

The Negative Influence of Stigma on Offender Rehabilitation and Society's Role in Destigmatisation

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Introduction

Stigma is a typically negative stereotype or attitude held by an individual or a group towards a collective demographic (American Psychological Association, 2018). Whilst stigma is a useful cognitive process for rapid decision-making (Richman and Lattaner, 2014), it more often breeds unfair judgement and treatment of specific groups. Throughout history, people have wrongly faced negative stigma based on skin colour, gender, sexuality, disability, and more. These negative stereotypes are often assigned to people with specific characteristics that some may regard as physically, socially, or mentally divergent to “social norms” and can lead to tangible effects such as cultural disapproval or ostracism (Bell and DeWall, 2021). In more severe cases, stigma invites unjust discrimination which has severely harmful effects on the stigmatised demographic (Liamputtong and Rice, 2021).

One of the largest yet mostly overlooked demographics affected by the negative influence of stigma is people with criminal records. In 2022, reoffending rates rose 26.4% (Ministry of Defence, 2024).

While this increase may be influenced by multiple factors, it reinforces the importance of continuing to evaluate offender rehabilitation approaches.

Whilst a multitude of research explores how individual factors influence one’s offending proclivity, extrinsic factors can also greatly influence someone’s offending rate, and each of these factors must be considered.

This literature review will explore research into different mediums that affect stigmatisation of ex-offenders; what causes stigmatisation and how it affects recidivism, as well as strategies to overcome and diminish stigmatisation such as conversation, education and training, and broader legislation change.

This exploration is crucial to adopt a collectivist approach towards offender reintegration and to understand the role stakeholders can play in reducing stigmatisation of offenders to improve rehabilitation efforts.

Causes of recidivism and the role of stigma

As seen in the Ministry of Defence's (2024) report, recidivism is increasing. One of the most significant factors behind recidivism is financial strain.

Leaving prison, ex-offenders are faced with more financial setbacks than the average person through increased insurance rates (Unlock, n.d), decreased chances of stable employment (Rovira, 2024), and the complex financial instability acquired from time in prison: poor credit history, inability to pay debt whilst in prison, loss of benefits whilst incarcerated, and much more (Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

Dunn (2023) revealed a positive correlation between levels of poverty and the number of crimes committed across all categories such as homicide, robbery and domestic violence. Re-shifting the focus from the individual offenders to systemic issues encourages a more compassionate perspective by acknowledging that multiple extraneous variables can affect someone's likelihood of reoffending.

An offender's expectation of stigmatisation upon release will also influence one's journey to desistance.

A wealth of research has revealed that prisoners expecting to face a high rate of stigma when re-entering the world were significantly more likely to reoffend (Moore et al., 2016).

However, one's own interpretation of stigma can also influence recidivism through the "self-fulfilling prophecy".

Merton's (1948, as cited by Almadi, 2022) definition of the self-fulfilling prophecy states that "The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true".

This highlights how continuous incorrect labelling can eventually lead to someone adapting their behaviour to fit this pre-conceived notion. In other words, if society can only view you as an offender, you may as well be an offender. This emphasises the need to create a welcoming attitude towards prison leavers. Eliminating the stigma around ex-offenders may reverse anxiety and inhibit destructive behaviours of prison leavers once they are released, leading to a smoother reintegration into their respective communities.

The role of the media

Due to the ubiquitous presence of stigma in both the working and social world, action is needed to challenge society's stigmas on a large scale. A key influence in modern society on the way the public views the world is media portrayal.

Media portrayal of ex-offenders and various other groups can shape public opinion around them (Milićević & Drndarević. 2024), which, when negative, can create a rejecting atmosphere for ex-offenders during their reintegration.

The news and media have been shown to sensationalise and perpetuate a negative image of offenders as a threat to society with a high likelihood of reoffending (Pager, 2007). Stelzmann, Jahnke and Kuhle (2022) conducted focus groups with people with paedophilic disorder in Germany and found that the media's consistent negative portrayal prevents those affected from seeking support before they have offended.

This shows the striking, detrimental influence that stigmatisation has on offending.

How can the media shift the narrative to prevent stigmatisation of offenders?

A potentially highly effective method is amplifying lived experience.

Companies such as Working Chance work alongside governmental bodies including the Ministry of Justice to interview people with criminal records, documenting and publicising their path to employment and rehabilitation (Working Chance. 2024; Ministry of Justice. 2023).

These interviews are widely accessible, enabling most communities to engage with this information.

Public speaking events are another avenue for amplifying the voices of people with lived experience. Leveraging the influence of platforms such as TEDx allows individuals to share their stories of successful paths to reintegration and rehabilitation.

Similarly, the use of podcasts, TV shows, films and books can all be produced to educate on real experiences of people that have offended.

The vast array of media outlets could all be analysed to identify their role in stigma perpetuation or cessation.

By evoking empathy among the public, this may be reflected in their actions towards ex-offenders in daily life, as they recognise the need of supporting their rehabilitation. Employers may become more likely to view a potential employee for their unique set of skills as opposed to their criminal record.

Society might empathise with someone's experiences, rather than ostracising them. This is key in allowing someone to be viewed as a human being rather than an offender, and to feel socially accepted on their journey to desistance.

The role of education and training

Education and training are also necessary for achieving a deeper level of de-stigmatisation. Beyond understanding a prison leaver's experiences and sympathising with them, increased knowledge is needed on how ex-offenders can be supported on an individual and social level.

Programmes like the Future Skills Programme, funded by UK government, teach companies how to set up training programs and schemes for prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

These schemes work similarly to company "graduate schemes". Whilst in prison they will work a prison job, gaining the necessary experience needed to acquire a job the company is offering.

Participants in the programme will then have at least a guaranteed interview with the company once they are released (Fulcrum, 2024). This program has been implemented by 9 UK based companies already and is thought to have supported 2200 prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

The United States-based Centre for Employment Opportunities (C.E.O.) is another example of how employers can be trained to scout for and accommodate ex-offenders as employees. C.E.O. runs a consulting department in which they consult companies with a focus on how they can reform their recruitment practices and encourage more fair and efficient hiring processes.



C.E.O makes various suggestions and offers training programmes for human resource workers on how to recruit, support, and develop ex-offenders as valued employees, while also challenging stigmas that hiring departments and companies may hold.

Additionally, they provide training and fund educational opportunities for individuals with criminal records, increasing the number of skilled and qualified candidates available to companies they work with to recruit – acting as somewhat of a pipeline to employment (Center for Employment Opportunities, 2020).

Consulting companies that evaluate organisations' recruitment practices and educate their clients on the benefits of hiring ex-offenders could increase employment opportunities for people with criminal records.

To allow employers to realise the unique benefits that hiring ex-offenders can offer, research must be conducted on how companies who recruit ex-offenders view their employees.

Previous studies such as the 2021 “Getting Talent back to Work” report (Society for Human Resource Management; Charles Koch Institute, 2021) analysed responses from business owners and human resource professionals in the United States to

employees in areas such as dependability and job performance.

Funding and executing research that demonstrates the value of hiring ex-offenders in other organisations will persuade more companies to follow suit and encourage governments and policymakers to invest in more programmes that support ex-offenders into employment in the future.

Improving education and training for the ex-offenders themselves may also reduce the effects of stigmatisation. Behan (2021) conducted a literature review into education in prisons and found that education consistently enables someone to be better equipped for their release from prison due to improved self-perception, confidence, and a greater sense of identity. Once ex-offenders exit prison with these newly acquired skills, they are better placed to secure jobs and develop relationships within their communities. Collaborations between rehabilitative organisations and companies devoted to training prison leavers can lead to an increased number of successfully rehabilitated and employed individuals (Ministry of Justice. 2019).

Working with multiple reputable companies can also bolster the CVs and reputation of prisoners by evidencing that they are familiar with working environments and would be able to conduct themselves appropriately.

Government legislation

Government initiatives that support ex-offenders demonstrate an institutional commitment to rehabilitation, which may help foster hope and de-stigmatisation of ex-offenders in the public's eyes. Ways in which the government has put these methods into practice most recently include the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022) and the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (Ministry of Justice et al., 2023) which permits prison leavers to no longer disclose their criminal records seven years after the end of their sentence. This legal amendment instantly affected one hundred and twenty-five thousand criminal record holders (Ministry of Justice et al. 2023), leaving them significantly more able to find jobs and stable employment without the risks or shame of disclosing an offence for which they have served their time. These legislative changes forge the potential to form an inclusive and accepting society in which individuals with criminal records are not continually persecuted after their sentence is served. The recent amendments have enabled thousands of individuals to seek a second chance at life and employment, allowing them to prove to society that they want to meaningfully contribute.

Another example of the government implementing initiatives to improve the lives and opportunities of ex-offenders is through the “Ban the box” campaign.

This campaign was introduced in 2016 by the civil service and aims to encourage employers to omit the “do you hold a criminal record” box to tick from their employment application forms (McNeil & Barnes, 2016). This programme is not mandatory but is a campaign that encourages companies to consider whether admission of criminal record on application is necessary.

The aim of this campaign is to limit the amount of criminal record holders from being immediately rejected upon applying for a job without even presenting to their employer the marketable skills they have acquired.

Ideally this programme allows employers to get to know the person without any implicit biases, and to address each person based on their individual skills.

To date, over 200 employers have adopted the Ban the Box initiative (Business in the Community, 2024), releasing over one million job opportunities to a whole new employee market.

This programme found that applicants who did not disclose their criminal records were significantly more likely to secure job interviews than their counterparts who disclosed their criminal records (Rovira, 2024). Encouraging employers to consider hiring prison leavers may positively influence their perceptions of this group, as well as open their eyes to some of the unique elements and characteristics ex-offenders may bring to the workplace.

Strategies to combat stigma

To prevent this spread of negative stereotypes, as well as the rise of recidivism, strategies must be put in place to address the public's fears and concerns about ex-offenders in society. As touched on in the previous section, integrating service users into employment spaces will reduce stigma. Utilising time in prison to develop skills also gives prisoners purposeful activity whilst serving their sentence, which has been widely proven to reduce violence amongst prisoners (Stephenson, Leaman, O'Moore, Tran & Plugge, 2021).

Regarding stigma, prisoners becoming employed once leaving prison can forge the image that they are not the dangerous, unproductive people that society has categorised them as. Instead, it can help reshape public narratives by demonstrating that someone who has been in prison is capable of making valuable contributions in the workplace. While demonstrating the roles ex-offenders can play in society once reformed, one of the most crucial elements to a successful rehabilitation program is an accepting environment to return to.

For this, the public must be made aware of their successes and progress and encouraged to view prison leavers through a less negative lens.

Campaigning and media portrayal can be included in all organisations looking to reduce stigma by evidencing their positive view of ex-offenders and using their platforms to share compelling information as part of their efforts to advocate for prison leavers.

Majeed et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of effective approaches to reduce stigma towards prison populations and found from 16 studies and a combined total of 8815 participants that anti-stigma interventions are highly effective in changing attitudes towards people with incarceration experience but found particularly strong results for “myth busting”.

This shows the importance of presenting true information and addressing false conceptions, and the transformative effect this can have on societal acceptance of people with experience of the criminal justice system.

Conclusion

To conclude, the expansive and enduring stigmas people with criminal records face is one of the most significant reasons behind the struggle and hardships ex-offenders encounter when attempting to reintegrate themselves back into society, employment and everyday life. Limited housing, job opportunities and poverty all contribute to higher chances of recidivism, so it becomes increasingly clear with increasing annual crime rates that actions need to be taken against detrimental stereotypes and stigmas.

To effectively dismantle these stigmas and stereotypes it is essential to take a multi-faceted approach to the matter. Through a combination of informing, educating, and reframing the view on ex-offenders through media outlets such as the news, social media and influential discussions and debates broadcasted online such as TedTalks, the public are informed of more realistic interpretations of those with lived experienced of the criminal justice system. Sharing experiences of real people with convictions and how they succeeded in becoming members of society, and debunking negative stereotypes, has the ability to evoke empathy and encourage society to be more involved in rehabilitation. Combining this with educational programmes for offenders both in and outside of prisons and the creation of a prison-to-work pipeline can eventually contribute to reforming employers' viewpoints on workers with criminal records and open their minds to the possibility that hiring ex-offenders is not the risk they once believed it to be.

Finally, and most essentially, government reform and legislation are required. Reviews of legislation paving an easier path into the working world for people with criminal records, and publicising these changes, can help shift the public's view on ex-offenders to a more positive and hopeful outlook. It can also aid in restoring financial independence, enabling someone to break out of the cycle of poverty and subsequently the cycle of reoffending.

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