concerns with losing disability benefits if he were to find a permanent job:

“With the economy being so crappy I don’t really want to go out there and be like ‘don’t send me any more money I’m going to work’ and then next month I don’t have a job because they decided not to keep that open or this, that, or the other.”

Not all of those with disabilities reported non-searching. Reggie indicated having several disabilities—HIV, blindness in right eye, and hemophilia—but was working with an agency to submit daily streams of applications to find a part-time job.

Few participants had steady employment prior to incarceration and most of their work history was sporadic and in low-skilled jobs. Six participants planned on contacting their previous employer; a strategy that has the potential to lead to subsequent employment (Ramakers, et al. 2015). A few of those who reported contacting prior employers seemed confident that they would get their old job back. When asked if he could return to his old job as a construction worker after being incarcerated for eight months, Lou states, “I never left” and further explains that “when you’re a good worker you don’t got to worry about nobody taking your spot.” Likewise, Cliff says of his prior construction employer, “they’ll put me right to work, if they have work” and “I’m expecting to be back at work probably as soon as I meet up with

these people and let them know I'm available." Others were unsure of whether it would be possible to secure employment with their ex-employer or whether a position would be available.

Although many of the participants indicated that personal networks were an option (n=14), they were hesitant or ambiguous in discussing who the contact was or what the contact could provide to facilitate the job search. Several of the participants mentioned vague job opportunities through their social network - "a guy I know works there" [Kevin], "I got friends out there" [Samuel], or "I've got people, friends in the streets, you know, by word of mouth, they're looking out for me and might be able to pull strings for me here and there and get me in places" [Jim]. Family members were most commonly identified as sources who could provide potential "leads." Brian and Dennis both pointed to brothers, and Otis said he had a cousin that worked in fast food who might be able to help him out. Leslie optimistically describes "a couple leads" through his network that included "a few of my dad's friends," "a guy that wants me to come work with him at [automobile parts retail sales store]," and "a friend of mine wants me to come work over there at [food service/restaurant]." As these examples illustrate, while many of the participants reported knowing people whom they could contact about a job, they were often vague in what the connection was and uncertain how it would manifest in employment. Therefore, the findings regarding social networks seem to be consistent with both of the social network mechanisms for minority groups noted above. That is, participants appear to lack influential contacts who might have information or status that might help towards securing a job, but also seem hesitant or unable to mobilize resources. We further address this finding below.

### **Felony Stigma and Job Searching**

In discussing employment, participants were asked if they felt it would be difficult to get a job and if so, what exactly would be difficult about it. Responses to this question were coded

anticipated stigma themes. More than half of the sample (n=17) indicated that it would be difficult to find a job because of the felony label, and several patterns emerged from this discussion of anticipated stigma. A central theme was trust; “A lot of places don’t trust convicts for anything” [Willie], “It’s a scary thing coming out, trying to re-establish that trust again in the community” [Alexander], and “You got a felony on your record so nobody wants to trust you or deal with you” [Glen]. In general, such responses highlight the fact that for returning inmates, the concern over stigma is not just about employment, but society in general.

Because participants routinely never heard back from potential employers, they described imagining what these employers were thinking as they reviewed their applications. This involved taking on the role of an employer and simulating the logic used to assess a potential employee with a criminal record. For example, after applying at several fast food restaurants and hearing nothing back, William believes his felon label is the main barrier:

“[My felony record] really hurts me right there because I went to prison for forgery, and when a person hear about that, it makes them think like...probably they think to themselves, 'can't trust him. But, I can be trusted. You know, my mistake was my mistake, and I paid for my mistake and I am not going to do it again. All I am doing is looking for a person to give me a chance.”

Similarly, Travis says that his felony label will “most definitely” make it hard to find a job and also suggests what he believes potential employers will think based on his past experience:

“Once I put down I have felonies on that application, employers are more likely not to call me. I’m pretty much the last choice. Because they figure that maybe the guy was in for theft. Maybe he’s gonna rob me blind. Or he’s a felon, been to prison you know, he’s not likely to show up on time. You know, missed days.”

In postulating about reasons for rejection by potential employers, participants would sympathize with the employers and in doing so refer to themselves as less worthy of employment than those job searchers who had not been incarcerated. For example, Samuel, in explaining his anxiety about finding a job, says:

“It’s hard right now [because of the economy], it’s gonna be twice as hard on you being a felon, because you already got a strike against you. As opposed to someone who is an active, productive member of society that never did anything wrong. And they’re getting fired. What makes you think I have the right to go take that guys job?”

Dustin and Gary imagined how employers see their felony status in comparison to persons with college degrees. Dustin suggests that “everything is really about you having a college degree,” but goes on to say that even those with college degrees are having difficulty finding jobs.

Similarly, Gary says, “You have people out here with diplomas all kinds of degrees... and they can’t even get a job and I’m a felon. And I’m supposed to get a job?” He goes on to say, “I’m a felon, so when they see my application and that isn’t going to get me no job over all these with all these degrees you know what I mean.”

In each of these examples the participants indicate that they are less worthy of employment and almost deserving of their unemployment. Similar to findings reported by Harding (2003), other participants specifically mentioned strategies of how to disclose their felon status. Kevin and Dennis both lament over the process, saying that if they lie they are more likely to get the job but at the same time fearing the repercussions if they are caught. Kevin says,

“Applications. Always come down to applications, filling out applications. Do you got a record? That’s the first question. You put no, and you get a job, and you look around, you know, one day they calling you in and they letting you go. You put yes, then they, nice

meeting you, unless they got a track record, they got something set up, it's hard to find a job if you got a record."

Similarly, Dennis uses a strategy of honesty, "I mark yes because I'm not going to lie to them. Because if I lie to them and then they find out later, I'm off at the knees. So I'm up front. Up front right from the start."

Other participants were very specific about how their felony status would block future job opportunities. Prior to his incarceration Thomas was enrolled in college, majoring in human biology with aspirations to be a pediatrician or in pharmaceutical sales; however, post release he says, "I can't go into any sort of medical field with a felony, so, and even though it gets expunged when I'm done with parole, they can still look it up."

### **Defensive Individualism and Social Networks**

The above examples illustrate returning prisoner's anticipation of stigma due to their record, and how they perceive this status serves as a barrier in pursuing employment. Most of the participants who anticipated stigma during the job search were cautiously optimistic about their ability to obtain a job. Stigma was a real threat but not necessarily an inhibitor. Stigma served as a reminder of status and of challenges to be faced and was also used as an explanation for why one has yet to receive a callback from an employer or why one has yet to secure employment. Moreover, from a stigma management perspective we might conclude from these respondents that by even talking about stigma these respondents were engaging in a type of preventative telling (Winnick and Bodkin 2008). Yet, many participants did not anticipate stigma (n=13). Some were seeking disability rather than employment (Brian, Willie, and Ken) and others had certainty stemming from external resources (Lou, Paul, and Cliff were confident they could find jobs with their previous employers, and Leslie and Shaun were hopeful their social network

would help them). The optimism of these participants seemed to overshadow any fears they had; a finding consistent among the extant literature on returning prisoners (Phillips and Lindsay 2011; Visher and O'Connell 2012). However, as we delved further into the remaining respondents who did not anticipate stigma a consistent theme emerged: participants displayed an extreme self-reliance towards their job search. For example, when specifically asked, "Do you think it makes a difference that you have an arrest record?" Leslie reiterates his self-reliance saying, "I really don't think that it will make a difference" and that "some guys like to play that card... you know 'we are convicted felons, no one is going to hire us.' That is just your mentality, you assume that they won't hire so you don't go out there and try." What was more telling is that nearly all of these individuals explicitly expressed having social support networks that offered financial, emotional, and housing support; yet, when asked about utilizing these social networks to find employment, the responders expressed reluctance to accept the help.

We found that this theme was strikingly consistent with defensive individualism (Smith, 2007); that is, these respondents had access to a social network—and in some cases utilized members of that network for other essential needs—but instead adopt a self-reliant approach and choose not to utilize their network in the job search process. Over half (n=19) of the participants gave responses consistent with this theme. For example, Henry and Shaun did not report any anticipated stigma but both made reference to their self-reliance. Henry worked five years at a restaurant owned by his family but is using an agency to find a job. He describes his family as loving, caring, and supportive, yet when asked if working at the family business was an option he says, "It was an option but I refuse to work there." When asked if his family could help with his housing situation he replies, "Not sure, sometimes I try to do it on my own." Shaun has a sister and aunt who have been helping him but when asked how he replies, "I try not to burden



them none. So I really don't ask them for nothing." When asked whether he thought it would be difficult to find a job he says, "No. Not as hard as they say it is." Self-reliance was often mentioned in relation to utilizing social networks. Similarly, Kevin was very positive in discussing his support system, living with his grandmother, receiving money his brothers and uncle (who both work for the city), his father who is retired from owning his own business, and sisters at college; but in discussing his job search he says:

"I am going to use my support system and stay with my grandmother for a while until I can get my situation straight. And then transition out and try to get my own place. Right now I want to just crawl first, just get whatever little job I can get, just set up."

While Kevin expressed a strong social support network he did not mention using any of them to find employment. Like Kevin, Henry, and Shaun, several participants suggested that family and friends offered financial, emotional, and housing support, but when asked directly about utilizing these social networks to find employment, the responders expressed reluctance to accept the help. There appeared to be something fundamentally different about the use of social networks when finding a job which we explore further in the theme below.

When Cliff was asked if he had any jobs lined up or expectations for employment, he reported that he is primarily using an employment agency to find a job. Yet, he also revealed that his ex-employer is his uncle who he describes a fatherly way, but worries he might be a burden as his uncle has his own children to care for. Cliff says, "I have to take the initiative myself. That's why these other things [employment agencies], I'm going to pursue those." When asked if he thinks it will be hard to get a job, "No. No. Not if you're willing to do anything. I am. A lot of guys aren't. But I'm willing to do anything." When discussing his housing situation, Cliff further states how he does not want to burden his uncle. When he left prison he assumed he would be

staying in a shelter, stating that if he stayed with his uncle it “would be a burden to have him bring me back and forth if I found a job. That would be a burden to him. So I figured I would seek a shelter to stay in.”

For most of his adult life Pedro reported being unemployed and is planning to use an agency to help him create a resume and fill out applications. In the past he has done some construction work and hopes to find something in that area but says that “at this point I am willing to take whatever I can find.” Pedro and his girlfriend have a child together and his parents have been emotionally and financially supportive since his release. His primary source of support is his girlfriend, whom he lives with and who has a job that can cover expenses. Pedro suggests he is uncomfortable “living off of her.” When asked if he has any family or friends that might help him find a job he says, “I have family that might be able to help me” but then immediately goes on to say, “I am definitely going to [local employment agency]... to put my resume in the talent bank and try to get a job through there” without elaborating further on how his family might help. Travis responded with similar sentiments, saying he has a very supportive family network and credits them for helping during his reentry. His brother-in-law is a manager at a moving company and he has already worked there for two days; it was arranged before he got out. However, when asked if it would be a permanent position he seems reluctant: “It could [be]...um... definitely gonna try to use [local employment agency] help that I can get from them and get a permanent more fulfilling one [job].”

The above examples show that participants were reluctant to discuss using their social networks in the job search. When asked directly—even if the participant had a supportive network that helped with the reentry process by providing financial, emotional, and housing support—they wanted to be self-reliant. The theme of defensive individualism often directly

related to participants' self-reliance and individualism concerning the job search. Tim says "I'm nervous, but I know I can do it. I am confident that I can do it and that I can, because when I was growing up, these little jobs that I've gotten, I've been able to walk in and talk to a person and get an interview and talk to them and get hired." Persistence was a common element among these comments, "I am gonna be pushy. I'm gonna be that guy that will probably get on some people's nerves and some people are gonna say, come on in" [Tim] and "I think if I stay persistent and show confidence, I could obtain employment. It's really all on the individual. You have some employers who won't hire felons, but if an individual man really wants to work, really wants a job, he could find one" [Dennis]. Moreover, Ken takes a defensive individualist stance against job training programs: "That program shit doesn't work... I really don't see how it can help you. I think you've got to help yourself... you've got to just work your way up yourself. I don't think people can talk to you and help you."

### **Obtaining Employment**

A strength of the current research was the capability to follow-up with the cohort to discuss changes in employment status. The average time to follow-up was eight months (ranged from 3 to 18 months;  $SD = 5.51$ ) during which time 18 of the participants reported having been employed since their release or were currently employed during the interview. As noted above, some of the participants were not looking for work: Henry did not indicate any job searching strategies because he already had employment; Brian, Willie, and Ken were primarily seeking disability; and by follow-up Thomas was enrolled in college full time. Among those who did find work many had situations similar to their previous employment, in that they were doing primarily non-payroll, low-skilled work. For example, Leslie, Dustin, Kevin, and Ken all reported having "odds and ends" jobs doing manual labor on construction sites or landscaping

but were not on payroll. While the participants' parole agents did not favor this work, they largely tolerated holding these jobs as long as more permanent opportunities were pursued. Ken stated that he required the additional income to supplement his disability payments. In terms of using one's social network to find a job, Samuel, Travis, and Leslie received help from family members to secure work (in construction, a moving company, and a painting company, respectively), Dustin and Kevin found out about their jobs from friends, as did Jim who had a short-lived custodial job at a fast food restaurant. Lou and Paul—both of whom were confident about returning to their previous jobs—were able to do so.

Table 2 shows, most of the participants found work at the same textile manufacturing company; Calderham. Some of the participants reported first hearing of Calderham from a fellow parolee, though most learned of and all applied to Calderham using an employment agency referral. The presence of Calderham as a potential employer carried implications for the employment outcomes of the sample. The manufacturer was presented to ex-offenders by reentry service providers as a "felon-friendly" employer who sought to provide temporary opportunities to those with disabilities. In the current sample, the existence of a criminal record in combination with a history of substance use was used to fulfill this requirement and gain employment. Additionally, Calderham was relatively forgiving of absences and misconduct, which allowed ex-offenders to return to their jobs following jail stays; therefore, we cannot consider employment outcomes associated with Calderham in a similar fashion to other employers in the study city. In this sense, Calderham served as a *de facto* transitional employment program (Western 2008), buffering the sample from chronic unemployment during the reentry process and validated initial endorsements of using employment agencies to facilitate the job search and obtain employment. While the results in Table 2 suggest that the sample heavily relied on

Calderham for employment, for some participants the decision to pursue the opportunity was more complicated. For instance, Otis' parole agent believed that he was too motivated and talented to "settle" on Calderham, but with little initial luck in his employment search Otis felt he could not pass on the opportunity.

Similar to their previous employment, the work that these individuals found was often sporadic. Jim learned about a job from a friend, but was soon on leave and receiving disability payments because of physical problems. Two other individuals were able to obtain employment, but lost their jobs - Matt, a convicted sex offender, had to quit his cooking job after two months when his parole officer discovered the job was located near a school. Travis, was fired from a moving company after his employer discovered he was a convicted felon. Kevin, who found temporary work cleaning, was arrested by the second interview. Tim was the only individual reporting multiple jobs; he obtained employment both at Calderham and a construction company.

Of the respondents who previously expressed themes of defensive individualism described above, only Kevin went on to ultimately utilize his network to find a job. However, it is worth noting that the person who helped Kevin find a job was not any of the family members who he described as part of his support network but was instead an old friend who owned an auto store. Like Kevin, Ken (who was seeking disability) found construction work from an old friend stating that he, "ran into him and tried to sell myself the best I could and he bought it." Of the other defensive individual respondents, all of those who found work were at Calderham (Cliff, Dennis, Pedro, and Tim).

## **Discussion**

The present study examines qualitative data from 30 recently released male inmates who were interviewed immediately following their release from prison and again several months

after. We explored participant's attitudes in regards to employment, examining the nature of the sample's prior employment history, the job search strategies they planned to use, and anticipated stigma during the job search process. Consistent with previous research, we found that prior to being incarcerated, most of the participants had sporadic employment histories and were primarily employed in low-skilled jobs (see Visher et al. 2011). While some of the participants reported having no prior work experience, those who were employed noted work in construction, food services, and factories and others referred to only having multiple "odds and ends" jobs without payroll. These parolees described five strategies for finding work: employment agencies, applications, disability services, previous employer, and social networks. While many of the participants planned to use more than one job search strategy, the strategy most commonly endorsed was the use of an employment agency. In most cases, the participants viewed this strategy as a safe bet, planning to use these agencies to help develop and submit applications to job banks, as well as train them in interviewing skills. Similar to Visher and colleagues (2011), we found that 6 of the participants in this study planned on contacting an old employer. Several participants elected to avoid the employment market, focusing efforts on disability payments.

Many of the returning inmates anticipated stigma during their job search; expressing concern that potential employers would not trust them or give them a chance because of their felony record. The participants would often guess at what potential employers might think about them. Our study found that those who anticipated stigma were more likely to have gained employment at follow-up than those who did not. The returning inmate's descriptions of anticipated stigma was consistent with much of the recent literature (LeBel 2008, 2012); surprisingly, we found that a noteworthy portion of the participants did not anticipate any stigma. There were those who did not anticipate stigma because they had a job lined up or knew they

would receive disability services; however, other participants stated that their felony status would *not* be a barrier to employment. In these cases, it was not a lower anticipation of stigma but a rejection of stigma followed by confidence and self-reliance towards their job search.

In further examining this rejection of anticipated stigma we found a theme that was consistent with Smith's concept of defensive individualism (2007). For these returning inmates, defensive individualism operated like a coping mechanism to stigmatization and commented on how they could only rely on themselves to have a successful reentry experience. In other cases, defensive individualism was expressed towards job search strategies whereby the returning inmates preferred to go at it alone rather than ask others for help. These participants would often describe a social network connection that was helping in the reentry process, and who might be able to assist with employment, but preferred to find work on their own. It is interesting to note that participants who anticipated stigma in their job search did not consistently indicate this would result in them adopting or altering their job search strategy. Rather, defensive individualism was more a driver of the job search strategies as these participants drifted away from using social networks towards other strategies. This is an important consideration for reentry practitioners, as research suggests that parolees who return to prison tend to have more unrealistic job expectations than those who do not (Bucklen and Zajac 2009). Defensive individualism may operate to exacerbate these unrealistic expectations. Simultaneously, the agency and confidence espoused by these participants may serve as an emotion-focused coping mechanism (Phillips and Lindsay, 2011), shielding sense of self from the difficulties of reentry.

Like Visher and colleagues (2011), we observed that about half of the participants found employment during the follow-up period. Few of the jobs came from the social network of the participants. Instead, most found employment using an agency and were employed a company

that had a reputation for hiring returning inmates. It is worth noting that the presence of Calderham to absorb unemployment among the sample makes the generalization of employment outcomes to other settings difficult, yet given the focus of the current analysis on job search strategies, this is not a major drawback. Indeed, the results are consistent with research noting that availability of manufacturing employers in a community can shape employment outcomes and reentry progress (see Bellair and Kowalski 2011).

Given the nature of the data it is not possible to determine causality between the themes that emerged in our coding. Indeed, the primary findings of this research advance the potential of defensive individualism to understand the relationship between incarceration and employment by describing *how* individuals incorporate defensive individualism approaches to their job search. However, there were several preliminary trends that emerged. For example, of the ten White participants only one whom reported they were searching for a job (three were seeking disability) were unemployed at follow up (see Table 2). While it was only three participants who were seeking disability, all of them were White. Participants who planned to use more than one job search strategy were more likely to find employment than those who did not (71% and 50% respectively). There was also a trend in the anticipation of stigma and employment: 71% of those who anticipated stigma were employed at follow-up compared to 46% of those who did not anticipate stigma. Fifty-five to 60% of participants who did and did not express themes of defensive individualism were employed at follow-up, with these trends being driven in large part by the reliance on Calderham.

Our findings are limited by having a relatively small number of male participants from a single city for whom initial and follow-up data were available. Additionally, all participants were subject to parole supervision, meaning that the patterns described here may not reflect the



experiences of those on unconditional release. By utilizing interview data we were not able to directly measure the parolee's social networks, only their perceptions of the utility of their networks. Thus, we are unable to test alternative hypotheses or explore spurious relationships among themes. It should be noted that this limitation is present in other studies on prisoner reentry and job search behaviors as well, and hinders our understanding of how stigma and social networks play a role in finding employment. Future research can further elucidate these processes by including returning inmates' social networks directly in the data collection process, providing detail on reentry from multiple perspectives and stakeholders, and assessing whether particular persons and resources were deployed during the job search and to what effect.

This study exists in an interpretivist context and requires the acknowledgement that data are co-produced by researchers, interviewers, participants, and research settings (Presser 2008). While this study overcomes shortcomings associated with interviewing participants involved in the criminal justice system in natural environments or in jail or prison locations, interviews of individuals under supervision can be criticized for producing hesitant, self-conscious, or distorted participant responses (see Bucklen and Zajac 2009). We attempted to minimize contextual effects through the use of a standardized sampling procedure driven by the research team (rather than the supervision agency), a semi-structured instrument used across interviews, a single interviewer, and a consensus-based thematic coding strategy. Despite these limitations, the present research expands our understanding about stigmatization and job searching among male returning prisoners. Our findings corroborate much of the research on stigma among inmates (LeBel 2012; Winnick and Bodkin 2008; Visher et al. 2011), as well work on social networks and employment (Smith 2007). And while recent research among returning inmates suggests social networks, especially familial, facilitate job attainment and can generate information,

influence decisions, corroborate skills and qualifications (Berg and Huebner 2011), it is not clear when and how these networks are used. Introducing defensive individualism to this literature can help to explain this pattern; however, more research is needed to explore this concept.

Specifically additional research should attempt to quantitatively measure defensive individualism to systematically explore associations with stigma, job-searching, and employment outcomes.

Moreover, such research might also examine benefits to defensive individualism and identify individual factors such as higher self-esteem, self-worth, or a greater sense of agency that drive perceptions of defensive individualism. Network analysis would also be useful in examining defensive individualism as it would allow researchers to assess the strength of ties and whether returning inmates create distance from or activate strong or weak network ties in managing numerous reentry challenges including the search for employment.

Finally, this study also contributes to a larger sociological understanding of the prison industrial complex, and its damaging effects on communities, by illustrating a mechanism by which prison contributes to mistrust and social isolation and serves to further separate returning prisoners from sources of social capital. Moreover, most returning inmates in this study who found work end up at Calderham which operates as part of a feeder system from the prison industrial complex for cheap labor and marginalized employees. This is consistent with claims that the criminal justice system can perpetuate inequalities by excluding individuals – especially African American males – from social, economic, and political spheres of social life (Smith and Hattery 2010; Smith 2010; Wacquant 2001).

## **Conclusion**

The increased rate of returning prisoners in the United States has forced policy makers to recognize the needs of this growing population. Finding stable employment helps returning

prisoners in the reentry process; however, it is important to gain a better understanding of stigmatization that exists in the lives of returning prisoners, and also how this affects the reentry process. Additional research is needed on the interaction between job seeking strategies of returning inmates and the strategies of employment agencies on stigma management and employment outcomes. Equipping and assisting returning prisoners is only a part of the equation to easing the reentry process; equally important are strategies that reduce stigma among potential employers and society at large.

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**Table 1: Participant Demographics (n=30)**

|                         | Percent | Mean (SD)    | Range   |
|-------------------------|---------|--------------|---------|
| Age                     |         | 36.60 (8.32) | 21 – 55 |
| Non-White               | 67%     |              |         |
| Offense Type            |         |              |         |
| Persons Offense         | 37%     |              |         |
| Property Offense        | 37%     |              |         |
| Drug Offense            | 13%     |              |         |
| Sex Offense             | 13%     |              |         |
| Previously Incarcerated | 57%     |              |         |
| Current Term Years      |         | 4.80 (3.77)  | 1 – 14  |

**Table 2: Job-Search Strategies, Anticipated Stigma, and Employment Outcomes**

| Pseudonym | Race  | Age | Employment |              |            | Previous Employer | Social Network | Anticipated Stigma | Defensive Individualism | Employment at Follow-up |
|-----------|-------|-----|------------|--------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
|           |       |     | Agency     | Applications | Disability |                   |                |                    |                         |                         |
| Alexander | Black | 44  | Yes        | Yes          | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | No                      | Unemployed              |
| Brian     | White | 49  | No         | No           | Yes        | No                | Yes            | No                 | No                      | Unemployed              |
| Cliff     | Black | 45  | Yes        | No           | No         | Yes               | Yes            | No                 | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Dennis    | Black | 43  | No         | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Dustin    | Black | 36  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | No                      | Landscaping             |
| Erving    | Black | 33  | Yes        | Yes          | No         | No                | No             | No                 | Yes                     | Unemployed              |
| Gary      | Black | 28  | No         | Yes          | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | No                      | Unemployed              |
| Glen      | Black | 34  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | Yes                     | Unemployed              |
| Henry     | Black | 41  | No         | No           | No         | No                | No             | No                 | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Jim       | Black | 55  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | No                 | No                      | Fast Food               |
| Ken       | White | 26  | No         | No           | Yes        | No                | No             | Yes                | Yes                     | Construction            |
| Kevin     | Black | 38  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | Yes                     | Cleaning job            |
| Leslie    | White | 24  | No         | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | No                 | Yes                     | Unemployed              |
| Lou       | Black | 40  | No         | No           | No         | Yes               | Yes            | No                 | No                      | Construction            |
| Marcus    | Black | 21  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Mark      | White | 38  | Yes        | Yes          | No         | Yes               | No             | Yes                | No                      | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Matt      | White | 25  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | Yes                     | Construction            |
| Mike      | Black | 44  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | No             | No                 | No                      | Unemployed              |
| Otis      | Black | 32  | Yes        | Yes          | No         | No                | Yes            | No                 | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Paul      | White | 32  | No         | No           | No         | Yes               | No             | No                 | No                      | Construction            |
| Pedro     | Black | 31  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Reggie    | Black | 39  | No         | Yes          | No         | No                | No             | No                 | No                      | Unemployed              |
| Robby     | Black | 48  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | Yes                     | Unemployed              |
| Samuel    | White | 45  | Yes        | Yes          | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | Yes                     | Construction            |
| Shaun     | Black | 30  | No         | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | No                 | Yes                     | Unemployed              |
| Thomas    | Black | 23  | No         | No           | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | No                      | School                  |
| Tim       | White | 39  | Yes        | No           | No         | No                | No             | Yes                | Yes                     | Textile Manufacturing   |
| Travis    | White | 33  | Yes        | Yes          | No         | No                | Yes            | Yes                | Yes                     | Moving Company          |
| William   | Black | 42  | No         | No           | No         | Yes               | No             | Yes                | Yes                     | Unemployed              |
| Willie    | White | 36  | Yes        | No           | Yes        | Yes               | No             | No                 | Yes                     | Unemployed              |