



Students' Perception and Attitude Toward Hiring a Former Offender

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Abstract

Much has been written about people's perceptions and attitudes toward former offenders. In this study, the researcher sought to examine the role conviction of a crime by the respondent, the respondent's relatives or a close non relative played in participant's perception of whether a former offender should be given the opportunity for employment. Participants were 191 undergraduate students at a mid-sized university in Central Pennsylvania. A chi square test was used to analyze the data. Results showed that responses from participants with a relative and those without a relative convicted of a crime did not differ significantly in terms of employment opportunity, but a chi square analysis indicated a significant effect for participant conviction on perception of employability. Moreover, there was a negative correlation between the degree of closeness to a non-relative and perceived employment opportunities.

Introduction

Individuals of color, especially men of color, are significantly more likely to be incarcerated. Additionally, recidivism is the norm rather than the exception. Also, recidivism is significantly reduced when the ex-offender can find gainful, but non-menial employment. When it comes to jobs, employers are very apprehensive to hire a criminal. In the current economy, it is imperative for almost all Americans to be employed. The job market is competitive and unemployment rates were found to be approximately 8% in 2013 by the U.S Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2013). Those without a criminal history have found it very difficult to find employment. It follows that those with a criminal background fare worse than other applicants. This is because almost all job applications ask whether the applicant has ever been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor. Applicants who indicate having a criminal record are less likely to be considered for employment. Albright and Denq (1996) found that out of 83 of 300



employers surveyed in their study, only 12% agreed to hire an ex-offender over other applicants.

In this study, the researcher sought to examine the role conviction of a crime by the respondent, the respondent's relatives or a close non relative played in participant's perception of whether a former offender should be given the opportunity for employment. Research suggests that having knowledge on a topic influences one's willingness to support that area (Dow, 1967). In a study conducted by Dow (1967), the researcher hypothesized that the public's attitude toward the offender is a function of their level of identification. In other words, the public's view of offenders depends on how much they are able to relate to the offender. A total of 549 college students from an Ivy League school and a state university were assessed using a survey. Students were asked to rank eight conditions based on their level of empathy, sympathy, knowledge and willingness to allocate limited financial resources (see Appendix).

The researcher expected to find that students with a low level of identification toward offenders would be consistent with the public's negative attitude toward the offender. Results showed that items ranked first and last in one section tended to be ranked the same in the other, while in the middle ranks the relationship was less clear. For example, questions related to criminality tended to be ranked last in all four sections. These findings are consistent with the original contention, that the ability to identify with the offender has an impact on willingness to allocate resources to research in criminality.

A study conducted by Swanson, Langfitt-Reese and Bond (2012) sought to examine employer hiring decisions in regards to applicants with felony convictions. Researchers enlisted the help of 12 employment specialists to interview 128 employers from nine states. Employers were asked questions on the basis of previous hiring decisions by type of conviction, reasons why they hired the applicant, their company's policy for hiring applicants with convictions, and hiring for specific positions. Results showed that 81 employers (63%) hired a former offender who had at least one felony conviction. Thirty-one employers reported that they hired the offender because they had the qualifications to do the job; thirteen said they had a mutual person in common, and eleven said they believed the person had changed. Of those who responded, forty



employers said they did not take the position applied for into consideration. Thirty-six employers said they were more likely to hire for the dock area or loading and unloading trucks. This finding is consistent with the idea that even though offenders were hired, they were considered for menial work.

When it comes to jobs, employers are very apprehensive to hire a criminal. This is suggested in the study conducted by Holzer (1996). Results found that close to two thirds of employers indicated more willingness to hire someone on welfare and someone with minimal work experience than a former offender. This finding supports the reluctance employers have to hiring ex-offenders. Another point to ponder is that the general scheme for reasons why employers hire offenders is based on a reason that in some way minimizes their criminal record.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between conviction of a crime and perceived employment opportunities. The first hypothesis was that students who were convicted of a crime would be more likely to indicate criminal history as a nonfactor in terms of employment opportunity. The second hypothesis was that students who had a family member convicted of a crime would be more likely to rate criminal record as a nonfactor in employment opportunities. The third hypothesis was that students who indicated having a nonrelative would be more likely to view criminal history as a nonfactor in employment opportunities. The fourth hypothesis was that students who had no criminal history in all three areas (respondent, relative, and nonrelative) would indicate that a criminal history should impact employment opportunities for the offender. The rationale for this hypothesis is that students will be more willing to be lenient in their views of offenders and employment if criminality is relevant in their lives through someone they know. In contrast, students who do not have a criminal history or someone in their lives with a criminal history will be less likely to be lenient. This study is important because the more we know about employment bias, the more we can focus on modification of the public's attitude toward African American offenders. The data from this study will help in reducing recidivism among people of color and reduce the negative attitudes.



Method

Participants

The participants were 191 undergraduate students at a mid-sized public university in Central Pennsylvania. Ninety-six participants were male, ninety-three female, and two did not provide a response. Students were recruited from introductory level courses in Wellness, History, English, and Psychology. The data consisted of 60.7% freshman, 25.1% sophomores, 6.8% juniors, 5.2% seniors, and 2.1% did not answer.

Materials

The materials were a consent form and a questionnaire created by the experimenter. The beginning of the survey gathered information concerning the participants' age, gender, academic major, and class standing. The second part asked the participants to indicate whether they, a relative, or a close non-relative had ever been convicted of a crime or served time in prison. They were also asked to indicate the specific crime and the amount of time served in prison. Lastly, participants were asked if conviction of a crime or time in prison should affect employment opportunities (see Appendix A). The questionnaire included forced-choice, short answer, and open-ended questions.

Procedure

The researcher contacted professors and asked to collect data from their students. The researcher went to classes and explained the purpose of the present study. Students were given a consent form and asked to sign their name after they read the form and agreed to the terms and conditions. Once the participants handed in their consent forms, the researcher put the forms in an envelope to keep them separate from the questionnaires. The purpose of this was to ensure that the participants' data would not be linked to their consent forms to ensure confidentiality. Students were given a copy of the questionnaire and took an average of 5 minutes to fill one out. The participants then handed in their completed survey to the experimenter and the survey was placed in a box with other completed surveys. It took nine days to collect data on 191 participants.



Data Analysis

Chi-square analyses were performed, as the data sets and variables represented were nominal-level data. Additionally, a Pearson-product correlation was performed to determine if there was a correlation between the degree of closeness of a non-relative was related to whether the participants thought that these individual should be employed, not employed or it should be conditional.

Results

A chi square analysis indicated a significant effect for participant conviction on perception of employability. Fifteen participants indicated that they had been convicted of a misdemeanor and/or felony. Of those fifteen, 12 reported that criminal history should not be considered for employment opportunities. There was not a significant difference in perception of employability based on whether or not a relative had been convicted of a crime. Conversely, there was a significant relationship between the closeness of the relationship with a non-relative and the perception of employability. There was a negative correlation with the closeness of the relationship and the perception of employability.

Participants convicted of a crime showed to be more lenient in their decision to include criminal record for employment as hypothesized. Having a family member, no matter the relationship, did not play a significant role in employability. The results indicate that participants who were closer to a non relative were more likely to oppose criminal history in employment opportunities than someone who was not as close with a non relative. In this case, participants' identification did play a significant role in their decision to include a criminal record in terms of employment. As closeness decreased, the likelihood of being opposed to employment increased.

Discussion

This study suggests that the perception of employability is only impacted when the respondent has been convicted themselves. This finding could have been because respondents could relate to employment bias due to their criminal history. Therefore, respondents were able to empathize and be more lenient in terms of considering criminal record in hiring decision. However, it should be noted that only 15 of the



participants had been convicted of a crime. The low number of participants with criminal histories could be due to the fact that all participants were college students.

The relative most commonly indicated as convicted of a crime was a cousin. Conviction of nonrelatives may not have shown an impact because of the wide variation in closeness to the respondent. This is supported by the correlation found.



Appendix A

Questionnaire

Age: _____

Male ___ Female ___

Academic Major:_____

Class Standing:

Freshman (0--30) ___

Sophomore (31-60 credits) ___

Junior (61-90 credits) ___

Senior (91+) _____

1. I have been convicted of a crime.

Yes _____

No _____

If yes,

Have you been convicted of a felony_____

Have you been convicted of a misdemeanor_____

Please list the crime(s)?_____

Should this impact a potential employer hiring you?

Yes_____

No_____

It depends on the job_____



Explain: _____

2. Did you serve time in prison as a result of your conviction?
Yes _____ No _____ How long? _____

Should this impact a potential employer hiring you?
Yes _____ No _____

It depends on the job _____

Explain: _____

3. Has a member of you family ever been convicted of a crime
Yes _____ No _____

If yes,

Were they convicted of a felony _____

Were they convicted of a misdemeanor _____



Please list the crime(s)? _____

Should this impact a potential employer hiring them?

Yes _____ No _____

It depends on the job _____

Explain: _____

4. Did they serve time in prison as a result of their conviction?
Yes _____ No _____ How long? _____

Should this impact a potential employer hiring them?
Yes _____ No _____

It depends on the job _____

Explain: _____

5. What was their relationship to you (mother, father, brother etc.) _____

6.. Has anyone you know, but not a relative, ever been convicted of a crime.

Yes _____ No _____

If yes,



Were they convicted of a felony_____

Were they convicted of a misdemeanor_____

Please _____ list _____ the
crime(s)?_____

Should _____ did _____ impact _____ a _____ potential _____ employer _____ hiring _____ them?

Yes_____ No_____

It depends on the job_____

Explain:_____

7. Did they serve time in prison as a result of their conviction
Yes_____ No_____ How long?_____

Should _____ did _____ impact _____ a _____ potential _____ employer _____ hiring _____ them?

Yes_____ No_____

It depends on the job_____

Explain:_____



How close were you to this person? Please indicate by circling the appropriate number how close you were to this person on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is just a mere acquaintance and 10 is your very best friend or someone you with which you has a close romantic relationship.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Thank you!

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Former Offender and Employment Biases

Researcher: Gloria Enyondo (cell phone number 267-339-1700)

In order to participate in this research study, it is necessary that you give your informed consent. By signing this informed consent statement you are indicating that you understand the nature of the research study and your role in that research and that you agree to participate in the research. Please consider the following points before signing:

- I understand that I am participating in research;
- I understand that my identity will **not** be linked with my data, and that all



information I provide will remain confidential;

- I understand that I will be provided with an explanation of the research in which I participated and be given the name and telephone number of an individual to contact if I have questions about the research. In addition, I understand that I may contact Dr. Rita Smith-Wade-El, Professor of psychology, at 717-872-3090 or the researcher if I have questions concerning my rights as a participant in psychological research or to report a research-related injury.
- I understand that participation in research is not required, is voluntary, and that, after any individual research project has begun, I may refuse to participate further without penalty.

By signing this form I am stating that I am over 18 years of age, and that I understand the above information and consent to participate in this study being conducted at Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

Signature: _____

Today's Date: _____
(of participant)

Print your First Name and Last Name: _____

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