

NATIONAL IMPACT: THE EFFECTS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT ON EMPLOYMENT AMONG JUVENILE OFFENDERS

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ABSTRACT

Youth adjudicated as delinquents face uncertain futures on release from residential juvenile programs (Modrcin & Rutland, 1989). They frequently return to environments characterized by family dysfunction, poverty, and peer pressure to continue a delinquent lifestyle (Dembo, Williams, & Schmeidler, 1994). Adding to these circumstances is the fact that many of these juveniles have psychological/emotional problems (Sikorski, 1991). The extent to which they can achieve the socially desired goals of community assimilation, educational development, and successful employment is dependent on the availability of effective, integrated treatment services.

Many juveniles who enter the criminal justice system can be characterized in two ways. These are inadequate educational attainment and less than satisfactory preparation to enter the workforce (Clark & Davis, 2000). To ensure that youthful offenders receive the necessary skills to enter the workforce, it is important that they are exposed to a broad range of services. These include employability skills training, occupational skills training and for many with learning and emotional disabilities, specialized training opportunities that prepare them to successfully enter the workforce.

The purpose of this article is to examine the impact of career development on the formation of mature attitudes and competencies for incarcerated youthful offenders and to explore the likelihood of gaining employment for this population based on participation in a career development program. Coffey and Gemignani (1994) maintained that in addition to vocational and academic programs, juvenile justice practitioners must provide youth with awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes required to obtain and succeed in entry-level jobs. Therefore, the development of mature attitudes and competencies is critical to realistic career decision-making and the likelihood of gaining employment.

Career Development

One of the most prominent theories of career development is that of Super (1957). Super's theory of career stages uses a life-span approach to describe how individuals evidence their self-concept through vocational choices. Super suggests that the process of choosing an occupation that permits maximum self-expression occurs over time and in four stages: (a) exploration, a period of engaging in self-examination, schooling, and the study of different career options; (b) establishment, a period of becoming employed and finding a niche; (c) maintenance, a period of holding on to one's position and updating skills; and (d) disengagement, a period of phasing into retirement. In addition, he introduced the concept of career maturity to denote "the place reached on the continuum of vocational development from exploration to decline" (p. 153). The model has expanded over the years and has come to encompass the reality that adults today have multiple roles and do not follow the linear pattern of organizational advancement that was predominant when the initial framework was formulated in the 1950s. The present investigation sought to incorporate the theory of career maturity as a conceptual framework for improving the employment chances of incarcerated youth. The focus of this research was on Super's stage of exploration and his concept of career maturation that begins with the dimension of orientation to vocational choice.

A major failure of juvenile justice authorities is the failure to provide youth with career preparation programs. Many youth paroled back to the community return without an employable skill and many will never return to school and receive a high school diploma (Cahill & Pitts, 1997).

A study of formerly incarcerated youth by Bullis and Yovanoff (2002) indicated that services focusing on educational placement and securing appropriate competitive work should be provided to incarcerated youth immediately after their return to the community. The authors suggested that these services should include the following components: (a) allow staff the flexibility necessary to serve youth outside of the school setting and in the community; (b) place emphasis on service coordination with other agencies, job and alternative educational placements; (c) utilize functional skill assessments (i.e., assessments of work, living, and social skills); (d) involve each youth in a meaningful way to plan and develop his or her own transition services and placement options; and (e) provide social skill instruction addressing specific work and living skills and setting requirements. The Texas Youth Commission (TYC) provides many of these components.

Project RIO-Y

TYC is the state agency charged with the incarceration and rehabilitation of the state's most serious juvenile offenders. Its mission is to "protect the public, habilitate youth to become productive citizens, rehabilitate delinquent youth and help prevent

delinquency” (TYC, 2002, p. 1). Among the many rehabilitative programs within TYC, are the Workforce Development Programs that provide youth with the employability and occupational skills that enable them to locate gainful employment when they return to the community.

In 1985 the Texas legislature created Project RIO (Reintegration of Offenders) in order to assist adult offenders assigned to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) locate employment upon their return to the community. While incarcerated in a TDCJ facility, adult offenders were provided employability skills training along with instruction in occupational skills. Upon release, these offenders were referred to the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), the state employment service, for assistance in locating employment opportunities. The adult program demonstrated a high degree of success with respect to reduction of recidivism and an increase in employment among adult offenders. During 74th legislative session in 1995, the state legislature mandated that the TYC implement the Project RIO-Y (Re-Integration of Offenders – Youth) program for juveniles assigned to TYC, and who were 16 years of age and older. While assigned to a TYC facility, volunteer RIO-Y participants receive an assortment of program services. These include aptitude and interest assessment to determine career fields in which the student can conduct career exploration activities and intensive training on the formation of mature attitudes and competencies for employment including job readiness skills training that prepare the youth to search for employment, apply for and interview for a job, and the skills necessary to maintain employment. When a Project RIO-Y graduate returns to the community they are referred to TWC for employment assistance and/or other workforce development services provided through the statewide network of workforce centers. These other workforce development services can include referral to apprentice programs, additional occupational skills training opportunities funded by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and provided by local workforce development boards, referral to Job Corps programs, and the military and other employment and training opportunities (TYC, 2002).

Design of the Study

Previous portions of the current study introduced the problem of concern and reviewed the literature pertinent to workforce and career development issues within the juvenile justice system. The purpose of this study is to determine the likelihood of gaining employment for this population from participation in career development. The researcher used the records of all Project RIO-Y participants and nonparticipants, 18–21 years of age, from 2002 through 2004, and examined employment rates at 180 and 365 days on parole for each youth. Approximately 1,500 youths fulfilled these criteria. Logistic regression was used since the goal of the analyses is prediction. Seventeen demographic factors were used to characterize the sample on the following variables: (a) age at release, (b) age of first delinquent referral, (c) assessment center behavior score, (d) classifying offense, (e) country of citizenship, (f) county of commitment, (g) escape

history prior to TYC, (h) ethnicity, (i) known gang membership, (j) placements prior to TYC, (k) previous felony adjudications, (l) previous felony referrals, (m) previous referrals for violent offenses, (n) probation prior to TYC, (o) specialized treatment needs, (p) participation in specialized treatment programs and (q) documented incidents in the first 30 days at TYC.

Results of the Study

The results of the study were mixed. Three predictor variables were significantly related to the likelihood of not being employed at 180 days: living in Travis County, African American ethnicity, and having a chemical dependency need. A trend was also noted for lowered odds of employment at 180 days for those who were younger at first referral. Two variables had the largest odds ratios: (a) participation in the RIO-Y program (although not statistically significant) enhances the odds of employment by 1.14 and (b) having a chemical dependency need decreases the odds by a factor of 1.15.

Table 1
Maximum Likelihood Estimates and Odds Ratio Estimates for Independent Variables for Employment Data at 180 Days (N = 1486)

Variable	Coefficient	SE	Wald	p	Odds Ratio
RIO/non-RIO	.13	.12	1.23	.27	1.14
Age at release	-.04	.10	.16	.69	.96
Age 1 st referral	.06	.04	2.82	.09	1.06
Escape history	-.19	.14	1.88	.17	.82
Bexar	.15	.16	.88	.35	.81
Dallas	.23	.15	2.27	.13	.87
Harris	.08	.15	.30	.58	.76
Tarrant	-.16	.20	.66	.42	.59
Travis	-.67	.30	4.82	.03	.36
Assault	.08	.12	.42	.51	.91
Burglary	-.34	.12	7.69	.00**	.60
Drug	-.00	.15	.001	.97	.84
Robbery	.14	.18	.63	.42	.97
Theft	-.04	.14	.09	.77	.81
African American	-.50	.08	35.75	.00**	.39
Hispanic	.07	.08	.75	.39	.70
U.S. citizen	.01	.03	.28	.59	1.01
ACBS	-.15	.11	2.01	.16	.86
EDN	-.19	.13	2.27	.13	.83

CDN	-.26	.13	4.25	.04*	.77
SON	.12	.21	.31	.58	1.12
Gang member	.02	.12	.04	.85	1.02
Previous placements	-.06	.08	.65	.42	.94
Felony adjudications	.09	.09	.98	.32	1.10
On probation	-.11	.13	.72	.40	.90
Felony referrals	-.07	.05	2.21	.14	.93
RVO	.02	.11	.42	.84	1.02
CDT	.14	.14	.92	.34	1.15
EDT	-.14	.19	.58	.45	.87
SOT	-.13	.25	.25	.62	.88
Incidents 1 st 30 days	-.03	.08	.15	.70	.97

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Participation in Project RIO-Y and Hispanic ethnicity significantly improved the probability of being employed at 365 days, while African American ethnicity and a chemical dependency need significantly decreased this probability as these two predictors did with the odds at 180 days. In addition, the greater the number of escape attempts and previous placements tended to lower the probability. Odds ratios indicated that RIO participants were almost one and a half times as likely to be employed at 365 days as non-RIO youth.

Table 2

Maximum Likelihood Estimates and Odds Ratio Estimates for Independent Variables for Employment Data at 365 Days (N = 1486)

Variable	Coefficient	SE	Wald	p	Odds Ratio
RIO/Non-RIO	.32	.12	7.85	.00**	1.39
Age at release	-.04	.10	.13	.72	.96
Age 1 st referral	.04	.04	1.20	.27	1.04
Escape history	-.26	.14	3.16	.08	.77
Bexar	-.03	.16	.04	.85	.65
Dallas	.04	.15	.07	.78	.70
Harris	.17	.15	1.25	.26	.79
Tarrant	-.22	.20	1.19	.28	.54
Travis	-.36	.30	1.49	.22	.46
Assault	.08	.12	.42	.52	1.05
Burglary	-.09	.12	.55	.46	.87
Drug	-.16	.16	.99	.32	.83
Robbery	-.07	.18	.15	.70	.91

Theft	.21	.14	2.35	.12	1.20
African American	-.49	.08	33.62	.00**	.45
Hispanic	.17	.08	4.28	.04*	.86
U.S. citizen	.02	.03	.72	.39	1.02
ACBS	-.07	.11	.40	.53	.93
EDN	.04	.13	.09	.76	1.04
CDN	-.27	.13	4.36	.04*	.77
SON	.14	.21	.42	.52	1.15
Gang member	.01	.12	.01	.93	1.01
Previous placements	-.14	.08	3.11	.08	.87
Felony adjudications	.01	.09	.01	.93	1.01
On probation	.03	.13	.04	.84	1.03
Felony referrals	-.05	.05	1.18	.28	.95
RVO	.09	.12	.61	.44	1.10
CDT	.08	.15	.27	.60	1.08
EDT	.05	.19	.08	.78	1.05
SOT	.001	.25	.00	1.00	1.00
Incidents 1 st 30 days	-.08	.08	1.08	.30	.92

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the difference in the employment rates for RIO participants at 180 days and 365 days could be due to several parole requirements. One factor could be that at 180 days on parole status, a youth may be required to engage in an activity other than employment. Often, returning youth must complete other parole requirements, such as finishing a GED, specialized treatment for sex offending or chemical dependency or meet the requirement of performing community service before they can go to work.

Additionally, being of Hispanic ancestry increased the likelihood of employment at 365 days on parole status. With respect to Hispanic sociocultural values, work is viewed as an essential part of their make-up and status within the community. This may account for their higher employment rate.

Two predictor variables were significantly related to the likelihood of not being employed at 180 days and 365 days: African American ethnicity and having a chemical dependency need. These results are consistent with the research that shows that unemployment among African American teens is higher than among white, including Hispanic youth. According to the U.S. Dept. of Labor (Bureau of Statistics Report, Sept. 2005), 32.6% of African American youth, between the ages of 16 to 19 years of age are

unemployed as compared to 13.3% of White youth (including Hispanics) of the same age group. This is evidence of the high rate of unemployment among African American youth and demonstrates the difficulty that African American youth face in gaining employment.

With respect to having a chemical dependency need and the likelihood of not being employed at 180 days and 365 days, Van Waal, McBride, Terry and VanBuren (2001) in a report for the National Institute of Justice stated, "In many communities, the majority of juveniles currently entering the justice system are serious drug users" (p.32). Other research indicates that juvenile drug use is related to recurring, chronic, and violent delinquency that continues well into adulthood. Juvenile drug use is also strongly related to poor health, deteriorating family relationships, worsening school performance, and other social and psychological problems. Chemically dependent youth who receive poor treatment or no treatment at all could be more likely to continue offending and thereby decrease the likelihood of entering the workforce.

A trend was also noted for lowered odds of employment at 180 days for those who were younger at first referral and for youth who lived in Travis County (Austin). Youth that were referred at a lower age could because of their age at release return to school rather than enter employment. The Texas Compulsory School Law mandates that school age children must attend school until their 18th birthday unless they have achieved a high school diploma or a GED. With respect to the lower odds of employment for youth living in Travis County, it could be that more youth are returning to school to complete high school or to enroll in some type of post secondary educational opportunity. Travis County traditionally has had a relatively well educated workforce. It is a center for technology and research, particularly in micro chip manufacturing and soft ware development. Seven universities and colleges are located in the area and feed these industries as well as state, county and local government. Additionally, there are a number of community-based youth serving organizations, all of which place youth in high school diploma programs, GED programs and occupational skills training programs.

While it is important for juvenile justice practitioners and, for that matter, all youth serving professionals, to develop strategies that prevent juvenile offending, equal attention must be paid to the development of rehabilitative programs that prepare youthful offenders to enter adulthood with the skills necessary for them to live as happy, well adjusted, and prosocial members of society. This research points out the relatively recent emergence of career development strategies for juvenile offenders as well as the promising results of these programs. Unfortunately, it also clearly demonstrates that career development programming is still not a priority in many juvenile agencies. Hopefully, this research will generate new knowledge with respect to the rehabilitative qualities of career development and furthermore, will cause policymakers to advocate for more occupational skills programs and legislators to fund more of these programs.

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