

READY OR NOT: EMPLOYMENT, RE-ENTRY AND THE  
LASTING EFFECTS OF STIGMA AFTER INCARCERATION

BY

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## Abstract

In this thesis I explore the how former prisoners experience the transition from incarceration to employment. Employment has been identified by researchers as an essential element in ex-prisoners' community re-entry process. However, the path to attaining employment after incarceration, particularly meaningful employment, remains complicated. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured longitudinal interviews with 24 parolees occurring over a three-year period, I seek to better understand the experiences of ex-prisoners as they attempt to find work. I aim to understand whether individuals are prepared to pursue employment immediately upon release from prison and the factors that impact their readiness, or lack thereof. Upon recognizing that individuals in the study tended to identify themselves as not ready for employment, I sought to understand why they were still expected to begin working using Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. I suggest that in many cases, attempting to manage one's stigmatized status slows individuals' return to work. As well, I suggest that the stigma associated with time spent incarcerated undermines individual credibility, and for this reason, participants' assertions that they do not feel ready to begin working are often not accepted.

*Keywords:* employment reintegration, community re-entry, work transition, desistance, parole, community corrections

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

For formerly incarcerated persons, the impact of incarceration is felt long after release. “Community reintegration,” a somewhat sterile and simplistic term given the often messy and complicated process it describes, requires releasees to address a multitude of competing needs. Upon release, an individual must tend to the conditions of their parole, while potentially balancing other needs such as finding housing and employment, reconnecting with family, friends, and other social connections, and addressing childcare needs, to name only a few. The social and economic obstacles that ex-prisoners typically face upon release have the potential to catalyze recidivism (Boryzycki & Baldry, 2003; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005). While some challenges individuals face upon release may have existed before incarceration, such as histories of abuse, disabilities, or mental illness, others are more directly related to the damaging effects incarceration can have on a person’s ability to return to the outside world (Borzycki, 2005).

In order to reintegrate into the community and remain in free society, ex-prisoners’ desistance from crime is essential. Desistance theorists maintain that some level of investment in the community, through employment or marriage, for example, encourages desistance from crime (Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle, & McPherson, 2004; Maruna & Toch, 2005; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2004), and that it serves as one of a number of “protective factors” which aid in desistance from criminal activity (Lösel & Farrington, 2012; Draine, Salzer, Culhane, & Hadley, 2002).

Employment, in many ways, is central to an individual’s success in the community, as it provides the financial resources required to attain housing and provide for oneself and

dependents (Petersilia, 2003). It can also be conducive to positive social interaction (Rossi, Berk, & Lenihan, 1980) and routine, which may prove stabilizing for former prisoners who find the lack of structure in the outside world jarring (Haney, 2003). Furthermore, employment can help former prisoners overcome the stigma of incarceration by demonstrating positive qualities and social worth as contributing members of society (Uggen, 2000). This is especially true of employment that highlights an individual's moral reform—for example, positions that focus on assisting others, such as a substance abuse counselling (Maruna, 2001). Employment helps to form a sense of identity (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, & Pollock, 2008; Uggen, 2000), which can be an essential task for former prisoners who, in some cases, must reconstruct their identity upon release to overcome the tenacious criminal label incarceration imparts.

While the benefits employment has on community re-entry are clear, the path to attaining employment after incarceration, particularly meaningful employment, is far more complicated. Broadly, this study sought to explore the barriers ex-prisoners faced upon attempting to find work after prison, as well as strategies they used that led to success. Upon analyzing in-depth, semi-structured, longitudinal interviews with releasees who were attempting to find work, questions arose about their levels of readiness as they were encouraged by their parole officers to pursue employment regardless of their level of preparedness, or lack thereof. : Consequently, this thesis is focused more specifically on three questions:

- (i) Are people ready to begin working immediately upon release from prison?
- (ii) Which factors impact their readiness?
- (iii) Why are individuals who identify themselves as not ready for employment still expected to begin working?

Through reflective thematic coding of interview transcripts, I attempt to use participants' words to lend some insight into these questions.

My thesis is comprised of six chapters. Chapter two provides a review of relevant literature surrounding employment reintegration post incarceration, as well as my theoretical framework. In chapter three, the methodological processes of how this data was collected and analyzed is outlined. Chapter four contains my findings, organized by key themes that emerged from the interview data. In chapter five, I discuss my findings as they relate to existing literature and examine how they can be understood in the context of Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. In chapter 6, I conclude my thesis by reviewing my research questions and discussing the implications of my findings for current parole and community reintegration practices.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews the broad body of scholarly literature detailing the process of community reintegration and employment reintegration after prison as well as the barriers that prevent some from doing so. I organize my review of the literature as follow: first, I discuss the concept of desistance—what exactly is desistance from crime and when does it happen? Next, I will review scholarly research discussing the relationship (or potential lack thereof) between employment and desistance. Continuing on, I will discuss the barriers ex-prisoners face finding employment, despite the potential benefits it may have for their desistance. I frame my study using Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma as it relates to the criminal record, and review the effects this stigma can have on an individual’s attempts to secure work. Finally, I will briefly outline the provided programming in Canadian federal institutions and the following capacity to produce releasees who are truly ready to re-enter the community.

#### Understanding Desistance

Laub and Sampson (2001) conceptualize desistance as an ongoing process of actively rejecting criminal activity and refer to the specific point-in-time at which the criminal activity ends as “termination.” The desistance process requires former prisoners to face a number of obstacles as they work to remain free of crime, and their response to these challenges will dictate the success and longevity of their life in the community (Gill, 1997; Scott, 2010). In this way, desistance from crime can be defined as “the causal process that supports the termination of offending,” and in particular, the individual’s maintained “state of non-offending” (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 11). Maruna and his colleagues (2009) draw on Lemert’s (1951) theory of

primary and secondary deviation to identify primary desistance as a lack of criminal activity and secondary desistance as a change in identity conducive to desistance. Thus, desistance in this sense is understood in two ways: (1) a lack of criminal activity, and (2) a change in identity.

In trying to understand why desistance occurs, scholars have indicated that desistance results from a combination of social factors and individual agency (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes & Muir, 2004; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008). While individual agency is central to a person's decision to desist from crime, it should always be considered in the context of the desister's socioeconomic conditions (Bottoms et al., 2004). For example, a person experiencing financial strain and a lack of housing or social support is likely to find it more difficult to desist from criminal activity than someone who is financially stable and able to live with a family member upon release.

Maruna (2001) explored desistance by comparing the narratives of former prisoners in Liverpool who remained actively involved in criminal behaviour with those who were desisting from crime and substance use. He found that the common narrative desisters used to describe their lives was very different from the one used by those still actively engaged in criminal activity. Desisters employed what Maruna (2001) termed a "redemption script," which situated the narrator's past criminal activity as being somehow out of their control and disconnected from their intrinsic sense of self, while also demonstrating their commitment to desistance. Individuals actively engaged in crime, conversely, used "condemnation scripts" which epitomized their own pessimistic viewpoints and perceived inability to change. Reflecting on his findings, Maruna asserts that for desistance to occur, former prisoners must construct an internal narrative for themselves in which their desistance from crime makes sense for their lives going forward. Their criminal past is not discounted, but is attributed to some extenuating factor that no longer applies

to them. Maruna's contribution aligns with the ideas of Laub and Sampson (2001) in that he also puts forth the idea that desistance is an ongoing maintenance process, necessitating maintained abstinence from crime "in the face of life's obstacles and frustrations, that is, when 'everything builds up' or one receives 'some slap in the face'" (p. 26).

### **Employment and Desistance**

This section of my literature review will focus on the relationship between employment and desistance, beginning with an acknowledgement of the scholarly disagreement regarding whether employment truly promotes desistance. Next, I will review the various ways employment has been found to have a positive impact on former prisoners, as well as arguments that posit the employment of ex-prisoners to be beneficial for the wider community. I will then discuss the expectation—in the form of a parole condition—for ex-prisoners to find work upon release. Following this section, I will review the literature documenting barriers former prisoners face as they attempt to find work.

Based on life-course theory, Sampson and Laub (1992, 1995) suggest that individuals are more likely to desist from crime as they age due to an increased investment in the community through marriage, employment, or the birth of children. Employment is often posed as an essential supporting element for ex-prisoners' desistance (e.g., Berg & Huebner, 2011; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013; Davis, Bahr, & Ward, 2012), although others question the causal direction of the relationship (e.g., Tripodi, Kim & Bender, 2010; Homant, 1984). In a Norwegian study of recidivist males, for example, authors found that those who attained employment had already desisted from crime before doing so, repositioning the directional association between finding employment and desistance (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014). Conversely, in a Canadian study of formerly federally incarcerated individuals, it was asserted that participants who found

employment in the community were almost three times less likely to return to crime than those who were unemployed (Nolan, Wilton, & Cousineau, 2014), although there remains the question of whether those who became employed had already desisted before doing so—their point of “termination” (Sampson & Laub, 2001) is unknown. In a study of former prisoners in the United States, Uggen (2000) similarly reported that participants over the age of 26 years old were less likely to reoffend if offered “even marginal employment opportunities” than those who were unemployed.

Work, particularly gainful employment, can promote desistance by exposing ex-prisoners to informal social controls, such as consistent monitoring, accountability for work, and association with law-abiding peers (Davis et al., 2012). As well, employment limits the time an individual may spend on criminal activities, and their commitment to maintaining their employment may encourage them to limit time spent with negative associates, thus promoting desistance (Davis et al., 2012). Furthermore, employment offers the opportunity for former prisoners to demonstrate their commitment to life as productive members of society. Reports from the United States and England indicate that some employed former prisoners demonstrate increased levels of trustworthiness, loyalty, and enthusiasm than the average employee, potentially in an attempt to counteract the negative connotations that come with having a criminal record (Devaney, 2011; Gardiner, 2012; Gill, 1997; Jolson, 1975).

Employment can be understood as an essential source of identity (Luyckx et al., 2008), particularly important for former prisoners as they strive to generate new self-understandings upon re-entering the free community. Work also benefits former prisoners as they re-enter the community by providing financial stability, independence, and a sense of self-worth (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Rosenfeld, Petersilia, & Visher, 2008; Uggen, 2000). The provision of finances

can allow individuals to support themselves and their families post release (Petersilia, 2003). In this way, work can be understood as an essential “building block” required to transition from incarceration back into life in the community (Visher et al., 2005).

Beyond the benefits employment can have on the individual lives of releasees, research indicates that employing ex-prisoners can have positive effects on the wider community in the form of reduced crime, increased public safety, improved perceptions of former prisoners, and reduced costs for the government and taxpayers (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008). For this reason, researchers suggest that communities need to provide resources to help ex-prisoners transition back into society as contributing members (Andress, Wildes, Rehtine, & Moritsugu, 2004; Rahill-Beuler & Kretzer, 1997). In order to reduce the disadvantages that former prisoners automatically carry based only on their status as having formerly been incarcerated, employment specialists and other advocates must work to dispel the negative connotations that accompany that status (Rahill-Beuler & Kretzer, 1994).

The benefits employing former prisoners has for individual desistance and the wider community promotes an expectation for them to find work upon re-entry. Employment works to normalize the formerly incarcerated person, demonstrating to the community around them the scope of their work ethic and social aptitude. For this reason, the need to attain employment is often recognized by parole boards and enforced in the form of a parole condition (i.e., to find employment or demonstrate their efforts to do so). Indeed, parole essentially demands that releasees accept and maintain any employment opportunity that they encounter, despite potential unsuitability or a lack of readiness on the part of the ex-prisoner (Shivey et al., 2007). As noted by Demleitner (2002), there is a discrepancy between the requirement for former prisoners to find employment upon community re-entry and the policies that prevent them from doing so.

Pryor and Thompkins (2012) support this notion, stating "...it is counterproductive to expect or even train ex-offenders to become productive members of society, while simultaneously restricting access and opportunities into the job market" (p. 439). Perhaps legally stipulating that someone find employment before they are ready or prepared to do so harms more than it helps.

### **Barriers to Finding Employment**

In this section, I outline personal barriers to employment often faced by ex-prisoners, as well as those that arise or worsen as a result of incarceration. Then I discuss the stigma that former prisoners must contend with and its effects on their lives and employment prospects. Finally, I discuss federal corrections in Canada and the ways it does or does not prepare prisoners to find employment upon re-entering the community.

#### **Pre-existing and Incarceration-imposed Barriers to Employment**

There are various characteristics associated with the "typical" profile of someone who has spent time in prison that may hinder one's ability to attain gainful employment. However, I want to acknowledge that in reviewing these barriers I may be reinforcing the stereotypical depiction of what a former prisoner looks like, effectively constructing another barrier to reintegration even as I promote dismantling those featured in this discussion. I would be amiss not to review the literature dedicated to profiling the different personal barriers to employment that former prisoners tend to possess, but before I begin I would like to point out that operating under the assumption that all people who become incarcerated are "a certain way" risks contributing to the negative associations that people hold about ex-prisoners. As stated by Maruna, 2001:

...despite the evidence that criminal behaviour is widespread throughout the population and that most criminal careers are short-lived and sporadic, criminological research

continues to focus on the static differences between offenders and non-offenders as if these were “types” of people. (p. 6)

Although it may be important to observe trends among people who become incarcerated in order to identify areas to be addressed to reduce crime going forward, this line of thought may also promote stereotypical thinking. Furthermore, while some individuals who become incarcerated may share a set of characteristics that are not conducive to employment, incarceration can worsen these traits and generate new issues. These barriers will be discussed below, organized by education, employment experience, health issues, financial strain, housing access, parole conditions and legal restrictions.

A large proportion of individuals who become incarcerated have low levels of education and few employment experiences (Petersilia, 2005; Varghese, Hardin, & Bauer, 2009; Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2010). Researchers indicate that most individuals who experience incarceration have not reached an educational level greater than high school (Travis & Petersilia, 2001) and possess low levels of numeracy and literacy (Harlow, 2003). Hamlyn and Lewis (2000) found that in a sample of 567 female prisoners, less than half (44%) held employment in the 12 months prior to their incarceration. Visher, Debus, and Yahner (2008) indicate that lack of employment experience makes former prisoners particularly vulnerable when looking for work at release.

Former prisoners are more likely to suffer from health issues, both physical and mental, negatively impacting their ability to find work after prison. The former prisoner and incarcerated population has a higher prevalence of mental health problems, some infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDs, and substance abuse issues (Hammet, Roberts & Kennedy, 2001). Mallik-Kane and Visher (2008) held longitudinal interviews with 1100 prisoners before and after their release to find that nearly all participants—eight in ten men and nine in ten women—possessed some form

of chronic health issue requiring management. They found that individuals with mental health problems were most likely to struggle to find housing and employment, and that individuals suffering from substance abuse problems were more likely to recidivate than other participants. However, having any health issue—mental, physical, or substance abuse—was also associated with recidivism. Physical health issues may dismantle an individual’s attempts to find employment by preventing them from pursuing manual types of labour. Some mental health problems that former prisoners are prone to and which would hamper a job search include low self-esteem, depression, and low motivation (Fletcher, 2001). Behavioural issues, such as problems with authority or a need for anger management, can also have a negative impact on attempts to find employment. Substance use has been identified as the most prevalent health issue among prisoners (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001).

Former prisoners are likely to have strained financial resources upon release and may also face debt as they re-enter the community, complicating their search for employment in that they may be unable to afford to attend interviews, buy necessary clothing or equipment, or pay for transportation (Webster, Hedderman, Turnbull, & May, 2001). Renting a house or apartment often requires providing a list of references as well as first and last month’s rent, which may not be possible for someone upon release (Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan, & Blitz, 2005).

The variety of needs one must attend to upon institutional release can compound and multiply, and the lack of one resource can fuel the lack of another. For example, employment is needed for an individual to afford housing—as well, stable accommodation is necessary to attain stable employment, demonstrating competing needs (Graffam et al., 2004). One participant in Graffam and colleagues’ (2004) study, which conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 former prisoners, noted: “With no place to sleep you get too tired to work. I lost my job” (p.

159). Releasees also face reuniting with social connections and navigating the process of reestablishing their role of responsibility within the family, while also trying to find housing and childcare, or obtaining necessary documents such as a driver's license or healthcare card (Finn, 1998).

In addition to the obstacles to obtaining employment mentioned above, parolees may be forced to contend with restrictive parole conditions. Conditions such as curfews and geographic travel boundaries can reduce releasees' access to employment opportunities (Richards & Jones, 2004).

### **Stigma and the Criminal Record**

In this section, I will outline Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and connect it to the effects of having a criminal record. I will then discuss the problem faced by ex-prisoners of whether or not to disclose and review research on employers' perceptions of applicants with a criminal record. I will discuss the effects of the intersection of criminal record stigma with other stigmatized traits and outline strategies that are sometimes used to mitigate this stigma.

Prejudice is a negative attitude towards someone informed by beliefs based on stereotypes (Allport, 1954; see Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013). This means that negative characteristics that are linked to a certain stigmatized trait are assumed of individuals who are associated with that group (Link & Phelan, 2001). Individuals who are associated with stigmatized groups are seen as lesser, flawed, or tainted (Goffman, 1963). In the context of former prisoners, there are negative stereotypes about the "type of person" who commits a crime (Clow & Esses, 2007; MacLin & Herrera, 2006), and it has been found that the word "criminal" tends to incite feelings of fear and hostility (Foster & Hagan, 2007).

Goffman (1963) identified three types of stigma, one of which being the stigma of character traits, where a person is perceived as having “blemishes of individual character” (p. 4). Prejudice against people with a criminal record can be understood as a character trait stigma. According to Goffman, character trait stigma suggests that the person possessing it is of “weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, *imprisonment*, addiction...” (p. 4, emphasis mine). The “branding” effect of the stigma lessens an individual’s social worth or credibility, causing others to potentially view them as “a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). The disconnect between the stigma-informed stereotypical assumptions of what a person’s character is and their true character is identified as the emergence of a “virtual social identity,” (p. 4) which might conflict with someone’s “actual” social identity. In this way, the individual who becomes represented by their criminal record retains little control over how others view or understand them, despite their best efforts to present favourably.

A stigma may affect the way someone is perceived by others to the extent that it becomes a “master status,” (Goffman, 1963) meaning that the stigmatized characteristic comes to define that person, effectively invalidating any positive attributes they may possess. The burden of a criminal record is limiting in that it informs others’ judgements of a person and ostensibly outlines their expected future behaviour. Regardless of its accuracy, this depiction is identified as a legitimate source of information based on the status of the people who compiled it (Murphy, Fuleihan, Richards, & Jones, 2011; Myrick, 2013). The stigmatizing nature of criminality is so persistent that even exonerees become “stigmatized-by association.” (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012). Despite being found innocent, public perception may remain that the exoneree’s character

has been negatively impacted by living and interacting with other prisoners (Clow et al., 2012). Clow and colleagues (2012) found that only one-third of their sample of 115 exonerees identified themselves as having successfully re-entered society. In fact, Goffman (1963) identified the tendency for a stigma to spread from a stigmatized person to their social connections as one of the driving forces of exclusion. This indicates that overcoming the stigma of the criminal record is an important factor in successful community re-entry post incarceration (LeBel, 2012). The tenacity of the criminal record has the potential to create a “lifetime of stigmatization,” particularly in light of its increasing availability for discovery with the digitization of records (Murphy et al., 2011; Myrick, 2013).

As an additional layer of complication, criminal records are often erroneous, outdated, and inconsistent (Mukamel, 2001; Myrick, 2013). This means that not only has the person in question lost the agency to define their self, but the record may present an unnecessarily negative image of who they are. Myrick (2013) describes the criminal record as “a textual proxy that the state has authored on its own terms, without input from the people whom it permanently represents” (p. 73). Furthermore, Myrick indicates that the author(s) of the criminal record is often concealed, complicating former prisoners’ attempts to rectify errors that misrepresent them. Through her fieldwork with individuals seeking to expunge their criminal records, Myrick found that beyond feelings of stigmatization, people felt de-personalized by their criminal records—“reduced to pieces of personal information that did not represent a holistic identity” (p. 93).

Knowledge of one’s own stigma can result in anxiousness and uncertain behaviour around others. Goffman (1963) indicates that a person who bears a stigma may feel that they are perpetually “on.” They work to manage the impression they make through a hyper-awareness of others’ perceptions of them. Goffman states that, “Each potential source of discomfort for him

when we are with him can become something we sense he is aware of, aware that we are aware of, and even aware of our state of awareness about his awareness” (p. 30). This speaks to former prisoners’ experiences as they internally question who does and does not know of their criminal history as they proceed through social interactions.

Another response to bearing a stigma is defensive withdrawal—purposely remaining silent, averting eye contact, or even avoiding situations involving social interaction in general (Goffman, 1963). The treatment of ex-prisoners as inferior can result in feelings of isolation as well as a lack of confidence and trust, leading to obstacles in building and maintaining relationships (Anazodo et al., 2017). This response to stigmatization would certainly have adverse effects on attempting to find work by hampering a person’s ability to make the social connections required to secure a position. Indeed, Goffman identifies attempting to find employment as an instance wherein a person’s stigma and the limitations imposed by it first become fully realized.

The responses stigma produces in the stigmatized person compound with effects prison institutionalization has on releasees as they attempt to re-enter free society. Institutionalization is understood as the process by which individuals’ perceptions and behaviours are altered as a result of an institutional environment (Haney, 2003)—in this context, prison. Haney (2003) outlines several ways the process of institutionalization can negatively impact releasees’ social functioning. Individuals may become hypervigilant and suspicious of others in response to living in an institution where the potential for danger might be all-encompassing. This may also cause some individuals to project an aura of toughness in an attempt to distance themselves from others. Developing this image of toughness might require individuals to closely monitor themselves and control their emotions, and psychologically distance themselves from others—

Haney (2003) notes that this may result in individuals develop “emotional flatness that becomes chronic and debilitating in social interaction and relationships and find that they have created a permanent and unbridgeable distance between themselves and other people” (p. 82). These factors would therefore have a negative impact on releasees’ social functioning. A reduced sense of self-worth and understanding of personal value is also identified by Haney (2003) as a result of institutionalization. Haney suggests that the compromised social status and stigma that result from being a prisoner may become internalized, causing prisoners to understand themselves as inferior and undeserving of a “normal” life. These aspects of institutionalization have clear negative impacts on the pursuit of employment, as gaining employment tend to be an interaction-based process. The stigmatized personality that emerges as a result of institutionalization isolates releasees from other people, and this distance is intensified by individuals’ attempts to manage their stigmatized status.

I elected to use Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma to address the research questions put forth in this thesis because I suspect that the stigma individuals feel following release from prison impacts their feelings of readiness to enter employment. As outlined by Goffman, understanding one’s own stigma, and the suspicion that this stigma is obvious to others, can negatively impact individuals’ social interactions. Individuals must learn to manage the stigma they carry, either by learning to conceal it, or to present it in a way that minimizes the damages it causes. Attempting to find work necessitates interactions with others—interactions that are inherently imbued with an uneven power dynamic between the employer and the prospective employee. When the prospective employee is stigmatized, this uneven power dynamic is exacerbated as the stigmatized individual must also manage their stigma in such a way that best

positions them to be awarded the position. Recall the research questions I attempt to answer with this thesis:

- (i) Are people ready to begin working immediately upon release from prison?
- (ii) Which factors impact their readiness?
- (iii) Why are individuals who identify themselves as not ready for employment still expected to begin working?

I use stigma to attempt to explain that individuals are *not* ready to begin working immediately after prison, as they are still learning to navigate the stigma they bare following incarceration. Furthermore, I believe their stigmatized status can be used to understand why individuals are expected to find work immediately upon release, even if they identify themselves as not feeling ready for employment. These linkages will be explored more thoroughly in the discussion section of this thesis.

### **The Dilemma of Disclosure**

Stigma is often discussed in terms of an attribute, but Goffman (1963) indicates that a discussion of relationships, rather than attributes, should be employed, as it is through the perceptions of others that a stigmatized person becomes discredited. People with a history of incarceration are not immediately discredited upon interacting with someone else, but remain “discreditable” if their status as a former prisoner is uncovered (Goffman, 1963). The problem of disclosure arises—is it best to inform others of their stigma-garnering status, or to attempt to conceal it? Goffman indicates that this dilemma creates a confusing inner-dialogue for the stigmatized individual: “To display or not display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (p. 58). This dilemma is especially prominent during the process of finding work. Honesty about their past could limit

their job prospects, but attempting to conceal it may also prove injurious to the individual's perceived character in that it signifies moral ineptitude, confirming others' suspicions about people who hold criminal records (Anazodo et al., 2017; Adler, 1993). Therefore, if an applicant is asked about criminal convictions during the screening process for a job, they face potentially negative implications if they say *yes or no*, while the choice to refrain from answering may also garner suspicion (Anazodo et al., 2017).

Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 male parolees in New Jersey and New York, United States, Harding (2003) identified three strategies participants used when addressing their criminal history: non-disclosure, full disclosure, or conditional disclosure. Harding also suggests that an ex-prisoner's decision to disclose a history of incarceration may be contingent on labour market conditions and individual perceptions of stigma. In Winnick and Bodkin's (2008) survey of 450 male prisoners, participants preferred "preventative telling"—revealing their criminal history before disclosure becomes a problem—although preferred methods of stigma management seemed to vary by race. The study showed that black ex-prisoners were more likely to preventatively disclose their criminal history due to pre-existing social stigma based on race, while white participants were less likely to engage in preventative telling because they perceived themselves as risking a loss of privilege. Non-disclosure is not a feasible strategy for some ex-prisoners due to background checks or parole conditions that stipulate transparency. As well, Goffman (1963) points out that concealing a discreditable secret, such as history of incarceration, takes on a more serious meaning if it is found out by close social connections—for example, co-workers. Choosing not to conceal one's criminal history may result in having to navigate a relationship with someone who accepts them but is unaware of their stigma and would hold prejudice towards them if it was known (Goffman, 1963).

Goffman terms the attempt at hiding one's stigma while proceeding through life as "passing" – that is, passing as someone who is considered to be "normal." The stigmatized individual may choose to reveal their status to some contacts while concealing it from others. For example, a former prisoner may find it pertinent to disclose his criminal record to his employer in order to avoid complications in the future while seeing no reason to do the same with casual acquaintances. This can become a complex process as the ex-prisoner works to mentally catalogue how much he has told and to whom (Goffman, 1963). This means that while passing is attainable, it may decrease the quality of life of the person keeping the secret.

Full disclosure, as stated by Harding (2003), "requires perseverance, self-confidence, and the ability to be an adept performer" (p. 581), as it requires the ex-prisoner to take control of the social situation and present their self as hireable despite having a criminal history. The strategy of conditional disclosure involves initially concealing past convictions but then revealing them at an opportune time after having proved their ability to be a good worker. Harding describes this tactic as potentially the most strategic of the three, noting that "He gets his foot in the door and still appears to be honest, defying the ex-convict stereotype by later admitting the mistake of concealing his felony conviction" (p. 584). Once one's stigmatized attribute is known, Goffman (1963) indicated that some may attempt to manage their stigma by devoting a great deal of effort to mastering activities at which they would stereotypically be deficient. This tactic was evident in James and colleagues' (1984) study of 112 black men working in North Carolina, United States, where researchers found that participants had a tendency to overwork themselves in an attempt to overcome stereotypes associated with their race. Disclosing one's stigmatizing history also provides the opportunity for some level of control over others' perceptions through choosing how the events are presented. For example, Myrick (2013) found that the participants in her

study who found themselves misrepresented through their criminal records did not attempt to minimize the events documented in the criminal record, but instead wished to provide context. This process, termed “covering” by Goffman (1963), can be a way for socially stigmatized individuals to repair their image: they accommodate the viewpoint of those who view them negatively while at the same time working to renegotiate that image.

The dilemma of disclosure—the question of who to tell, and how much to reveal—is so great that Decker and colleagues (2014) recommend addressing disclosure techniques as a key tenet of employment re-entry programming. They assert that best tactic is to honestly account for time spent incarcerated, as it is likely that their employer will eventually be made aware of it regardless, yet emphasize the importance of developing a coherent narrative that clearly demonstrates personal betterment post incarceration. Paralleling Maruna’s (2001) concept of the redemption script, Decker and colleagues assert the importance of developing a “re-entry script” which demonstrates commitment to desistance and a contextualization of one’s past.

### **Gatekeepers to Employment: Employer Practices**

The stigmatizing effects of the criminal record are well-documented through research demonstrating employers’ prejudice against hiring formerly incarcerated individuals (e.g., Albright & Denq, 1996; Pager & Qullian, 2005; Harris & Keller, 2005; Pager, 2003). For example, Chui and Cheng (2013) indicate that in their qualitative study of the experiences of sixteen men who had recently been released from Hong Kong prisons, employers would hire former prisoners but would find some way to terminate their employment upon discovering their history of incarceration. Participants in this study indicated that they felt unfairly prejudiced against, even though employers would not indicate their termination as being due to their criminal record and would instead cite poor work performance or unsuitability for the job. On a

more encouraging note, Swanson, Langfitt-Reese and Bond (2012) found that in a study of 128 employers across nine different states and from diverse backgrounds (i.e., entry-level to skilled work) regarding hiring practices, 63 percent of participants indicated having knowingly hired at least one person with a criminal record. Furthermore, few of the participating businesses in the study had written policies barring the employment of former prisoners. Giguere and Dundes (2002) also indicate that the majority (53%) of the 62 Baltimore employers they surveyed would hypothetically be willing to hire a former prisoner. Those employers who indicated greater familiarity with former prisoners were more likely to indicate willingness to take advantage of a subsidized wage program that allowed them to hire individuals with criminal records. However, Pager and Quillian (2005) discovered, through comparing a survey of employers in high crime rate areas (Dallas and Houston, Texas, United States) with an audit study of the same employers, that although a number of employers indicated in the survey that they would be willing to hire former prisoners, few of them actually followed through with this sentiment in practice.

Rasmusen (1996) suggests that employers' acceptance of individuals with criminal records may be affected by the rate of crime in their specific area, indicating areas with high rates of crime are less likely to stigmatize individuals with a history of incarceration, and therefore more likely to employ them: "...if crime is sufficiently prevalent, a criminal record loses its informativeness and thus its stigmatizing effect" (p. 541). This could be a result of the criminal record becoming normalized due to its prevalence, or perhaps of employers becoming less able to avoid individuals with criminal records. It has also been suggested that employers are more likely to hire former prisoners in times of low unemployment (Henry, 2000; Shapiro, 2000).

## **Additional Stigma**

Some criminal backgrounds are discriminated against more than others – for example, Albright and Denq’s (1996) study of the attitudes of 83 Houston and Dallas employers demonstrated that participants were especially unwilling to hire people who had been incarcerated for violent crimes or crimes against children. As well, Pager (2007) used an audit-style study to discover that employers are more likely to consider hiring individuals who have been convicted of drug crimes than violent offenders. If a former prisoner bears another socially unfavourable trait, they may be further discriminated against by employers and incur what Gausel and Thorissen (2014) term “multiple stigma.” For example, an employer may hold more prejudice towards individuals with a history of mental illness combined with a history of incarceration compared to someone whose only stigmatizing attribute is their status as a former prisoner (Gausel & Thorissen, 2014). Former prisoner job applicants who are also visible racial minorities have been found to face additional barriers to attaining employment (Holzer, Raphael & Stoll, 2006; Pager, Western & Sugie, 2009; Pager, 2003). Pager and colleagues (2009) conducted an audit study in New York City of applicants with differing racial and criminal backgrounds to low-wage jobs. Results indicated that having a criminal record garners a significant negative effect on employment outcomes, and that this effect is exacerbated for Black applicants. Holzer and colleagues (2006) found that employers who used criminal background checks were more likely to hire Black applicants or applicants with resume gaps, suggesting that employers who do not use criminal background checks may avoid applicants with attributes that are associated with a history of incarceration. Raphael (2006) discussed the potential unintended consequences of time-limited criminal records in this context, cautioning that time limits on criminal history information may prompt employers to use their own means to avoid individuals

with a criminal history, thus assuming certain traits may signify past criminal involvement (e.g. racial minorities, individuals who receive public assistance, fragmented employment history). These findings bolster support for the use of criminal record checks in that they can redeem individuals with no criminal history but who bear attributes associated with incarceration. However, the problem of the criminal record for those who possess it remains.

### **Strategies to Improve Employment Prospects**

Just as some attributes can exacerbate the stigma former prisoners' face as they attempt to find work, there are also characteristics that can reduce the level of discrimination with which applicants with a history of incarceration must contend. In their study of Dallas and Houston employers, Albright and Denq (1996) found that formerly incarcerated applicants with vocational training or a college diploma had a better chance of acquiring employment. Twenty years later, Cundiff (2016) used audit methodology to find that educational attainment has the potential to mitigate the negative impact of having a criminal record, but not until a bachelor's degree is earned. Formerly incarcerated individuals are also more likely to attain employment if they can demonstrate consistent work history, as demonstrated by Visher and colleagues (2011) through a study of the employment experiences of 740 male releasees in the United States.

Incarceration, however, does hinder individuals from attaining the aforementioned attributes. Most institutions in Canada, while acknowledging the value of higher education, do not offer educational programming beyond the GED, perhaps due to budgetary constraints or lack of personnel (discussed below). Furthermore, incarceration creates gaps in employment history. Even if a prisoner manages to find employment within the institution, they are faced with either being untruthful in presenting it on their resume or admitting upfront their history of

incarceration. The stigma of incarceration can also extend to any credentials or work experience gained while institutionalized, effectively rendering them nullified (Blesset & Pryor, 2013).

Former prisoners with poor history of employment and few educational credentials can bolster their chances of acquiring employment with a strong social network (Graffam et al., 2004; Lin, 2001). Individuals may learn of job opportunities through their social network, and social connections can increase an applicant's chance of finding employment by acting as a reference for potential employers—it is possible that if an applicant's value is guaranteed by an outside source, the employer is more likely to see their worth (Lin, 2001). A study conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice tracked the employment patterns of ex-prisoners and found that most of those who found employment post release “were either rehired by former employers or had help from family and friends” (as cited in Travis, 2005, p. 163). Connecting with employers prior to release also improved employment prospects (Visher et al., 2011). The ability to do this would be facilitated by having a strong history of employment or a good social network to put prisoners in touch with potential employers.

Imprisonment results in gaps in employment history, and time away from the workforce can also result in skill erosion and unfamiliarity with workplace technological advancements (Decker, Spohn, Ortiz, & Hedburg, 2014). For this reason, it is preferable for former prisoners to be in a situation where they can be open about having been imprisoned, in that it would allow them to better access the support services they require to integrate into their job. Finding employment through social connections may increase the likelihood that they will be able to speak openly about their history of incarceration, and it has been suggested that individuals who do manage to attain employment do so through dissolving the stigma of incarceration with social connections (Blesset & Pryor, 2013). Attaining employment through a social connection or being

rehired by an employer with whom the ex-prisoner already has an established relationship allows the individual to avoid the complications imposed by their former prisoner status (Blesset & Pryor, 2013, p. 445). Again, however, the isolation and stigmatizing nature of incarceration impedes an individual's ability to maintain their social connections (Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001).

Despite the steps individuals might take to reduce the stigma of incarceration, Graffam and colleagues (2004) found, through conducting semi-structured interviews in Australia with convicted former prisoners and correctional service workers, that having a criminal record overshadowed any educational attainments or training former prisoners might have. Thus, the criminal record becomes "...the most defining aspect of their employability" (Anazodo, Chan, Riccardelli, 2017).

### **Attaining Gainful Employment**

If a former prisoner is able to find work, the type of employment they are able to attain may be affected by their prior incarceration. In the United States, individuals with history of incarceration are barred from employment that puts them in contact with vulnerable populations, such as seniors, children, or sick people (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). This prevents them from working in healthcare, childcare, and residential care facilities. As well, former prisoners are barred from working in law enforcement in the United States (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). Through the analysis of the earnings records of former prisoners released from correctional institutions in Virginia, United States, from the fiscal years of 1999 to 2003, Lichtenberger (2006) found that the sectors least likely to employ former prisoners were in the areas of public administration, healthcare, scientific and technical services, and finance and insurance. Individuals can also be barred from certain types of employment if employment caveats are

imposed on their parole conditions—for example, if the individual's crime was related to computer use, they may be legally banned from pursuing employment related to computers (Kerley & Copes, 2004).

Conversely, it was found that the areas former prisoners were most likely to find employment in were secondary sector industries, like construction, mining, and manufacturing (Lichtenberger, 2006). Nally and colleagues (2011) found that temporary employment agencies are a major employer of former prisoners—a precarious and unstable form of employment. It was also noted that former prisoners were employed in food services, as well as transportation and warehousing services (Nally et al., 2011).

It is possible that not all types of employment promote desistance—in particular, stable work with good working conditions and sustainable wages has been highlighted as most effective (Finn, 1998; Graffam et al., 2008; Harrison & Schehr, 2004; Uggen, 2000). Because formerly incarcerated people face limited employment options, they are more likely to settle for low-paying, unstable, precarious work that lacks benefits, union rights, and is more likely to have dangerous working conditions (Harding, 2003). Furthermore, employers might be aware of former prisoners' desperation to find work, making them easy to exploit (Atkinson & Rostad, 2003)—for example, employers may take advantage of former prisoners by overworking them (Purser, 2012). In light of the poor quality of work they are most likely to attain, former prisoners may be enticed by the thought of returning to the perceived benefits of crime (Gill, 1997; Waldfoegel, 1994).

Maruna (2001) points out that work can be inherently rewarding, or it can be punishing. Some jobs are much more likely to be experienced as punishing, and if an individual perceives their work as punishing, they may see that as a reason to reoffend (Maruna, 2001). Furthermore,

Maruna (2001) argues that forced labour as punishment, such as picking up debris on the side of the highway, will turn people away from wanting to pursue work: “For many, the psychological lesson of coerced, hard labour may be that work is punishment and something to be avoided” (p. 128). Conversely, providing opportunities for formerly or currently incarcerated people to provide volunteer support, such as at animal shelters or homeless shelters, may inspire them to further pursue other generative activities in the place of criminal activities, thus desisting from crime (Maruna, 2001). In this way, it is clear that the type of work a former prisoner is able to find is an important factor in fostering desistance. As well, attaining some type of generative employment that is embedded in virtue, such as substance abuse counselling, for example, can facilitate former prisoners in shedding the stigma that accompanies having a criminal record and reformulating their identity, a feat not made possible by low-level employment (Maruna, 2001). It is possible that the unstable, unskilled work that is most readily available to former prisoners might discourage individuals from remaining employed, ultimately providing encouragement to pursue the perceived benefits of criminal activity (Gill, 1997; Waldfogel, 1994).

In light of the perceived benefits employment seems to have on the desistance process and the complications former prisoners face as they attempt to find work, it would logically follow that addressing employment needs be an important part of the rehabilitative goals of incarceration. In the next section, I will outline some characteristics of federal incarceration and release in Canada and discuss the ways in which the need for employment is or is not addressed by institutionally-offered programming.

### **Canadian Context**

This research is illuminated by the experiences of releasees in Ontario, Canada, who were recently released from federal prisons at the time of their interviews. In Canada,

provinces/territories are responsible for individuals who are convicted of a crime and receive sentences of less than two years, or who receive such community sentences as fines, probation, or community service, while individuals who receive sentences of two years or more are the responsibility of the federal government (CSC, 2014b). The Correctional Service of Canada is the governing body responsible for those who are convicted of a crime and receive a sentence of two years or more during their time spent incarcerated and on parole (CSC, 2016). There were 39,623 incarcerated individuals in Canada on an average day in 2014/2015, 15,168 of whom were in federal custody (Reitano, 2016). The incarceration rate in Canada in 2014/2015 was 85 per 100,000 adult population, with the federal incarceration rate in particular resting at 53 per 100,000 adult population (Reintano, 2016). Canada's incarceration rate is intermediate compared with other countries in the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development with a rate that is about one-sixth of that of the United States, yet higher than many European countries of similar socioeconomic development (Statistics Canada, 2015).

Federally incarcerated individuals can apply to receive full parole after serving a third of their sentence or seven years, whichever is less. Full parole allows individuals to serve a portion of their sentence in the community, during which time they must maintain certain conditions of release designed to reduce the risk of recidivism, and must regularly meet with a parole officer and sometimes the RCMP. Day parole is, in many ways, the same as full parole, but the individual is required to live in a halfway house or a similar facility in the community which still provides some aspect of supervision and support. On an average day in 2014/2015, the CSC supervised 7,895 individuals on day parole, full parole or statutory release (Reitano, 2016).

Prisoners in Canada undergo a series of assessments aimed to determine the risk they may pose as well as areas they need to address in order to desist from crime (Ricciardelli, 2014).

An individual is assessed based on dynamic and static risk factors that may contribute to their criminality—dynamic factors referring to factors that may be amenable to change, and static factors referring to facets of an individual’s personal history which are unchangeable (Griffiths, Dandurand, & Murdoch, 2007). Based on these assessments, the Criminal Profile and Correctional Plan are developed. In identifying areas of need, the prisoner or ex-prisoner’s parole officer can ostensibly recommend strategies for improvement. These are communicated through “measurable, positive goal statements” (CSC, 2015). Dynamic risk factors can be addressed by institutionally-offered and community-based programming and treatment services, and include needs related to employment, education, substance use, housing, attitudes, cognitive skills, and social networks (Griffiths et al., 2007). The “Employment Domain Indicators” section of the *Dynamic Factor Identification and Analysis* questions the interviewee’s employment history, their employment status at the time of arrest, and their work stability (CSC, 2015). It also takes into account marketable work skills obtained through training or experience; interviewee satisfaction with their own work skills; and the interviewee’s self-identified ability to work with others (CSC, 2015). The interviewee’s attitudes regarding employment are assessed based on their perception of their own employability and their demonstrated work ethic (CSC, 2015). This category also takes into account whether the interviewee’s income before arrest was principally or partially derived by illegal activity (CSC, 2015). Based on these factors, parole officers can prescribe conditions or required activities that are meant to address any employment-related deficits. Within the Correctional Plan, there is included “an initial education, vocational and employment plan that will address the offender’s needs and identify the expectations for behaviour, skill or knowledge development related to work placements and future community employment” (CSC, 2015). Ostensibly, this plan would include participating in employment

programming, pursuing volunteer work opportunities, pursuing institutional employment opportunities, and upon release, demonstrating attempts to find and maintain employment.

Upon conditional release, these static and dynamic risk factors are translated into “Conditions of Release” (CSC, 2016b). Standard conditions of release are applied to everyone and include keeping the peace and obeying the law and reporting regularly to a parole officer (CSC, 2014b). A parolee may also be required to observe “special” conditions of release, which are formulated and prescribed on an individual basis based on a person’s dynamic and static risk factors. A parolee must observe all standard and special conditions that are prescribed to them; if they fail to do so, the Parole Board of Canada reserves the right to revoke that person’s parole and return them to prison (CSC, 2014b).

Theoretically, the work to address these dynamic factors should begin within the institution. However, the programming and opportunities for improvement that are realistically offered within the institution are limited. An individual with great need to improve their employability can be motivated to attain work experience, volunteer, create social connections, and collect certifications, but their imprisonment may make it impossible to do so. The CSC acknowledges that addressing dynamic risk factors through institutionally-offered programming and education offers reintegrating individuals their best chance at desistance (CSC, 2007), but there is a disconnect between this sentiment and the capacity for a prisoner to take action while incarcerated. Although CSC mandates that “it shall provide a range of programs designed to address the needs of offenders and contribute to their successful reintegration into the community” (Corrections and Conditional Release Act, 1992, sec. 76), uncertainty remains regarding whether this assertion is realized. In Ricciardelli’s (2014) qualitative study exploring the incarceration experiences of 56 Canadian former prisoners, her participants indicated a

paucity of beneficial programs or supports for fostering personal growth, noting those that did exist were lacking in quality. Limited programming may arise in Canadian prisons due to budget and personnel constraints, and programming may be offered with varying consistency between institutions based on differing prisoner needs and staffing (Ricciardelli, 2014).

The administration of programming for an entire prison population is generally overseen by one or two programming managers, constituting a very low ratio of programmers to prisoners (Ricciardelli, 2014). Theoretically, prisoners should be assessed on a regular basis in order to determine their personal programming needs and the progress they have made towards their identified rehabilitative goals—however, developing programming for an entire prison population while continuing to take into account the needs of each individual prisoner is nearly impossible due to strained resources (Ricciardelli, 2014). Despite this, the CSC is realistically a world leader in the provision of correctional programming (CSC, 2009). Although there are indications that programming provided by the CSC may be lacking in quality, at least programming exists to build upon and there is discussion around its improvement (Ricciardelli, 2014). In a 2009 evaluation of the CSC’s correctional programming, provided programs included those for violent offenders, sex offenders, substance abuse, family violence prevention, and Aboriginal offenders. There is no mention of employment-related programming. There was an overarching sentiment among participants in Ricciardelli’s (2014) study that the programming currently offered targets participants’ “cognitive self” (p. 191)—that is, their internal sense of morality and willingness to change. However, participants indicated that if prisoners had not yet come to the decision on their own to desist, being forced to participate in the programming would not hold any benefit for them. Instead, participants emphasized the need for prisoners to learn such life skills as “cooking, managing finances, trades or skills that could be used to

acquire employment, how to make grocery lists” (p. 191). Rather than the programming currently provided, Ricciardelli’s participants advocated for more hands-on training that might impart the skills needed to find employment. Taking these points into consideration, it is difficult to connect the imposed parole condition of finding and maintaining employment with any institutionally provided opportunities to improve one’s chances of doing so.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### The Data

Longitudinal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 men and women on conditional release over a three-year period. Interviewee recruitment was tied to participation in Klink, a program designed to support releasees as they enter the workforce after prison. Klink was a pilot program overseen by the St. Leonard's Society of Toronto, a non-profit, non-religious charitable organization that strives to ease individuals' transition into employment following correctional release. The program was originally funded by an \$87,000 grant from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (now Employment and Social Development Canada), and was meant to adhere to a variant of the Service Subsidization business model wherein Klink would provide a product or service to the market and use the proceeds to fund services for its clients. Klink combined an employment skills training program with a social enterprise that provided clients with a period of employment. The first week focused on skill-building, such as practice interviews and résumé workshops. Following this first week, clients participated in an employment placement lasting three to five weeks at a coffee roasting or boat washing company, the length of which fluctuated as the program developed. Upon completion of the work placement, there was potentially an opportunity for longer-term employment. Participation in the program provided clients with a line for their résumés and a reference to support their chances of attaining future employment opportunities.

Klink participants took part in interviews that were designed to help them voice their experiences as they transitioned from incarceration to community living and sought

employment—the struggles they faced, factors that eased the process, and aspects of Klink that they found useful or unhelpful. To garner insight into how participants' experiences evolved as they spent time in the community and labor market, initial interviews were complimented, when possible, by follow-up interviews three to six months later, then 12 to 18 months later, and again toward the end of the study.<sup>1</sup> A demographic survey was used in conjunction with the interviews to document criminal and institutional histories.

Study participation was voluntary at each stage, and all potential participants were made aware of the study by case workers at the day reporting centre where the employment program was offered. Interviews were conducted in person whenever possible, but due to geography and work hours, some were conducted by phone to accommodate schedules. An interview guide was constructed and used, but discarded when conversation flowed. Interviews were at least an hour in duration, and the audio recordings were transcribed by research assistants. Ethics approval was obtained and each participant provided informed consent.

These interviews sought to give releasees the opportunity to express, on their own terms, the experiences they had as they attempted to find work upon their release. In a way, this research serves to counteract the assessments that prisoners are so often burdened with—too often, the responsibility for determining the needs of prisoners are outsourced to professionals such as psychologists, case workers, or counsellors (see Foucault, 1977, p. 20). Therefore, this research aims to provide a platform to those individuals whose voices are often silenced, and my work as the author will be only to contextualize the participants' sentiments with the current body of academic literature surrounding community re-entry and within relevant theoretical models.

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<sup>1</sup> Given contacting some participants took coordination, efforts and tracking (at times to no avail), follow up interviews were not at precise intervals despite best efforts.

## The Participants

Six cohorts of participants were followed over a period of three years, from 2012 to 2014. The first consisted of nine men on parole, between the ages of 22 and 45, with a mean age of 32 and a median age of 31. The second cohort included three participants, two male and one female between 25 and 53 years of age, with a mean average age of 41.5 and a median of 47. The third cohort consisted of four male participants, between the ages 21 and 47, with an average age of 32 and median age of 30. The fourth cohort was three male participants, between the ages 25 and 37, with an average age of 29 and median age of 26. The fifth cohort of three male participants between the ages 30 and 38, had an average age of 32.5 and median age of 30, while the sixth cohort included two participants, one male and one female, age 21 and 36 years.

Of these participants, 23 were Canadian Citizens. Ethnic/racial identity was self-reported as: White (n=7), Black (n=13), East Indian (n=1), Hispanic (n=2), Hispanic/Black/Aboriginal (n=1). A total of 13 participants had children who they identified as their own (with the exception of one who had step-children, all were biological children). Only one participant entered prison married and was still married post-incarceration; another was newly engaged and two were in serious relationships. Three parolees had entered prison in long-term common-law partnerships, and one was no longer in the relationship after incarceration (the other two still were). Two participants were divorced, but one had re-married, and 11 were single before and after incarceration.

The participants' educational profiles were quite diverse as well. Twenty-three participants had gained their GED (i.e., graduate equivalency diploma; most were earned while in prison), one had less than high school, one had some college experience, and another two participants held a university degree, while two had some university experience. All but one (i.e.,

23) of the participants identified as in need of income; one said he was “good for money.”

Among the residential/living arrangements of the participants, 15 lived in a halfway house, one in an Aboriginal healing shelter, four with a family member, two were staying in a homeless shelter, one had moved out of a homeless shelter and into an apartment, and another was living in a room in a home that he described as being in a very “bad” area.

Eleven men had served previous provincial sentences, and 10 had formerly been charged as a youth and spent time in a youth detention centre. Only two of the men/women in our sample were released from their second or third federal sentence, thus 22 participants were on parole after their first time in federal prison—most were released on statutory release rather than parole. The parolees’ sentences had ranged from two years to life, but participants served from 16 months in prison to over twenty-two years (based on information provided—one participant was unclear about his time served, and the issue was not pressed). Two participants had received a Long Term Offender designation and all others were actively on parole. The range of criminal convictions included: criminality related to domestic violence, drug-related convictions (both possession and trafficking), property offence convictions (e.g., theft, break and entry), cybercrimes, violent offence convictions (e.g., assault, robbery, forcible confinement, possession of firearms), sex-related convictions, attempted murder, manslaughter, and first and second degree murder(s). All of the men and women in our sample had served time in reception, nine had served in a maximum secure facility, 20 in a medium secure, and 12 in a minimum secure prison. At the time of interview, one participant had already experienced a parole breach and had returned to prison as a result. He was released anew at the conclusion of the study.

Overall, of the 24 participants, four parolees had returned to prison during the course of the evaluation, including one person who had secured full-time employment, while another had

been suspended. Post-evaluation, another parolee has returned to prison. More positively, seven have acquired and remained in full-time gainful employment positions (two in “management” positions), one is in a part-time position, and two, who were previously employed, are now in school full time; six participants remain unemployed. Two participants were unaccounted for upon completion of the evaluation—no one had been able to reach them to confirm their employment or parole statuses.

### **Data Analyses**

Interview transcripts underwent semi-grounded thematic analysis. I used NVivo software to employ a variety of coding techniques, beginning with an *a priori* coding scheme (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) which consisted of descriptive themes drawn from the interview guide and literature review. These broad, preliminary themes organized the interview information into the following categories: “Legal Barriers to Employment”; “Personal Barriers to Employment”; “Incarceration Experience”; “Interpersonal Barriers to Employment”; “Thoughts Regarding Klink”; and “Administrative Barriers to Employment.” After this preliminary analysis, I employed a semi-grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I read and re-read the transcripts multiple times in order to identify emergent themes, allowing me to further break down the transcripts in order to identify patterns across cases, comparing the similar and differing experiences of participants. Using this grounded approach, I reorganized my coding scheme using the following emergent themes: “Biographical Information”; “Community Re-entry”; “Stigma”; “Incarceration Experience”; “Employment”; “Interpersonal”; “Klink Program”; and “Parole.” Each of these themes was assigned as a “parent node” on NVivo. At this stage in the process, the interview transcripts were coded independently by my peer using the scheme that resulted from the combination of *a priori* and grounded codes. I compared her coded material

with mine to ensure a qualitative variant of inter-rater reliability (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Mareau, 1997), a measure taken to safeguard against personal bias by ensuring the coded content was consistent.

Following the assignment of parent nodes using the combination of *a priori* and grounded approaches, nodes were further broken down into “child” nodes. This process resulted in an overwhelming amount of specific nodes, some of which, throughout the process, had become poorly organized. I re-read the transcripts twice more and employed axial coding (Saldaña, 2015), which was used to disaggregate and then link and analyze these emergent themes and subthemes to create a cohesive and organized image of the challenges releasees faced during employment reintegration. This process allowed me to amalgamate and reclassify some of the nodes, ultimately resulting in a thorough, cohesive categorization of data, facilitating the comparison of experiences and sentiments across cases (Boyatzis, 1998). Following this process, each parent node was separated into two to fourteen “child nodes,” and each of these child nodes was further broken down into up to eight more “grandchild nodes.” For example, the “Parole” parent node contains eight child nodes, including “Conditions”; “Time Consuming”; “Hampers Employment”; “Hampers Social Interaction”; “Relationship with Parole Officer”; “Fear of Breach”; “Breach”; and “Never Breached.” The “Conditions” child node is then further disaggregated into child nodes that delineate each specific condition that was mentioned by participants, including “Avoid Certain Persons”; “Curfew”; “Find Employment”; “Residency”; “Substance Use”; “Technology”; “Travel Restriction.” For this thesis, my findings are drawn largely from linkages between the “Employment,” “Community Re-entry” and “Parole” nodes. I drew heavily from the information organized within these nodes as they detail the experiences individuals had as they attempted secure employment upon receiving parole. They also contain

information regarding the effects of parole on employment and the ability of participants to re-enter the community. The information contained within these nodes was most pertinent to answering the research questions I have put forth.

Throughout my analysis, I used NVivo's "Annotation" tool to make note of any pieces of information that surfaced in the interview transcripts that I could connect to themes in the literature. I used the Annotation tool to highlight a piece of text from the transcribed interview and make note of any patterns in the literature it reflected. I also used NVivo's "Memo" tool to organize my own personal reflections, observations, and ideas. Glaser (1978) describes a memo as "the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationship as they strike the analyst while coding..." (p. 83). By using NVivo's Memo tool I was able to actively document my engagement with the data and reflect on my own mindset and preconceived ideas that I held prior to analysis. Using Annotations and Memos facilitated the process of axial coding and helped to inform my discussion.

The final layer of organization I applied to this data was to develop case summaries of each participant using information gleaned from the demographic survey as well as their interview transcripts. At this stage in my analysis, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. At the beginning of the summary, I would list their age; race/ethnicity; time served; index crime; charges; number of convictions; previous occupation(s); parental status; marital status; religion; highest level of education; citizenship; household income; and age at first custodial sentence. Next, I made sparse notes from each interview, focusing primarily on the individual's described criminal trajectory, work history, and employment experiences upon release. Each set of notes was delineated by interview number (i.e., "interview 1:" "interview 2:"). This process was essential for my analysis and writing in that it allowed me, after having made thematic

connections across participants, to refocus these themes on the individual participant and observe how each theme played out individually over time. It was also instrumental in ensuring my analysis remained chronologically consistent and helped me to provide richer descriptions of each participant and their individual circumstances as I wrote.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Many experiences reported by participants in the study were consistent with patterns noted in the literature review. The releasees interviewed described their aspirations for employment and understood its value in their journey toward desistance from crime, yet indicated a lack of preparation and resources to help them find work. To this end, I organize my findings as follows: first, I outline participants' understandings of employment as a parole condition. Next, I review some individuals' purported lack of readiness to pursue employment, despite understanding the parole board's stance that it is necessary to do so. Following this, I recount the experiences of those in the sample who were eager to find work, but faced barriers to employment erected by having spent time incarcerated. Finally, I document participants' suggestions for ways they might leave prison better prepared for community re-entry and finding work.

#### **Employment as a Condition of Parole**

The emphasis the Correctional Service of Canada places on employment through work-related parole conditions was actualized in the experiences reported by releasees. Mark, a 22-year-old releasee, had no employment experience beyond being a paid extra on some television shows before becoming incarcerated. Despite the difficulties he was facing in trying to find work, his parole conditions stipulated that he needed to be employed or in school. Regarding this, he stated: "I don't have a choice." Moreover, his concern about his inability to find work was intensified because he felt vulnerable to revocation given his parole had already been revoked once due to a breach based on a misunderstanding. Mark explained that his parole

officer thought he had used marijuana, and it was not believed until after he completed a “clean” urinalysis that he had not. Nonetheless, he suggested that his parole was revoked because, “...at that point they didn’t think I had a job fast enough...” He suggests that what started as a breach based on a misunderstanding turned to a revocation because of his inability to find work or secure housing, thus leaving him feeling particularly vulnerable when awarded conditional release anew. His experiences reveal the necessity placed on employment, as failure to find work can be perceived as a possible violation of release conditions.

Chris, a 25 year-old ex-serial recidivist, indicated having incurred about 43 past convictions (this was his estimate; he was uncertain about the actual number) after first being arrested at the age of twelve. Through Klink, he was partaking in a pre-employment program placement that required him to provide a week of voluntary labour as training before he was hired. Working for a boat-cleaning company, his only task was to spray boats. Chris openly discussed his dissatisfaction with the work due to the menial tasks he was responsible for and the lack of pay. He did not believe the job would have a positive effect on his future employment prospects, despite the fact that it would provide him with work experience. When this potential benefit was pointed out to him by the interviewer, he responded, “Well like who cares... ‘yeah ok call these people, yeah [Chris] sprays a real good boat.’ No one cares about that.” To Chris, the menial nature of the labour detracted from its potential to serve as an employment experience or reference for his résumé. When asked about his decision to carry on with the job despite its apparent shortcomings, he replied, “my PO basically said I have no other choice.” This pressure from their parole officers to accept any offer of employment was echoed by other participants.

Scott, for example, at age 36 was serving a life sentence. He had been imprisoned for 22 years prior to his conditional release. He admitted that a portion of the motivation behind his job

search was his parole officer: “It’s been, I don’t want to say the expectations of my parole officers but at least partially that, right?” He also demonstrated some agreement with his parole officer, as he identified employment as conducive to acclimatizing to community living: “Initially the goal for me was adaptation with the community because I was in prison for so long. It seems like the next obvious step for that is to look for employment.”

Adam, age 45, had previously held a successful career as a political assistant. He indicated that his counsellor at the halfway house he was staying at “was impressed with how easily I said I had to take any job...” Adam was unable to return to his previous career after incurring a criminal history and was barred from specific types of employment due to the nature of his criminality (he was convicted of sexual assault on a former romantic partner). His words demonstrate the apparent consensus across parole officers, employment counsellors, and even releasees, that work is required for long-term success in community reintegration. However, there may be a discrepancy in how much value each party places on employment-derived monetary remuneration or gratification.

### **Employment Readiness: Recognizing When Employment Becomes Feasible**

The pressure that parole officers place on parolees to find work often resulted in participants pursuing employment despite an acknowledged lack of readiness. For example, an interviewee named Phil was hesitant to participate in Klink for fear that the experience would reflect negatively on him if it went poorly: “Like this... now they can say that if I have a deteriorating attitude they can threaten to send me back, you know?” Phil indicated not feeling ready to begin working and when the interviewer suggested telling this to his parole officer, he answered:

No, no, I just don’t want to ask to wait ‘til next month and then have my P.O. say, ‘oh he has a deteriorating attitude’...And then I get compared to other people to say they did

more time and they were out for as long as me and they're doing good, it feels like a race. I'm not out to impress anybody.

This response indicates that Phil did not view taking more time to feel ready before looking for work as an option due to the expectations of his parole officer. Phil also states: "There's sometimes that I feel like I'm being pressured, like I'm trapped in a corner. I don't want to feel like that." At thirty years old, Phil had never held a job before his incarceration and at the time of his interview, he had recently been released after serving eight years of an eleven year sentence for armed robberies. He had interest in finding employment, but thought he would be able to take his time and access some supports before doing so. Instead, he felt that his parole officer was pushing him to proceed with haste:

Right, I got out, can I take things slowly, that's what I thought could happen. Start off at a YMCA, talk to someone, a job counsellor, a psychologist, something like that, just to ease into it, right? I don't feel like I've gotten that, they've all been like here, do this, go there and do that and that's what's going to happen. It feels like it's a race... go to A, B and C and come back and show me what you got.

Phil explained that he understood the importance of finding employment and becoming self-sufficient, but indicated that it would take some time for him to do so: "...I know it's time for me to grow and that, but it's going to take time. It's not going to be two weeks or three weeks to get rid of everything I've learned over the past ten years." Here, it seems that Phil's goals are aligned with those of his parole officer. His statement, "it's time for me to grow and that," can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that he is ready to desist from crime and pursue a "normal, grown-up" life, which would ostensibly include employment. However, he views his situation pragmatically. He recognizes that desistance and acclimatizing to a generative, crime-free lifestyle is a process, and is not something that will happen for him immediately. Here, there emerges an observable discrepancy between expectations put forth by Phil's parole officer and his own perceptions of what he is capable of doing.

The reasons participants cited for feeling unprepared for employment were manifold. In some cases they were being released into a community unfamiliar to them, and were intimidated by trying to become acclimatized to a new space while also attempting to find work. Others, even when being released into a community they were familiar with, struggled with the transition from being incarcerated to community living. Simply re-learning to live outside of prison—to provide for oneself; make individual decisions, both large and small; and interact with others, whose individual contexts are unknown (not a reality during imprisonment)—can be a struggle for some, and placing a required search for employment atop this experience might be unrealistic.

### **Re-entering an Unfamiliar Community**

The process of re-learning to navigate the outside community is made more daunting if the releasee is entering an unfamiliar place. Sam's experience demonstrates these jarring effects. At the age of 38, Sam had been a frequent recidivist and when interviewed, he reported having just finished serving his first federal sentence of five years for armed robbery and possession of a firearm. He was first sentenced at age eleven, and he continued to incur provincial sentences until his experience doing federal time: "I've been in more than I've been out, for sure." Upon release, he felt vulnerable and unprepared: "For one, I was scared to death and I wasn't going back to the area where I was familiar. I did so many years without smoking and the first thing I did was buy a pack."

Moreover, because prison facilities and community corrections centres are often geographically distant from a prisoner's home (Comfort, 2008; Western & Wileman, 2009), their re-entry become complicated through reduced access to their social support network. Sam was being released into an area he described as "unfamiliar," meaning that in addition to the variety

of factors a person needs to address upon release, Sam faced doing so in an unknown space. He would have to learn how to navigate an unfamiliar area and perhaps learn how to use local public transit. Being in an unfamiliar space could complicate his job and housing searches in that he might have less understanding of where to look. As well, being released and paroled in a place that is not “home” to him means that he would likely have to face these challenges with reduced support from pre-existing social connections such as family, friends, and former employers, which an individual being released into their hometown might be better able to avail. Sam’s decision to buy a pack of cigarettes after years of not smoking suggests his use of a familiar crutch in the face of discomfort and uncertainty. He describes himself as having been “scared to death.” This demonstrates the ease with which individuals may fall into old destructive habits upon release in light of the stresses brought on by community reintegration—old habits which may manifest as criminal activity or support potential recidivism.

Chris was being released in a city geographically distant from his hometown, to which he planned to return after completing his parole and leaving the halfway house. He explained that finding work in that city felt somewhat futile to him because he intended to leave anyway: “I’ll still work in stores until next season or whatever, but I won’t even be in *[city name]* next season, know what I mean? I’m not from here.” While he intended to find a retail job to hold him over until he moved home, he suggested that there was no point in trying to find something better because he intended to leave the city anyway. This can hamper employment reintegration by imbuing the job search with a sense of pointlessness, making it difficult for individuals to motivate themselves to find work.

## Accessing Social Support Services

Sometimes releasees must seek social assistance in order to support themselves while they look for work. Sam describes obstacles he faced in trying to attain social assistance, indicating that what he would need could have been better explained to him in advance:

[If there are] things that we don't know we're going to be up against, and you know it's probably something I'm going to need to face... then tell me before hand. You say I need to go to welfare but don't tell me I need three of these things. I go there thinking that I don't have any money today and hopefully I'll be able to get some money from them for tomorrow. But you come out and you realize there's five different things you had to bring and you didn't know and two weeks later you're finally getting the cheque. From that day to the cheque day, it's madness. They should set it up ahead of time but they don't.

This passage demonstrates the financial difficulties ex-prisoners face and the competing needs that accompany release. To receive financial assistance, a variety of documents are required; however, attaining these documents might come at a financial cost. For example, they might face transportation costs when trying to arrive at a Service Canada branch, and in Ontario, a provincial photo identification card costs \$35.00 (Service Ontario, 2017). When Sam attempted to apply for social assistance he was asked for identification, and the only documentation he possessed was his Finger Print System (FPS) card—a symbol of his criminal history. In order to apply for social assistance, he would have to disclose his criminal history immediately: “Who the f\*\*k wants to come out of prison and tell the whole world that's where you were?” Sam felt that he had not received sufficient support before attempting to secure social assistance. This contributes to a lack of readiness for employment, as well, because a scarcity of financial resources complicates the job search.

## Transitioning into Life Outside of Prison

Another factor contributing to some participants' hesitance to search for work immediately following release was a feeling of being overwhelmed by the outside world. At age

53, the multiple sentences Ian had incurred over his lifetime accumulated to about seventeen years of incarceration. He was offered a job two weeks after being released on parole but declined it, indicating that he felt unable to accept the offer of employment because he had pain in his knees, though he realized this decision would disappoint his parole officer. He readily acknowledged the importance of getting back to work for his continued desistance from crime: "...I understand that in my past, it [has been] important to get back to work almost as soon as possible." The interviewer pointed out that beginning a new job after having been incarcerated must be very stressful, and Ian said: "...you know what, the knee is an issue but what we're talking about is also a concern because I was a little bit overwhelmed."

Ian's experience paralleled Phil's in that when he joined the employment program after release, he was under the impression he could ease into the process of finding work, first taking time to better his resume construction and interview skills. However, he was almost immediately set up with a job interview and an offer of employment. He acknowledges that he was fortunate to find an opportunity so quickly, but stated, "I wasn't ready." This conversation demonstrates his understanding that a lack of readiness is not a legitimate reason to deny an employment opportunity, revealing the level of significance that is placed on finding work for parole maintenance. His physical issues probably dissuaded him from accepting the job, but his statements also suggest that he was using his knee injury to conceal the fact that he felt unprepared to accept the job offer so soon after his release. This suggests that while a physical ailment constitutes a legitimate reason for unemployment, emotional or mental ailments do not.

Scott describes the opportunities he had to participate in work release programming as being instrumental in facilitating his reintegration back into the community, noting that "...I think the experiences of actually getting out of prison even before day parole were really

beneficial. One of the reasons I haven't felt weird now is because of those chances." Work release programs allow prisoners to be temporarily released to work in the community for a period of time. They might be escorted or unescorted absences, or they might take place at a halfway house or with CORCAN<sup>2</sup> so that the person completing the work release is still under some measure of supervision. Scott indicated that these experiences helped him to become reacquainted with the outside community. Here, he recalls an incident where he was almost struck by a vehicle while on work release because he forgot to look both ways before crossing the street:

I actually almost got run over on one of these work releases. We had to cross the street to work on a skating rink, and it honestly didn't occur to me that it was a road. It was just there and the guy in charge had to scream for me and grab me because I had forgotten to look both ways. But can you imagine someone getting released in [*city name*]? And it's funny the things you forget and get out of the habit of doing, but it's things like that that really helped to recondition me into society.

Scott had been incarcerated for so long, he forgot to look both ways before crossing a street. This is a stark example of how time spent in prison can erode an individual's ability to function in the outside world, demonstrating that time is needed to readjust. His participation in work release programs helped Scott to not "feel weird" when he was released in the community, supporting the importance of these programs for successful community re-entry.

Natalie, 47, was incarcerated for sixteen years. She confirms that for her, being thrust into a job search immediately upon release would not have resulted in successful employment.

Natalie took some time to acclimatize to the community after being released before trying to find employment. She entered the employment program eight months after her release and received an offer of employment soon after. At the time of her interview she was holding a job and

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<sup>2</sup> CORCAN is an agency that operates within the Correctional Service of Canada to offer on-the-job vocational training for ex-prisoners and for individuals who are still incarcerated (CSC, 2016c).

described herself as content. When asked about the transition from prison to living in a halfway house, she replied, “It was very overwhelming. When I first came out all I did was cry. And a few times I just wanted to go back because it’s familiar, right? I find out here it’s very fast for me.” When asked if she thought she would have been successful if she had participated in the employment program immediately upon release, she replied:

I think for myself, personally, I think I needed time to adjust. I think if I had been put in right away I don’t think I would have done as well. I think, like I said I was dealing with a lot of overwhelming feelings and I needed to go through an adjustment period. Especially someone like me who’s been in a long time right?

When asked if she would have been ready four months after her release, she responded negatively, citing the length of her sentence and the various facets of community reintegration one must attend to:

You’re dealing with all kinds of stuff. You’re dealing with adjusting to the halfway house, you’re dealing with adjusting to the community. Going places by yourself, being more independent... [in prison] you’re told what to do and you’re on a routine, right? So there’s a lot of factors there. It’s not that simple.

She indicated that for her, waiting before attempting to find employment was essential: “...it would have been too much. I think this was perfect timing for me. Because I’m ready now, right?” Both Natalie and Ian had spent a significant amount of time in prison and away from the workforce, and both had felt unprepared to find work immediately upon re-entering the community.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, Natalie did feel ready to pursue employment. She was then placed in a

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<sup>3</sup> An interesting observation can be made when comparing Natalie’s experience with Ian’s. Natalie and Ian spent a similar amount of time incarcerated, and neither felt ready to pursue employment immediately after release. However, Ian felt more comfortable attributing his aversion to accepting the job to his knee injury, and was only open about feeling overwhelmed and unprepared when probed by the interviewer. However, Natalie was able to express this, while Ian attributed his hesitance to begin working using a physical injury. Admitting to feeling overwhelmed and unprepared to pursue employment conveys a certain level of vulnerability. It is possible that while Natalie felt comfortable embodying this level of vulnerability, Ian was restricted from doing so by hegemonic ideals of masculinity and accompanying notions of “toughness.” Although more research would be required for further discussion, this

position through Klink, and was successful in maintaining the position throughout the duration of this study. Her experience suggests that forcing individuals to accept a position before they feel prepared to do so may set them up to fail, and demonstrates some time for adjustment may be needed before one is to successfully accept a position.

### **Social Interaction after Prison**

Upon institutional release, parolees must learn anew to navigate society and the social interactions that come with societal living. Some participants perceived their social skills as inadequate and as impeding their readiness for employment. Beyond the job itself, interactions with others on the job were a source of stress and vulnerability. To this end, several participants noted that while they were happy to be back in the community, re-learning how to interact with others was a challenge. Greg, age 36, stated, “You’re not used to being around normal people, or just people in general. You know what I mean? It was very hard on the system, it’s very stressful.” Seemingly mundane tasks can become daunting for releasees. Greg, for example, explained that, “in the first days I got out, I was really nervous to take the subway.” Similarly, Seb, age 25 and having just finished serving eight and a half years for nine armed robberies, identified “being around so many people” as the most difficult part of reintegration, stating, “You have to have people skills, and I’m shy around people... I don’t know how to relate, I guess. I don’t know what everyone does nowadays. I don’t know how to explain it. I’ve been around criminals for six years and I’m around females and stuff now so I’m just shy.” Phil also indicated feeling overwhelmed by being around so many people. He described the first time he

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discrepancy in experiences might demonstrate the effect gender can have former prisoners’ experiences of parole.

visited the food court in the mall in his city: “I couldn’t focus on eating. I just couldn’t stop looking at all the faces.”

Participants’ demonstrated that their feelings of unease around others can have negative effects on their job search. Finding work requires an individual to expose their vulnerabilities. As job seekers they must reach out to strangers and be open to judgement. Once a job is attained, the new employee may also have to become accustomed to the social climate of their new work place and form relationships with their co-workers, superiors and clients. The stress tied to learning the ins and out of any new job can be daunting, and also requires new employees to draw on their co-workers’ and superiors’ experiences and advice—a potentially overwhelming task for someone recently released from institutional custody. Phil, for example, described the prevalence of such vulnerabilities in how he avoided reaching out to others: “So many different people. I don’t know anybody so I don’t want to ask any questions to anybody.”

Participants’ comments regarding the job interview process are also pertinent to this discussion of compromised social skills. Social anxieties compound the experiences of releasees who are nervous because of their time away from the workforce, which leaves them “out of practice” with applying and interviewing for jobs. The topic frequently arose when the interviewer asked which skills participants felt they needed to work on through programming. For example, Jake, age 28, said that, “For me it’s mostly the interview part. I’m always either too uptight in an interview or just don’t know what to answer, really.” Roy, 27, who had been unemployed for a long period of time before his arrest, felt nervous about attending a job interview because it had been a long time since he had done so: “...I haven’t dressed up like that for a while, and like actually presented myself to someone that’s gonna be looking at me... I’ve never been in those kinds of positions in a long time.” Their words evince that time spent within

an enclosed social system separate from the outside world may leave individuals unaccustomed to interacting with strangers. The time Roy spent away from the workforce also left him uncertain of how he should try to come across to others. The job search process magnifies the discomfort that results as individuals work to reacquaint themselves with social interaction, which necessitates a heightened level of vulnerability and consciousness of self-presentation.

Social anxieties compound the experiences of releasees who are nervous because of their time away from the workforce, leaving them “out of practice” regarding searching, applying and interviewing for jobs. The job application process is even more intimidating for people who have never held a legal job before. When asked about the most difficult aspect of finding a job, Phil, who had never held (legitimate) employment, responded, “Just the fact that I had never done an interview. How to talk, present myself, the right words to say... [it is] very intimidating. My stomach turns.” Klink provided opportunities for practice interviews, and Phil expressed hope that these practice interviews would help him “to get over the nervousness and anxiety” that came with interviewing for jobs.

### **Barriers to Employment: Beyond Readiness**

Beyond an indicated lack of readiness to pursue employment, participants identified various other barriers that negatively impacted their ability to find work. Participants spoke of the importance of having a social network for finding employment and the negative impacts incarceration has on a person’s ability to connect with others and maintain existing relationships. They also spoke of the stigma that follows the criminal record and the resulting dilemma of whether or not to reveal their criminal record to potential employers. Thus, even once individuals do feel prepared to re-enter the workforce and pursue work, there remain barriers that can prevent them from doing so.

## Social Connections

A robust social network was identified by participants as key for finding employment. Mark, a 22 year-old participant who had just received statutory release from a three year sentence, pointed out that this is the case regardless of whether someone has a criminal record: "...there's work out here, but you got to know someone 'cause I have friends who haven't been in the system once and they find it hard to get employment." Scott's crime and the twenty-two year sentence that accompanied it isolated him from his family. Having been incarcerated at the age of fifteen, he had very little opportunity to build a social network as an adult. He described the contrast between his situation and that of other lifers:

I have a couple of friends who are lifers and who have support from family and the community. I know one guy who has a couple of years to go but when he gets out he'll live at the halfway house and his sister has offered to let him use her garage. In the garage he's going to set up a bicycle repair shop which is a skill that he has that he thinks it's in demand enough, and he's going to run it out of her garage. So, he already has their support in terms of if they need tools he'll get it, if he's not doing well financially then he has people that will help him out. So I see him having a number of advantages that I don't. I have other people that I know who are getting out and going back to work in their family's company, or their friends company or their parents know someone who can get them a connection.

The notoriety of Scott's case motivated him to settle in Ontario rather than in the province where his crime took place, despite the fact that his family resided there: "In [*province*] my offence is much more well known than here. Being out here gives me that distance, but it also means that that measure of my support network is gone." Chris, a 25 year-old participant completing his parole in a city away from home, indicated that being on parole inhibited his ability to form a social network upon release: "I'm not even allowed to leave the city and I don't even know anyone here...I can't even have friends because everyone needs to get CPICed<sup>4</sup> to hang out, you

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<sup>4</sup> "CPIC" refers to the Canadian Police Information Centre. A parolee's associates must undergo a background check through CPIC in order to ensure they have no criminal involvement.

know?” Parolees are not to spend time with other persons with a criminal history, yet it is largely not feasible that the people they meet have a background check completed through the Canadian Police Information Centre. This reality has the adverse effect of generating fear of parole breaches if one unintentionally ends up befriending another former prisoner. The latent effect of such restrictions is the resulting difficulty it creates when trying to grow one’s social network while on parole. This is detrimental for parolees’ job-search efforts, because social connections can lead to job opportunities, and demonstrating positive social contact with others can bolster an individual’s legitimacy as well as increase their chances of attaining a position. For example, Scott explains in a later interview that he was able to find a job at a computer store because his volunteer work at a church provided a positive reference for his moral character: “I walked into the store with a resume and said I was looking for a job, and he said, ‘you volunteer at the church—what the heck, I’ll take a chance on you.’” This exemplifies the positive effect social contact with other people and organizations—especially those that connote morality, such as a church—can have on one’s job searching efforts and on others’ perceptions of a person’s character.

As mentioned above, James, who had previously been self-employed as an entrepreneur, found himself unable to return to the job he held before his incarceration due to the corrosive effects being imprisoned had had on his social network. His business contacts shunned him as a result of the negative associations that came with his conviction: “...the kind of friends I was having before, some friends have gone away from me because they don’t want to be associated with a criminal. Some people just see the offence and they don’t want to know what happened and don’t want to know anything about you.” He expressed understanding that in some cases his former contacts did not want to ignore him, but severed ties with him due to the damaging effects

association with an ex-prisoner could have on their reputation: “[It is] not that they didn’t believe me, but they couldn’t be involved with someone who was involved in drug transactions.” To this end, James noted that he felt compelled to take any job he could get in order to financially support his family: “finance-wise it’s really tough because getting a job with a criminal record is really hard here... I’m forced to do any type of job. My family has to survive, so I have to do any job I can find and move on with my life.” This demonstrates how James’ standards for the type of work he would take were lowered by the barriers to employment imposed by his criminal record. Recognizing a need to financially provide for his family while also taking into account his limited job options, James conceded that he would accept any type of work despite being highly qualified in a specific area.

### **Perceived Stigma and the Criminal Record**

Participants’ discomfort with social interaction and the job interview process was also, in many cases, informed by their knowledge of their own stigmatized status. On meeting new people, Scott said, “...it’s always how much should I tell them, what should I say, how much or how little.” Adam was made acutely aware of his stigmatized status when an offer of employment was rescinded following his potential employer’s discovery of his criminal record after a Google search of his name. Following this occurrence, Adam considered changing his name to avoid having someone uncover his criminal record using the internet, but remained hesitant, questioning the alternative and potentially more damaging messages it may convey: “...does it make me look like I’m trying to hide or escape from something?” The uncertainty of who may discover his criminal history was stressful for Adam: “...I suffer from anxiety and in the back of my mind I’m thinking ‘oh my god, what if they find out.’ When I send out an email or a resume it’s always on my mind... if I went into a job and didn’t tell them then it would be

on my mind every day. I would have been fearful every day.” This circumstance brings to mind Goffman’s (1963) pertinent, if convoluted passage: “The individual who is known about by others may or may not know that he is known about by them; they in turn may or may not know that he knows or doesn’t know of their knowing about him” (p. 85).

This discomfort—unease as a result of not knowing who is aware of one’s criminal history, or how much they know—may motivate former prisoners to pre-emptively disclose their criminal record in an attempt to control how they are depicted and bypass the uncertainty of who knows about it. Regarding this, Adam said, “...I would hate to be living with the fact that I had a record and I didn’t tell you and someone finds out. Like I said, I have a lot of anxiety and I know that would create more of it, so if there’s a way to relieve some of it then I am inclined to do that.” In a later interview after Adam had been job searching for three months, he amended his stance regarding disclosure, indicating whether or not he disclosed depended on the situation:

Some places I did. If they didn’t ask I didn’t tell. Other places they asked and I said yes. So some places will also ask if you’ve received a pardon and I was always honest about that. And then other places where they didn’t ask and I got to a point where they would offer me a job I would proactively disclose.

Adam’s technique is consistent with Harding’s aforementioned (2003) identification of three strategies former prisoners use to address their criminal record: non-disclosure, full disclosure, or conditional disclosure. Jake discloses even in recruitment processes where disclosure is not necessary, “...because a lot of places do background checks, so I tell them up front.” Engaging in “preventative telling” (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008) eliminates the anxiety that results from being uncertain about who knows about whose stigmatized status, despite the risk of rejection.

Participants also saw advantage in disclosing on their own terms because it enabled them to contextualize their criminal history rather than being affixed with the hazy definition of “former prisoner,” which creates potential for others to conceptualize their criminal history as

worse than it was. Jake, who served two thirds of 26 months for sexual assault, implied that his crimes occurred as a result of drug use: “I let them know before I tell them what the charge was...what the circumstances were leading up to that because all I tell them now just bear in mind that I was on drugs when this happened and I wasn’t in the right frame of mind. That kind of eases things a little bit.” Natalie’s conviction stemmed from her relationship with her abusive former partner. She contextualized her conviction by describing her personal circumstances at the time:

...they just see paper and that’s not who we are, that doesn’t define us... It’s a one time thing with me and it just happened, it was bad choices on my part. I chose to stay there and I had nowhere else to go. I was young, I was uneducated, I had kids, and I financially wasn’t stable. There’s a lot of circumstances that people don’t understand.

Jay, age 37, served five years of a seven year sentence for robbery, forcible confinement and possession of a firearm. During his second interview, he had a job placement in a coffee company. Regarding disclosure at work, he stated, “Yeah, some people ask and I water it down and some people are interested to know what the story is and stuff so I’ll tell them some of it and how I made a mistake and stuff like that.” Again, this demonstrates how preventative telling may offer the former prisoner a chance to control how much of their story is told, perhaps mitigating the negative effects of the vague label that comes with a criminal record.

Beyond navigating whether or not to disclose, Jake indicated the act itself of recounting what happened to be painful. He pointed out that his co-workers knew that he was incarcerated, but not what his offence was: “There’s still something there that gets me every time I have to tell someone about it.” He said that it gets easier to disclose over time, “...but at the same time it still hits me that I can’t believe I did that.”

Upon disclosure, participants met mixed responses. Employers were occasionally unconcerned by participants’ criminal histories. By Jake’s third interview, six months after his

first, he was well into a college Network Administration program and had an employment prospect tending to satellite communication on an oil rig. He had pre-emptively disclosed his criminal record to the company, and stated, "...they said that they don't give a rat's ass. They just want someone to help who knows what they're doing." However, he noted that employers' responses were generally not so positive:

I have applied to a lot, and they've said that while I'm more than qualified for the job they can't take me because I have a record... Over 300 resumes I must have gotten out around [city name] and I've only heard back from two and I never got hired...most of the places are because of a criminal record, they just don't want to hire anyone with any kind of record."

When asked to identify the most difficult aspect of community reintegration, James, a former entrepreneur stated, "Oh yeah, it's the criminal record. It's killing you everywhere you go. You can't get a decent job. And meeting your friends is a problem because you don't really know if they're judging you about it." James, age 47, spent three years in an Ecuador prison before being transferred to Canada. He was convicted of drug smuggling from Ecuador to Nigeria after agreeing to transport a box for a potential business contact, and continued to assert his innocence throughout his interviews. James was employed in exports, a very contact-based business, but found when he was released that his former connections did not want to associate with him due to the stigma of his criminal record. This left him faced with the challenge of starting from scratch or entering a new field.

### **Conclusion**

My aim in presenting these findings is to illustrate the experiences of releasees as they strive to re-situate themselves within the community and adjust to life outside of prison. As well, reviewing their experiences helps to demonstrate the diverse challenges they face as they attempt to find work. Taking these experiences into account, it becomes starkly evident that individuals

may not feel ready to pursue employment for an array of reasons. My discussion section attempts to discern why some individuals pursue employment despite identifying themselves as not being ready to do so.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The data collected to support this study was originally intended to help illuminate barriers parolees faced as they attempted to find work after being released from prison. Upon analyzing the resulting interview transcripts, the most unique barrier I observed was that participants did not feel ready for employment. Thus, the direction of my analysis focused on attempting to discern whether releasees were ready for work upon release and trying to understand factors that contributed to their readiness, or lack thereof.

Throughout the process of my analysis, I came to the conclusion that many participants were admittedly not prepared for employment; however, their conditions of parole provided them with no other option than to try to find work anyways. To proceed, in my concluding chapter, I use Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma to try to understand why parolees are expected to find work despite admittedly not being ready to do so—especially in the face of potentially negative outcomes due to this lack of readiness. In doing this, I hope to move academic understanding forward by examining the effects stigma has on an individual's ability to enter the workforce at their own pace.

Employment for ex-prisoners has been extensively discussed in the context of “external” barriers such as lack of housing or finances, few employment experiences or educational attainments, and employers' negative attitudes towards those with a history of incarceration. Less discussed, however, has been the effect that an “internal” barrier—like an individual's emotional preparedness to seek and accept work—has on a person's

outcomes. I begin this chapter by discussing participants' demonstrated lack of readiness to find work upon release, and the factors that contributed to making this the case. Next, I discuss how participants were pressured to find work by their parole officers, despite indicating that they were not ready to do so. I then consider readiness as being considered an "illegitimate" reason to delay one's job search, and employ Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma to attempt to explain this idea. I move on to recount participant outcomes and discuss potentially negative effects of forcing parolees to find and accept employment before they are ready. Finally, I suggest tactics to potentially increase individuals' level of readiness to find work upon release.

### **Lack of Readiness**

When analyzing these interview transcripts for emergent themes regarding barriers to finding employment following prison, "readiness" was not a pattern I expected to see. However, it was a topic that emerged repeatedly, both in terms of a lack of practical preparedness to find work (e.g., lack of work experience, lack of job search techniques) and an individual, emotional unpreparedness to enter the workforce. Immediately upon release, individuals understood the expectation to find employment that was placed on them by the parole board and their individual parole officers. Though many participants expressed in no uncertain terms feeling unprepared in this regard, they conceded that it was necessary to look for work in order to fulfill their conditions of release.

Multiple factors fuelled these feelings. In terms of internal factors, some participants were being released and paroled in a community away from their home, and

the stress of learning to navigate an unfamiliar community compounded with the stress of trying to find work. For others, and especially for those who had been incarcerated for a long time and described themselves as “institutionalized,” taking time to grow re-accustomed to the “outside world” after having been inside for so long was necessary before finding work. Participants described the stress incited by having to take part in social interactions in general; more specific and acute, however, was the stress that stemmed from social interactions related to attaining employment. Participants were daunted by the job interview process and uncertain how to present themselves properly, especially as many of the participants in this study had limited formal employment experiences—consistent with previous findings in the literature (Petersilia, 2005; Varghese, Hardin, & Bauer, 2009; Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2010).

Even if internal feelings of readiness were attained, external barriers remained as individuals sought to find work. Participants’ social connections were damaged by having been incarcerated, replicating findings from Western, Kling and Weiman (2001), which negatively impacted their attempts to find employment. As well, participants in this study struggled greatly with the stigma brought on by having a criminal record. Many participants had opportunities rescinded upon the revelation of their criminal histories and articulated uncertainty regarding whether to disclose their criminal records employers and co-workers, or to try to keep them concealed. The effects stigma has on former prisoners’ job-seeking efforts have been well-demonstrated in the scholarly literature, and the results of this study replicate previous findings from other scholars (e.g., Pager, 2007; Chui & Cheng, 2013) in that participants found their employment prospects to be diminished by the repellent nature of having a criminal history.

The demonstrated barriers to employment that participants in this study faced support the argument that individuals need to be given more time after prison to adjust to the outside world and develop employable skills before they are to start working. In prison, there are limited opportunities to develop oneself as hireable through training, work experience, volunteer work and the development of social connections. If these areas were not already developed before a person is incarcerated, they must be addressed and constructed upon release, and this takes time. Even, and perhaps especially, if a person is assessed as having “employment” as one of their dynamic risk factors, they may not be ready to enter a job immediately upon their release. Individuals who have a dynamic risk factor of employment are more likely to be those who obtained their income through illegal means before they were incarcerated. If they were imprisoned for an extremely long period of time, such as in the case of Scott, employment is often applied as a parole condition because it promotes “normal” functioning in society.

Employment as a dynamic risk factor is also often assigned to people such as Natalie, whose crime stemmed from being in an abusive relationship with her romantic partner. She is considered to be at risk of staying in an abusive relationship in the future if she remains financially dependent on her abuser. Thus, individuals who are employable—who have work experience, training, perhaps even a career—are not generally assigned employment as a condition of parole, because it is not something they need to improve upon. Those who are assigned this condition are generally difficult to employ, and may be deeply uncertain and anxious in the face of finding work. Thus, recalling my first research question—are parolees ready to find work upon release? Often, they are not. However, they are still pushed to attain employment by their parole conditions. I proceed by

considering the potentially negative effects of being pushed into accepting employment before one is actually ready to do so.

### **Effects of Seeking Employment Too Soon**

Participants' words demonstrate that upon release, the transition from being incarcerated to being in a position of employment can be difficult. Phil felt rushed into finding work upon release; he understood that employment was important for his desistance, but felt that he was being pushed to seek work before he was ready. Being in the community and outside of prison can be shocking, especially for someone like Natalie, who was incarcerated for seventeen years. There is tension between trying to uphold conditions of parole, which may require haste, and trying to proceed in ways that assure the individual feels comfortable and is set up for success, which may require some extra time. Even once a person does feel ready to pursue work, being incarcerated and therefore removed from the workforce for a period of time can complicate re-entry, such as in the cases of Jake and Roy.

Seeking and attaining employment becomes a graver process as it is translated into a parole condition and placed upon individuals in that their freedom is at risk if they fail to uphold that condition. Thus, while many participants described feelings of apprehension and uncertainty about finding employment, they forged ahead in doing so nonetheless. The effects of feeling desperate to find work brought on results consistent with findings from the literature. Understandings of the severity of these parole conditions informed individuals regarding the type of work they accepted; rather than waiting for the *right* job, which would provide a liveable wage, be suitable to the

individual based on past training and experiences, and preferably be in some way meaningful to the individual, parolees were expected to accept virtually any offer of employment, congruent with Shivy and colleagues' (2007) findings. Recall Adam's statement: "...I had to take any job..." This approach to finding work may result in parolees ending up in jobs that are exploitative or alienating to them, thus nullifying the potential benefits employment might have for desistance—as indicated by Maruna (2001), if the work is found to be punishing rather than rewarding, it is less likely to have positive effects for the parolee and may even catalyze recidivism. This finding also supports indications in the literature that ex-prisoners' disadvantaged position in the labour market and desperation to find employment may make them more likely to find work that is precarious and/or exploitative (Harding, 2003; Atkinson & Rostad, 2003).

I do not intend to argue against the importance employment holds for ex-prisoners' community reintegration; its benefits are clear. Instead, I aim to highlight that prison-to-employment transitions will look different for each individual. Despite the demonstrated importance employment has for desistance and community reintegration, I argue that using parole conditions to pressure individuals into finding work before they are truly ready to do so may not actually provide a positive influence. To demonstrate this, recall the experiences of Phil, Sam, and Roy. Phil articulated wanting to take more time to prepare himself before attempting to find work, but indicated that he was not able to do so for fear that his parole officer would assess him as having a "deteriorating attitude." Sam was released from prison into an area geographically distant from his home and describes himself as being "scared to death," and immediately bought a pack of cigarettes in an attempt to quell the anxiousness he was feeling despite having quit for

many years. Roy had noted that his resume was quite blank and hoped Klink could help by giving him some experience and teaching him how to seek work; he indicated feeling anxious about attempting to find a job because he had not taken part in many job interviews and felt uncertain about how to present himself. All three of these individuals were working with parole conditions that stipulated they find employment or demonstrate that they were attempting to do so, and all three indicated feeling unprepared to take on this task due to a combination of factors.

Every effort was made to make note of individuals' outcomes at the end of this study, though for the same reasons that complicated our ability to conduct follow-up interviews this was not always possible. Phil and Roy had both breached their parole and were back in prison at the end of this study. Final notes on Sam indicate that no one had been able to reach him. Recalling the standard condition of parole that requires parolees to meet regularly with their parole officers, Sam's absence would count as a breach and his parole would likely be revoked. All three of these participants understood that employment was important in supporting their desistance, indicated that they did not feel quite ready to take on a position, but also indicated that their parole condition influenced them to move forward with trying to find work despite this—and all three reoffended. In cases such as these, individuals are dealing with the myriad of emotions, anxieties, and barriers that were hampering their successfully reintegration into the community. The results of this study indicate that in some cases, it is not effective to stipulate that they attain employment during this time.

In contrast, Natalie had expressed that she was not prepared to take on a position of employment immediately upon release, and was able to take eight months to readjust

to the community before she found work. This time afforded her the opportunity to work through the emotions that come with being outside of prison and back in the community, especially after a long sentence (hers was sixteen years). She was able to readjust to a world where her day was her own to schedule, rather than being institutionally controlled. She was able to relearn how to conduct herself in the free community through doing things like going places alone and relearning how to use public transit. After eight months had passed and she once more was comfortable being in the community, she felt ready to pursue work and did so successfully. At the end of this study, Natalie held a steady job and described herself as content.

Like all qualitative work, these outcomes cannot be interpreted as generalizable. However, the results do help to demonstrate how different trajectories from prison into the community, and then into the workplace, might play out. Further, they show that while employment is certainly important for desistance and successful community reintegration, the timing of employment may also be a factor in individuals' success.

While employment may help support the transition from a life of incarceration to a lifestyle focused around desistance, the results of this study suggest that this is only true once a person is *ready* to find work. If a job opportunity is pursued before someone feels mentally ready to do so, it is possible that they may return to a previously discarded familiar crutch, as was demonstrated by Sam. Sam's case displays the ease with which individuals may fall into old destructive habits upon release in light of the stresses brought on by community reintegration—old habits which may manifest as criminal activity or may support potential recidivism. Thus far, I have addressed my first two research questions: (i) are people ready for employment immediately post incarceration?

and (ii) which factors help individuals feel ready to seek work? Next, I address my final research question: if pressuring someone to begin work before they feel ready to do so has such potential for negative outcomes, why does it continue to happen? Using Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, I argue that the stereotypes that follow a history of incarceration are such that a person cannot use "lack of readiness" as a reason to delay finding work.

### **Stigma, Stereotypes, and Readiness**

The way stereotypes people hold about former prisoners crystalize into a stigmatized status had palpable effects on participants' efforts to find work. They were afforded very few chances for employment, and often they were relegated to finding work by undergoing the stressful process of concealing their criminal record from potential employers. This tactic was not ideal as it left participants dealing with anxiousness produced from lying by omission, and in cases where their criminal history was revealed after an offer of employment was made, the offer tended to be quickly rescinded. This provides a clear demonstration of participants' status as having been formerly incarcerated evolving into what Goffman (1963) terms a "master status" in that their criminal history eclipsed any positive attributes they may have possessed. Even if an individual's qualifications, experiences, skillset and personality were found suitable for the job to the extent that they were offered employment, the revelation of their criminal history would overshadow these positive qualities, effectively rendering them invalid.

Recalling Goffman's (1963) stigma of character traits, having a history of incarceration suggests that a person's character is tainted. While it is not immediately

evident, once known, it discredits the stigmatized individual and infers negative stereotypes of them. Having been convicted of a crime and having subsequently served time in prison results in a person being viewed as being of “weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty...” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). Some stereotypes of “criminals,” which ex-prisoners are assumed to be, include being untrustworthy, morally corrupt, and dangerous. A quick search of the word “criminal” on “Thesaurus.com” yields synonyms for criminal as a noun including villain, delinquent, wrongdoer, and miscreant; synonyms for criminal as an adjective include deplorable, shameful, reprehensible, disgraceful, inexcusable, unforgivable, unconscionable, unpardonable, monstrous, and wicked. These synonyms can be interpreted as demonstrating the widespread condemnation of individuals who have been found to have involvement in criminal acts. Because stigma is attached to individuals with a criminal history as a group, individuals who are a part of this group are considered to possess the negative traits associated with it.

I argue that the stereotypes attached to a history of incarceration influence others to be suspicious that someone who indicates being unready for work is being dishonest. Instead, if they express an unpreparedness to find work it is suspected that they are lazy, scheming, and uninterested in participating in the formal labour market. Perhaps they prefer to earn a living dishonestly, in a way that might require less labour and scheduling, but that violates the law. I interpret the findings of this study to suggest that because they have been found to have violated the law before, they are restricted from citing a lack of readiness to pursue work as a reason to delay doing so—it is suspected to be an excuse, a way to disguise their laziness or sneakiness. Ex-prisoners are not allowed to be

unprepared to work. Upon their release, they are expected to behave in a way deemed as “normal” as possible—they must strive to conform, despite the fact that from the time they are imprisoned to the time they are released they are existing in a distinctly abnormal reality.

### **Implications**

It is within the public’s best interests that former prisoners are properly rehabilitated and reintegrated into the community following their release from prison, as this reduces recidivism, thus reducing crime and increasing public safety. Reduced recidivism would also result in smaller prison populations, ease financial burdens on taxpayers and the government, and would benefit communities in that they would gain productive, contributing members.

The findings from this study demonstrate a need for pre-employment programming, offered both in the institution and in the community. Participants displayed a clear lack of readiness to begin working, both in terms of employability and their own personal readiness. For this reason, employment programming should begin within the institution in order to help individuals become more employable and also to aid them in developing a mindset conducive to finding work. This programming should address a wide array of needs. Some incarcerated people have never held employment before and require support in constructing a resume, looking for work, and preparing for interviews. Others may have held a white collar position that they are unable to return to due to the nature of their crime—they might understand how to prepare a resume and how to behave in interviews, but face navigating the job market anew, aiming for positions with which

they likely have little to no experience. Furthermore, as suggested by Scott, work releases may stand as a solution to helping people feel more ready for work upon re-entering the community. Work releases allow people to leave the institution and spend time in the community, thus helping them to reacclimatize to the outside world even while they are still incarcerated. If work releases were more widely available, perhaps more parolees would feel ready to seek and accept employment immediately upon release.

It is difficult to reconcile the fact that people may not feel ready to work after prison with the advantages it may hold in terms of community re-entry and desistance. But perhaps some other type of generative activity that involves less pressure than formal employment might function to benefit the ex-prisoner in some of the same ways. For example, pursuing volunteer positions can demonstrate morality, productivity, and normalcy, without the same pressures and vulnerabilities of formally applying for a job. In fact, pursuing generativity through volunteer work may provide individuals with a greater sense of empowerment than they would receive by accepting a low-status, repetitive work (Maruna, 2001). As well, Maruna (2001) states that participating in "...generative roles can expedite the process of obtaining public acceptance" (p. 124). When people who are known to be ex-prisoners have positive interactions with others in the community, there is opportunity for the stereotypes attached to their stigmatized label to be dismantled. The stigma of being a former prisoner overshadows a person's education and work experiences to the extent that it becomes a "master status," (Goffman, 1963) as discussed above; however, stigma can be dissolved through social connection (Graffam et al., 2004). This demonstrates the importance of working with others and

fostering a sense of social connectedness, but also suggests that this is most effective within jobs or positions that offer opportunity for personal development.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

I conclude my thesis by revisiting my original research questions:

- (i) Are people ready to begin working immediately upon release from prison?
- (ii) Which factors impact their readiness?

My third question, however, is dependent on finding certain answers to the initial two questions:

- (iii) Why are individuals who identify themselves as not ready for employment still expected to begin working?

I found that many of the participants in this study were not prepared to begin working immediately upon release from prison and for a variety of reasons, two of the most pronounced of which were the stress incited by the prison-to-community transition and the daunting nature of the job hunt, especially in the cases of participants with limited employment experiences. Using Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, I address the final question by suggesting that releasees are not allowed to delay their search for employment due to a lack of readiness because the stereotypes that follow having a history of criminality discount a person's credibility. The negative implications that come with their stigmatized status suggest that they are lazy and untrustworthy, and that assertions that they are "not ready" may be excuses to delay finding work for more nefarious reasons.

The findings in this study suggest that while employment is important, individuals may be vulnerable upon release and unprepared to seek employment right away.

Participants were unprepared in terms of employability, and also in terms of personal readiness to face the labour market. However, many attempted to find work in spite of this, at the behest of their parole conditions. The experiences of participants in this study suggest that rushing into employment immediately following release may result in negative outcomes, such as recidivism, but speculates that personal readiness is not regarded to be a legitimate barrier to employment due to the stereotypes that inform others' beliefs about ex-prisoners.

Many of my findings parallel and support current understandings within the body of scholarly literature detailing prison-to-work transitions. However, most of the existing literature is American, and my study demonstrates that these patterns can be replicated in a Canadian context. Furthermore, my findings are relevant to a broad discussion of what we, as a society, expect life to look like for people after they are released from prison. Moral reform, demonstration of desistance, and productivity are expected of individuals who are released but we often fail to provide the tools that make meeting these goals possible. With this thesis, I hope to encourage all who give thought to releasees' lives after prison to consider the process and the needs of the individual, rather than just their desired outcome.



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