



For Immediate Release
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Study Confirms That Finding Work For Ex-Offenders Is Tough But Not Impossible

Iowa City, Iowa – Persons released from prison face tremendous barriers to employment, according to results of a recent survey by economic development policy students at the University of Iowa. The percentage of Eastern Iowa businesses that automatically disqualify persons with a history of criminal conviction ranges from 25 percent for a record of operating a vehicle while intoxicated to 80 percent for a violent crime, the students found.

“An employer’s aversion attenuates over time,” said Brenda Dodge, Operations Director of the Iowa City Workforce Center - IowaWorks. “Many more companies will hire a person released from prison 10 years ago than the number willing to hire a person released within the last year. Unfortunately, the recidivism rate to prison is very high, especially within the first three years. This means that the job of the newly released ex-offender is to be focused on gaining some type of employment. It is difficult but not impossible. Employers are looking for accountable and skilled employees and this can be learned and honed within the prison walls,” she said.

The Iowa City IowaWorks Center mailed invitations to participate in the students’ on-line survey to 5 percent of the business establishments randomly selected from the Cedar Rapids-Iowa City laborshed. Seventy area employers completed the survey between March 25 and April 15. In addition to eliciting the attitudes and barriers toward hiring ex-offenders, the 32 question survey asked participants whether interventions can increase their willingness to hire a person with a record of felony conviction.

For example, 47 companies indicated they would value references from a job club when making hiring decisions. Only 13 business establishments responded that a job club reference would not affect their willingness to hire a qualified applicant. Two employers indicated that the reference would significantly increase their willingness.

These results are important to the Hubbub Job Club, which requested the study. Job clubs assist job seekers with encouragement, opportunities to practice interviewing skills, and feedback necessary to improve chances of success in what can otherwise be a lonely and humiliating experience. The Hubbub Job Club is unique because it was started by men incarcerated at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center who continue to manage it.

“The barriers to employment are daunting for a person with a criminal past,” said Richard Funderburg, assistant professor of urban and regional planning at UI who teaches economic development policy and advises the job club. “The men gained hope in learning that employers value their job club efforts as they value other workforce interventions such as the Career Readiness Certificate and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit,” he said.

Job clubs provide unemployed persons a network that is increasingly necessary to gain advantage in competitive labor markets and they have long been used by highly skilled job seekers with great success. The Hubbub Job Club meets 5-6 p.m. each Thursday evening at the prison in Coralville and the founders are planning a second meeting location for the job club outside the prison’s walls to benefit job seekers of every type throughout the community.

The University of Iowa, IowaWorks and the prison system will continue to find ways to partner to upskill, educate and employ persons with criminal records that present barriers to employment.

For additional information, contact Brenda Dodge at (319) 351-1035 or Richard Funderburg at (319) 335-0036. Iowa Workforce Development provides a number of services 24/7 online at www.iowaworkforce.org.

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