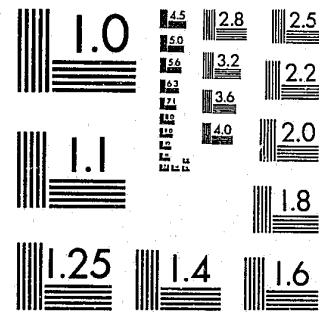


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Some Myths About the Employment Problems of Young Offenders

BY MARK R. WIEDERANDERS, Ph.D.
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RECENT reports of significant statistical relationships between ex-offender employment and parole success (Brenner, 1976; Cook, 1975; Glaser, 1978; Pritchard, 1979; Stephens & Sanders, 1978) suggest that more emphasis should be placed on correctional programs to train offenders for employment. Unfortunately, there are few encouraging leads into which types of training programs lead to employment after release from incarceration. A review of the literature on the effectiveness of standard vocational training programs (Cook, 1975) concluded that such programs had little or no effect on observable measures of ex-offender employment.

One optimistic interpretation of this apparent lack of effectiveness is that, although technical job skills might have been taught well, offenders often lack the general skills needed to find and keep any kind of job. Accordingly, many correctional systems now teach "employability" skills to bridge the gap between technical skills and actual employment. Although variously labeled, employability courses usually include training in how to look for jobs, how to match skills and interests to available job opportunities, how to conduct oneself in job interviews, and similar topics. Often, these courses include content secondarily related to jobs, such as how to balance a checkbook and how to read bus schedules.

The present discussion will examine evidence of an unfortunate discrepancy between basic, on-the-streets needs of young ex-offenders related to finding and keeping jobs and the topics that are usually taught in formal employability courses. By taking an argumentative position that such a discrepancy exists, perhaps more research and especially more curriculum development in this area will be stimulated.

The California Youth Authority (CYA) in 1976 began a research-and-development project that would, first, identify the types of "job survival skill" problems that were most critically lacking among parolees and second, develop and field-test a curriculum to teach these skills to wards at CYA facilities. This project was undertaken because

evidence suggested that general attitudes, habits, and skills that go with being a worker, regardless of occupation, are at least as important to job success as are technical skills to perform specific jobs (Dickover, Maynard, and Painter, 1971; National Committee on Children and Youth, 1971; McCormick, 1965).

A detailed description of this project's findings and products is reported elsewhere (Wiederanders, 1978a; Stewart & Colby, 1977). While working on the project, the writer frequently corresponded and talked with those in other agencies and firms who were providing employability training to delinquents or who were developing curriculum for others to use. His impression was that there were certain commonly shared beliefs, among trainers and curriculum writers alike, that were incorrect and that resulted in emphasizing the wrong issues in the classroom. These beliefs were: (1) a large percentage of ex-offenders do not or cannot find jobs; (2) the most critical topics to address in pre-employment training of young offenders are how to seek and apply for jobs; and (3) young ex-offenders quit jobs primarily because of the low pay they receive. Because of the intense recent interest in bettering employment rates of ex-offenders and of hard-to-employ youth in general, a separate analysis of the CYA findings directed toward testing these shared beliefs is presented here.

Method

In the first, or needs-assessment, phase of the project, structured interviews were administered to a representative sample of CYA parolees. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain self-reported reasons for successes and failures in finding and keeping jobs. Then, curriculum was designed to provide training in the skill-areas that analysis of the interviews showed to be most related to success in the parolee job world.

A sample of 145 parolees was selected randomly from the caseloads of parole offices in four California cities. These cities were selected after carefully

studying demographic characteristics of all CYA parolees. Sampling from within these cities simulated a statewide sampling in terms of demographics of respondents. Characteristics of the sample closely resembled internally kept data concerning all CYA parolees. Mean age was 19.7 years, with a range of 16 to 24; ethnicity was 34 percent white, 38 percent black, 23 percent Spanish-surnamed, and 5 percent other; committing offenses included homicide (3%), assault (10%), sex offenses (4%), robbery (22%), burglary (26%), narcotics (4%), and 10 percent other assorted crimes.

The economic backgrounds of respondents were largely poor or working class. Thirty-nine percent of the parolees' families had received some form of public assistance in the past, and most parents' jobs were either in semiskilled (29%) or unskilled (23%) occupations.

The structured interview, available elsewhere (Wiederanders, 1978a), asked for job histories, together with self-reported reasons for job separations, losses, and failed jobseeking efforts. The schedule was designed to collect parolees' experiences in planning careers, locating job openings, applying for jobs, interviewing for jobs, getting along with co-workers and supervisors, and some miscellaneous areas such as grooming and handling personal finances.

Members of the sample were interviewed individually in private CYA offices. Anonymity of responses was promised, and participants were paid \$5.00 for their participation. Duration of interviews was between 30-45 minutes.

Results and Discussion

From the many results that were used in constructing the training modules (Wiederanders, 1978a), those relevant to the three possibly "mythical" statements will be described.

Regarding the proposition that a large percentage of ex-offenders cannot find jobs, 95.8 percent (139) of respondents had held at least one job during their first 12 months on parole. After 1 month on parole, 64.8 percent of respondents had found a job, while 74.5 percent had worked after 2 months on parole. At the 4-month point, the percentage of those who had found at least one job approached 90 percent. It simply was not true that a large or even moderate percentage of these young offenders "could not find jobs." Other studies (Glaser, 1964; Evans, 1968) have reported similarly high or even higher percentages of ex-offenders who found at least one job soon after incarceration.

Although the proportion of ex-offenders who find a job is high, point-in-time employment rates of ex-offenders are low. Only 55 percent in the CYA sample were actually working at 4 months after release from incarceration, and employment rates among ex-offenders in other areas and time periods have consistently been low (Pownall, 1969).

The main reason for low employment rates among ex-offenders is not failure to find jobs but failure to keep them. The modal job of respondents lasted less than 2 months while the median job lasted only 2.8 months. Similar statistics have been obtained in other samples. For example, in the Evans (1968) sample of adult Federal parolees the modal job lasted 2 months and the median job 4 months. A project in Georgia to provide job placements and financial aid to prison releasees (Stephens and Sanders, 1978) resulted in many jobs obtained, but frequent job losses; at no point in time were more than 50 percent of the sample employed.

Returning to the data from the CYA study, 30.6 percent of respondents had lost their jobs due to unfavorable dismissals. The remainder had either quit or been "laid off" due to lack of work to perform, or other neutral reason. Reasons for quitting, which will be discussed in more detail below, also reflected many problems on the job with co-workers, work habits, bosses, and money management.

In contrast to these findings are the available curricula to teach pre-employment skills to young people. If these materials accurately reflect what professionals believe are the pre-employment training needs of urban youth, then professionals strongly believe that how to seek and apply for jobs is the most critical topic to address. In one phase of the CYA project, 180 nationally known publishers were solicited to find any materials that would be appropriate to teach job survival to young people. (This procedure and the subsequent writing of the training modules were conducted by the American Institute for Research in Palo Alto, California.)

The solicitation was worded broadly, so that any materials related to job finding and job keeping would be sent for examination. Of the numerous sets of sample materials that were sent, 48 were judged appropriate to the reading level (8.0 or below) of the bulk of the CYA population. Only 29.2 percent (14) of these 48 sets addressed any issues related to job maintenance. Of the 14 that did, only four devoted half or more of the text or other materials (tape cassettes, filmstrips, etc.) to

job retention skills.

In these materials, the contrast between coverage of job seeking vs. job keeping topics was qualitative as well as quantitative. The materials sent by publishers concerning job findings were very complex and covered every conceivable step in the process of securing employment. Topics such as how to locate job openings, how to read want-ads, how to arrange personal job interviews, how to interview for jobs, how to complete job applications, and even how to construct resumes were dealt with in far greater detail than were job-keeping topics. Save for a few notable exceptions, job-keeping topics were treated peremptorily, with few suggested class exercises.

Two other findings from the CYA interviews suggest that the usual curricular emphasis placed on job finding is unwarranted. First, 22 percent of respondents reported that they had not been required to fill out any formal job application to obtain their jobs. Also, 47.6 percent of jobs were located using family or friends (rather than employment services, want ads, self-initiated contacts, or other sources). These data suggest that job finding was frequently a very informal process for these youth, and that teaching similar populations elaborate strategies of job finding is a questionable venture at best.

The third statement which is often repeated in discussions of young offenders is that they will not work for low wages. However, of the 95 CYA respondents who had voluntarily quit a job, only 12 (12.6%) said that they had quit because of low pay. This was the fourth-most-common reason. "Didn't like the work" and "Couldn't tolerate bosses or co-workers" were tied for most frequently offered reason (18 responses each, or 19.0%). Third came "Couldn't conform to the work schedule" (14 responses, or 14.7%). The remaining 33 quit for various reasons: to take a better job (9); because they moved (6); to return to school (4); because of transportation problems (2); and miscellaneous reasons (12). Similarly, an analysis of reasons for quitting in a sample of adult Federal parolees (Cook, 1975) showed that low pay was the third most common reason out of five content categories.

The relatively small percentage of CYA parolees who quit because of dissatisfaction with wages is surprising, since by objective standards the wages were low. The mean and median wages (\$2.98 and \$2.50 respectively) were close to the Federal minimum wage of 1977 (\$2.50) when the interviews were given.

These data point to an annoying conclusion: that

young, urban ex-offenders have been poorly served by concepts of current employability training. Typical employability curricula promote the idea that youthful vocational development is or should be a very rational process involving first an examination of career options, personal values and skills, then getting appropriate training, and then mounting a careful and sophisticated job search. This rational process culminates in landing a suitable job. Unfortunately, the vocational development of CYA youth and probably that of other young offender populations seldom happens that way.

An example from CYA project files typifies the pattern of development in a young male ex-offender: Upon release from incarceration, the person is taken by a friend to his workplace, a car-wash, where help is wanted. The youth is put to work that day and is given an application blank to fill out and bring back the next day. He fills out the form at home, with the help of an older sibling. After a few weeks of work, he starts feuding with a co-worker over a loan of some money. Pressure mounts and, one day, the youth simply stops coming to work. After a few days of sitting idly at home, our example case goes out with friends, gets drunk and is eventually arrested for disturbing the peace and malicious mischief. After a few weeks in jail, remembering the brief satisfaction of having earned his own money, he vows to get another job and keep it. This time, he calls some older relatives and is told about job openings at a local heavy-machinery factory. He is given a try at a general cleanup job and meets a few workers there who have also "done time" but are now "clean." They help him with union paperwork and chat with him on lunch hours. Eventually, they urge him to enroll in part-time training to become a machinist. A year after parole, he enrolls and does well. He appears well on his way to become a full-time machinist and to have no more legal troubles.

Variations of this story, but not all with happy endings, are the norm in the interviews. Elaborate job-seeking skills are not needed to find the minimum wage, minimum skill jobs that are typical entries for this population. Frequently, youth are "tried out" for a day or two on the job in lieu of a job interview. Presenting resumes for these types of job openings is inappropriate if not somewhat ridiculous. But data suggest that these youth will work for low wages. The most important aspect of initial vocational development in young ex-offenders is survival on the job.

Training well spent would be in how to get along with or tolerate co-workers, how to hang on to an

unexciting job long enough for promotions or better opportunities for work to present themselves, how to use informal peer networks for support or to air gripes, and how to get on-the-job or part-time training for better employment when motivation for it develops. In the training modules developed for CYA use (Wiederanders, 1978a), at least half of the class hours were allotted to these survival issues. Unfortunately, the available materials to teach job maintenance skills were so paltry that filling half of the approximately 40 course hours on these topics was difficult. Further curriculum development work is needed from commercial publishers to allow practitioners to go much beyond a cursory class treatment of on-the-job survival topics.

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