



Arrests, recent life circumstances, and recurrent job loss for at-risk young men: An event-history analysis [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study used longitudinal data from 202 at-risk young men to examine effects of arrests, prior risk factors, and recent life circumstances on job loss across a 7-year period in early adulthood. Repeated failure-time continuous event-history analysis indicated that occurrence of job loss was primarily related to prior mental health problems, recent arrests, recent drug use, and recent being married/cohabitation. It is argued that long-term effects of criminal justice contact on employment outcomes should be understood in the context of (shared) prior risk factors and recent life circumstances.

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1. Introduction

Many contemporary discussions of how criminal activities may lead to subsequent success and failure in work careers have their roots in developmental theories of crime that consider employment problems to be a key factor linking past offending to future offending (Bushway, 1998). At least two processes have been posited to explain the link between crime and subsequent work outcomes, namely failure to build human and social capital (Hagan, 1993) and labeling effects (Becker, 1963). Although there are important differences in the underlying frameworks, the two processes are likely interrelated in many cases.

Building on Granovetter (1985, 1992), Hagan (1993) has posited that the process of “social or criminal embeddedness” during the late childhood and adolescent years (i.e., continuing engagement in delinquency, involvement of parents in crime, affiliation with delinquent peers) leaves delinquent youths without the necessary human and social capital (e.g., conventional local contacts or referral networks that could facilitate the transition into the labor market) to successfully participate in legal employment once they reach the adult years. This, in turn, increases the risk for subsequent engagement in criminal activities. Formal sanctions of criminal behavior, such as imprisonment, are posited to further contribute to this chain of effects because inmates become embedded even more firmly in criminal networks that lead away from opportunities for legal employment and reduce long-term prospects for stable employment and adequate earnings. Hagan (1993) also cautioned that the association between delinquency and later work outcomes will likely be spurious to some extent because of shared prior risk factors.

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Other scientists have particularly stressed the labeling and stigmatizing effects of contact with the criminal justice system, including a history of arrests, convictions, and incarceration, on later work outcomes (e.g., Becker, 1963). Sampson and Laub (1997) integrated such notions into their age-graded theory of informal social control and posited that contact with the criminal justice system as a consequence of prior criminal behavior is a key example of what they call the “process of cumulative disadvantage”. More specifically, they stated that formal labeling arising from contact with the criminal justice system causes employers to exclude adult ex-offenders from conventional employment opportunities and in this sense “mortgage” their future. Such exclusion leads to job instability (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993), which has been shown to increase subsequent adult offending (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1990).

The current study examined the effect of factors related to social and criminal embeddedness and to labeling or stigmatization on employment across a 7-year period from ages 23–24 to 29–30 years for men from predominantly lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds who had been studied since childhood (the Oregon Youth Study). Specifically, risk factors from childhood and adolescence, along with time-varying measures of recent life circumstances in early adulthood, were examined in multivariate event-history models predicting to job loss (including repeated job loss) across the early adult period. Whereas predictors from both theoretical perspectives were examined, competing hypotheses were not definitively tested because further measurement of mechanisms involved would have been required for such a test.

There is evidence supporting both of these theorized processes. Studies have shown that arrests, convictions, and incarcerations during adolescence and early adulthood have adverse consequences for later work outcomes, including income level, job stability, unemployment, and career pathways (e.g., Bushway, 1998; Freeman, 1991; Kerley, Benson, Lee, & Cullen, 2004; Needels, 1996; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Tanner, Davies, & O’Grady, 1999; Thornberry & Christenson, 1984; Western, 2002; Wiesner, Vondracek, Capaldi, & Porfeli, 2003), although these effects may not always be sustained over time (Grogger, 1995). For example, Bernburg and Krohn (2003) reported that the effect of official police intervention on later nonemployment was partially mediated by lower educational attainment. Regarding potential stigmatization effects, experimental studies and survey research have shown that many employers are reluctant to consider ex-offenders as potential employees (e.g., Boshier & Johnson, 1974; Buikhuisen & Dijksterhuis, 1971; Holzer, 1996; Pager, 2003), although the associations between conducting criminal background checks and actual hiring decisions seem to be more complex than one might expect (Stoll & Bushway, 2008). About 30–40% of employers actually check the criminal history records of their most recently hired employee (Holzer, 1996), and this proportion may be rising (Stoll & Bushway, 2008). These results suggest that labeling and stigmatization effects contribute to ex-offenders becoming entrapped in a deviant life style but are unlikely to be the only process accounting for the crime-work link.

1.1. Limitations of existing research

Studies of the effects of crime on employment failure have been limited by several factors. First, relatively few studies (for an exception, see Western, 2002) have adjusted the effects of criminal activity and criminal justice contact on later employment outcomes for shared risk factors that could render effects spurious in nature—such as low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990)—and for labor-market demand-side factors—such as job sector, type of occupation, and other job characteristics—that capture different opportunity structures for job separations and other work career outcomes. Failure to control for such factors makes it more difficult to disentangle the exact mechanisms that account for links between prior crime and later work outcomes. To some extent, this problem can be alleviated by statistically controlling for unobserved heterogeneity (see Bushway, 1998).

Second, even less attention has been given in empirical work to adjusting the effects of crime and criminal justice contact on later work outcomes for other relevant local life circumstances (Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995) that take place during the young-adult years, including changes in the family domain (e.g., marital status, parenthood) and individual behaviors (e.g., drug use). More recent sociological work has stressed the multiple interfaces between work and family life for many (though not all) contemporary young adults (e.g., Han & Moen, 1999; Osgood, Wayne, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005). Consideration of time-varying recent life circumstances also fits well with the age-graded theory of informal social control from Sampson and Laub (1997), (2005). Although its main focus is on the prediction of crime over the life course, both authors would likely agree that social ties during the young-adult years might promote stable work careers (or even act as turning points in work careers) above and beyond the effects of childhood propensity, thus representing competing influences. But as noted by Bushway (1998), time-varying recent life circumstances might also affect both criminal justice contact and employment outcomes, thus rendering the effect of criminal justice contact on later work outcomes spurious. Controlling for recent life circumstances is consequently important.

A third limitation is that a large proportion of the empirical work has focused on high-risk samples, such as releasees from prison and serious offenders (Piehl, 1998). This limits the generalizability of findings to other segments of the general population, including less serious offenders and community samples.

Fourth, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993), study designs have rarely allowed for a dynamic analysis of effects of crime and other hypothesized factors on the timing of employment events across several years. Further empirical work on all these issues is, consequently, much needed.

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