
How Work Affects Crime—And Crime Affects Work—Over The Life Course

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Abstract

The meaning and social significance of both work and crime change dramatically over the life course. This chapter considers the connection between employment and criminal behavior at different life-course stages. We briefly discuss theories suggesting a general link between work and crime, and then take up the question of how work affects crime in adolescence, emerging adulthood, and older ages. We next report on classic and contemporary research showing how crime and punishment affect employment and earnings. The chapter concludes by taking stock of what has been learned and suggesting lines of further inquiry into when and how work matters for crime and delinquency.

Keywords

Employment • Crime • Punishment • Life course

There is a deep and enduring faith among both the general public and policymakers that employment is critically important in addressing crime. This engrained cultural belief has been the backbone of support for programming in this area, such as job-training programs for former prisoners. Yet, the meaning and social significance of both work and crime change dramatically over the life course, such that work may have one effect in adolescence and quite another in adulthood. We will first unpack the theoretical foundation

undergirding these cultural beliefs and then examine the empirical research that tests them.

The new and emerging research described here suggests that the basic relationship between work and desistance from crime may be more complex than once thought. At the societal level, several counterintuitive trends reveal complexities in how humans choose their paths toward crime and employment. If work is so closely related to crime, why have crime rates continued to fall during the great recession era of the late 2000s (Uggen 2012)? What is more, new research is beginning to trace and specify the effects of involvement in the criminal justice system on future employment prospects, suggesting a self-reinforcing relationship between the lack of quality employment opportunities and future criminal activity.

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This chapter reviews research concerning employment and crime over the life course with a particular focus on three areas: first, how work affects crime; second, how criminal punishment affects work opportunities; and third, how these two processes operate in tandem in a contemporary context of widespread electronic criminal records and background checks.

How Work Affects Crime

Classic criminological theory provides ample reason to think that employment might deter crime. *Rational choice and economic* theories suggest that the income associated with work should reduce the motivation to commit crime for economic gain (Becker, 1968; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Ehrlich, 1973; Freeman, 1992). After all, most crime is economic behavior—almost 90% of the serious offenses reported in the USA each year concern remunerative crimes (see, e.g., United States Department of Justice, 2001, p. 278). Income is therefore a key consideration, with jobs functioning as an effective “money delivery system” that reduces the incentive to commit economic crime. Along similar lines, *anomie* (Merton, 1938) and *differential opportunity theories* (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) argue that crime becomes the most attractive option when legitimate pathways to economic and social ascent are blocked. One’s relative access to legitimate and illegitimate work opportunities operate to strongly influence the decision to commit crime.

Other perspectives focus on how investment in work and commitment to conventional lines of action function to prevent criminal acts. *Social control theory* (Hirschi, 1969) suggests that workers will have a greater “stake in conformity” (Toby, 1957) than nonworkers, inhibiting criminal acts that might put such an investment at risk. Working increases informal social controls and expands professional social networks, tying individuals to others in networks of reciprocal obligation (Sampson & Laub, 1993). *Routine activities theory* extends this idea to the structural impact of employment on day-to-day routines (Cohen & Felson, 1979), where the opportunities to commit crime are guided by the “routine activities of

everyday life” (Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996, p. 635).

These theories also lend support to life-course specific theories, or *age-graded theories of informal control* (Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1991; Uggen, 2000). While adolescents and youth engage in routine activities that allow for criminal opportunities (i.e., unsupervised time with peers), adults are more likely to be engaged in legitimate employment in a formal, supervised environment.

Self-control theory argues that people self-select into both employment and criminal activity (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). From this perspective, criminals and noncriminals are differentiated by their varying levels of self-control and ability to delay gratification. It is not the work, per se, that inhibits crime, but rather individual differences in factors that lead people to seek legal employment in the first place. In this view, unmeasured levels of self-control likely drive statistical relationships between work and desistance from crime.

Each of these theories posits a particular relationship between employment and crime at different stages of the life course. In the next section, we appraise the evidence bearing on these varied perspectives.

Empirical Research

When examining the effect of work on crime across the life course, it is clear that both the intensity—in particular, the hours worked per week—and the qualities of work are keys to understanding the relationship. For youth, both a complete lack of work and total commitment to work are linked to criminal activity (e.g., Bachman, Staff, O’Malley, Schulenberg, & Freedman-Doan, 2011). For adults, the quality of work and the bonds created through legal employment (Uggen, 1999, 2000) facilitate desistance from crime as individuals transition into adult roles.

Effects for Youth

In the earlier stages of the life course, much empirical research suggests that although involvement in work during adolescence is in many ways beneficial,

over-involvement in work at a young age appears to be detrimental. In particular, adolescents over-invested in this adult-like role are more likely to engage in delinquency, although debates continue over whether intensive work plays a *causal* role or is simply a risk factor (Bachman et al., 2011; Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; D'Amico, 1984; Hirschi, 1969; Marsh, 1991; Mortimer & Finch, 1986; Shanahan, Finch, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Fegley, & Dornbusch, 1993; but see Paternoster, Bushway, Apel, & Brame, 2003).

Further research has supported this notion by identifying other negative effects of work experience, particularly for adolescents who work more than 20 h per week (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Staff & Uggen, 2003; Wright & Cullen, 2000; Wright, Cullen, & Williams, 1997; but see Johnson, 2004 for evidence of race differences in the effect of intensive work). As adolescents value these intensive work roles, other age-appropriate roles appear to become less salient or important to them. To the extent that young people invest less time and attention in their school roles and responsibilities, for example, they are likely to experience decreased educational performance and lower aspirations for further schooling (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Mortimer & Finch, 1986; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1995; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). Conversely, Staff and Uggen (2003) find the lowest rates of 12th-grade school deviance, alcohol use, and arrest among adolescents whose jobs supported rather than displaced academic roles and provided opportunities for them to learn new things.

On the other end of the spectrum, a lack of employment opportunities may also be linked to increased delinquency in the adolescent stage of the life course (Allen & Steffensmeier, 1989; Sullivan, 1989). Crutchfield (1989) shows that an abundance of secondary labor market jobs is associated with higher crime rates, and in an analysis of 14- to 24-year-old males, Freeman and Rodgers (1999) find that crime rates drop in areas with the steepest declines in unemployment.

Arnett (2000) identifies a distinctive “emerging adulthood” life-course stage for those 18–25 in societies requiring prolonged periods of education. Furstenberg and colleagues (2004) similarly attribute

lengthening adolescence to the increased time needed to obtain jobs that support families. Much recent life-course research has thus directed special attention to crime in the emerging adult period (e.g., Loeber & Farrington, 2012; Osgood, Wayne, Foster, & Ruth, 2005; Thornberry et al., 2012).

In terms of the overall life course, however, most empirical research suggests that work is more effective in reducing criminal behavior for adults over the age of 25 than for adolescents or even emerging adults ages 18–25 (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 2000; Wright, Cullen, & Williams, 2002). For example, in a study of people leaving prison and drug treatment, Uggen (2000) finds significant effects of work only for former prisoners age 27 or over.

Effects for Adults

Moving to the post-emerging adult stage of the life course, research has linked crime and work for adults in three major areas, showing: first, how job quality matters in desistance from crime; second, how prosocial bonds created through legal employment act as a deterrent to crime; and third, how aggregate unemployment levels relate to crime rates.

The quality of a job appears to matter more than the mere presence of legal employment in its effect on reducing crime (Allan & Steffensmeier, 1989; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 1999). A long line of studies shows a relationship between high-quality work opportunities and diminished criminal behavior. Allan and Steffensmeier (1989) find that inadequate employment and unemployment increases arrest rates among young adults. Shover (1996) identifies jobs with “a decent income” and the opportunity to exercise creativity and intelligence as facilitating desistance from crime (127). Uggen (1999) finds that former prisoners who obtain high-quality jobs are less likely to reoffend than those who obtain lower-rated jobs, even when controlling for self-selection into employment.

Consequently, labor markets characterized by high unemployment rates and low-quality jobs are associated with increased crime, even after statistically controlling for various sources of selection

and background characteristics. For instance, Crutchfield and Pitchford (1997) demonstrate that youths working in the secondary labor market are more likely to commit crime as compared to those in higher quality, stable jobs. Using a fixed effects model that adjusts for some sources of selectivity, Uggen and Thompson (2003) find a positive effect of local unemployment rates on illegal earnings, though this effect is reduced to nonsignificance when individual employment characteristics are taken into account.

Professional networks developed through legal employment also change the informal social controls to which a potential offender is subject. Adopting prosocial work and family roles, as well as developing an identity as a law-abiding citizen all facilitate desistance from crime (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997; Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). Quality employment is often in short supply for those with extensive criminal histories, though it remains critical to establishing a prosocial identity in the process of desisting from crime (Maruna, 2001). Crime, in turn, can subvert claims to adult status. Massoglia and Uggen (2010) find that continued involvement in the delinquent activities of adolescence is largely inconsistent with adult roles and incompatible with a global perception of oneself as a working adult.v

Aggregate Effects

Aggregate-level examinations of crime and unemployment rates offer important correlational evidence, though the direction of this relationship remains subject to debate (see Uggen & Wakefield, 2007). Several theoretical perspectives underpin these conflicting predictions. Economic choice and opportunity theories predict a positive relationship between unemployment and crime, as those without legal income are forced into illegal means (Cantor & Land, 1985; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Ehrlich, 1973; Greenberg, 1985). On the other hand, routine activities theory posits that unemployed persons will spend more time at home, acting as guardians against crimes such as

burglary while simultaneously reducing their risk of victimization outside the home (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Cantor and Land (1985) argue that both the processes operate in tandem, resulting in a complex and difficult-to-observe link between unemployment rates and crime rates. Empirical research has, however, found some effect of unemployment on property crimes in particular (Raphael & Winter-Ember, 2001), even when controlling for other demographic and economic factors. This relationship has been less apparent for other types of crime.

Improved Designs

Though previous research has been useful in understanding larger trends in how work and crime operate in tandem, most existing studies remain poorly suited to test the complex mechanisms that underlie these processes (Thornberry & Krohn, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2012). To remedy these limitations, experiments, statistical adjustments to estimate less biased effects, and longitudinal designs have been implemented to more closely examine how employment acts to reduce crime (Glueck & Glueck, 1930, 1937, 1943; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Laub & Sampson 2003; Uggen, 2000; Zweig, Yahner, & Redcross, 2011).

Experiments

Though difficult to implement, experimental designs that compare a randomized treatment group to a control group remain the gold standard in determining the effects of an employment intervention on criminal behavior. The National Supported Work Program found significant effects of transitional employment in preventing reoffending for older adults (Uggen, 2000), while a recent evaluation of the New York Center for Employment Opportunities found the strongest effects of transitional employment for high-risk offenders who were most recently released from prison (Bloom, Redcross, Zweig, & Azurdia, 2007; Zweig et al., 2011).

Cohort and Longitudinal Studies

Longitudinal studies have been key in following work and crime across the life course, while also controlling for self-selection into employment, as well as prior deviance. A classic cohort study by Glueck and Glueck (1930, 1937, 1943) followed 500 delinquent boys, matched to a control group, and studied the impact of family, work, and attachment on delinquency. Laub & Sampson (1993, 2003) reanalyzed these data, focusing heavily on the effects of job stability and commitment to work. Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972) followed a cohort of men born in Philadelphia in 1945, finding a positive relationship between unemployment and arrest. Farrington and West's Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (Farrington, 1986; West & Farrington, 1973, 1977) followed 411 boys from London from the age of 8, similarly finding increased criminal involvement among young adults during times of unemployment (Farrington, Gallagher, Morley, St. Ledger, and West, 1986).

Though yielding powerful insight into trajectories of work and crime over the life course, these classic studies often relied upon a single birth cohort—a design that has been criticized for its inability to distinguish between cohort, period, and age effects. For example, a low rate of employment among young workers in 2009 may be a function of their youth (an age effect), or it may reflect the significant recession occurring at that time (a cohort effect). Such studies may also suffer from issues of selective attrition, if for example, those at greater risk of joblessness and incarceration are less likely to participate in later survey waves (Farrington, Ohlin, & Wilson, 1986; Tonry, Ohlin, & Farrington, 1991). In response, this classic design has been updated and modified more recently into larger-scale projects (e.g., Thornberry & Krohn, 2003), as well as smaller community studies (e.g., Mortimer, 2003). Researchers have also adopted accelerated designs that follow several cohorts of a period of years (Earls, Brooks-Gunn, Raudenbush, & Sampson, 2002; Tonry et al., 1991), saving time and cost while still allowing for sophisticated analysis.

One particular data source, The National Longitudinal Study of Youth, has been especially important in identifying work and crime patterns for younger populations. Using these data, Crutchfield and Pitchford (1997) show that youths employed in the secondary labor market are more likely to commit crime relative to those in more high quality, stable jobs. Crime among secondary labor market workers was especially high in areas of high secondary labor market concentration (Crutchfield & Pitchford, 1997). Using these same data, Ploeger (1997) shows that work was associated with a number of delinquent or problem behaviors for adolescents (substance use, alcohol use, and aggression), even after controlling for prior levels of delinquency. A number of other studies using longitudinal data have further clarified the relationship between work intensity and delinquency while controlling for experience and selection (McMorris & Uggen, 2000; Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, Shanahan, & Call, 1996; Staff & Uggen, 2003; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991).

More recently, a series of NLSY97 papers by Robert Apel, Gary Sweeten, Shawn Bushway, Robert Brame, and Raymond Paternoster have advanced understanding about the complex dynamics between employment and crime (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Apel, Bushway, Paternoster, Brame, & Sweeten, 2006, 2008). This research has challenged the orthodoxy in this area—particularly the oft-reported finding that “intensive” work of more than 20 h per week is criminogenic for teenagers (Paternoster, Bushway, Apel, & Brame, 2003). Although the matter is far from resolved, this important policy question continues to occasion much discussion in reports by the National Research Council (1998) and other key policy actors.

Statistical Techniques

The latter line of research speaks to the rapid development and application of advanced statistical techniques to the question of employment and crime. The literature has now advanced past cross-sectional studies that employ covariate adjustment, to include longitudinal studies employing lagged

dependent variables, Heckman-style Selectivity Models, Propensity-Score Matching, Endogenous Switching Regressions, and Within-person Change Models and Hierarchical Linear Modeling (Uggen & Wakefield, 2008). For instance, Osgood and colleagues (1996, 1999) use fixed effect within-person change models to show that young adults who spend relatively large amounts of unstructured time with peers are more likely to engage in crime. Uggen and Thompson (2003) apply similar techniques to show that employment in regular jobs and in subsidized program jobs both reduce the illegal earnings of study participants in the following month.

While these new adjustments have advanced research on work and crime, they have also cast some doubt on previous findings. For instance, when Paternoster et al. (2003) compared covariate adjustment, lagged dependent variable, and pooled cross-sectional models, their results challenged the oft-cited finding that high work intensity increases crime among adolescents. Johnson (2004) also finds that the positive effect of intensive work on delinquency is more applicable to white youth than youth of other races (see also Newman, 1999). Using lagged and contemporaneous measures of unemployment, Britt (1994, 1997) and Cantor and Land (1985) find a negative effect of unemployment rates on crime but a positive lagged unemployment effect. Today, new methods and perspectives are seeking to better contextualize work and crime in relation to contemporary problems of mass imprisonment, the Great Recession of 2007–2010, and punishment.

New Context, New Methods

As incarceration rates ascended from the mid-1970s to 2010, research followed that began to describe a new concentration of disadvantage and crime in particular communities (Kasarda, 1989; Massey & Denton, 1993; Morenoff & Sampson, 1997; Wilson, 1996). The diminishing quality of employment in the secondary sector of the labor market and rising income inequality are likely to have had especially strong effects on

the criminal involvement and incarceration rates of African-American males (Uggen, Wakefield, & Western, 2005; Western, 2006; see also Blau & Blau, 1982; Crutchfield & Pitchford, 1997; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1992; Pettit & Western, 2004; Western, Kleykamp, & Rosenfeld, 2004).

The expansion of the criminal justice system in the USA since the 1970s also means that more and more US workers have a criminal history (Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006; Western, 2006). In 2010, there were ~1.6 million people (mostly men) incarcerated in state and federal prisons (United States Department of Justice, 2011). It is now estimated that 12.8% of adult males have a felony conviction (Uggen et al., 2006), with rates among African-American men much higher (Western, 2006).

Painstaking qualitative research has also been employed to help explain the processes and context linking crime and employment. Mercer Sullivan's influential (1989) ethnographic fieldwork shows how labor market and neighborhood conditions affect young men's entry into crime, the development of criminal activities, and (often) their transition into legal employment as they entered adulthood. Six years of fieldwork by Alice Goffman (2010) shows how in the context of mass imprisonment, young black men in disadvantaged neighborhoods spend much of their time "dipping and dodging" to avoid arrest and potential reincarceration, thereby compromising their careers and family relationships. The juvenile gang members in MacLeod's (1987[2010]) fieldwork were also followed into middle-age, where many have struggled to obtain legal employment. There have also been efforts to combine qualitative and quantitative research. Harris, Evans and Beckett (2010) adopt a multimethod approach to examine the origins and effects of monetary sanctions on convicted criminals. Sampson and Laub (2003) combine divergent sources of life history data, including narratives, interviews, and advanced statistical models, to understand and explain men's transitions into and out of crime from boyhood until age 70. They find that unemployment, like marriage and military service, is systematically related to changes in crime throughout this long period.

What is clear from these studies is that the relationship between work and crime is not only complex but also is shaped by the contemporary context of incarceration and punishment. The next section describes research that seeks to understand how punishment, in turn, affects work.

How Punishment Affects Work

Research designs similar to the ones described above have also been employed to examine the reverse relationship between punishment and future employment, including cross-sectional, experimental, longitudinal, and qualitative designs. Findings show that punishment affects work in terms of future employability, earnings, and skills for those with a criminal record. After a review of research in these three areas, we will discuss the life-course implications of these effects.

Employability

Surveys and experimental audits of employers have been conducted in recent years to understand how a criminal record affects future work possibilities. In Pager's (2003, 2007) Milwaukee audit study, she sent pairs of "testers" to apply for entry-level jobs—one applicant with a criminal record and one (otherwise identical) applicant without such a record. Pager found that for white testers, there was a large and significant effect of criminal record on employment: 34% of whites without records received callbacks, while 17% with records received callbacks. For black testers, 14% without criminal records received callbacks, compared to 5% with a record. Thus, the effect of a criminal record is "40% larger for blacks than for whites" (Pager, 2003, p. 959).

Because this design could not control for employer effects or address cross-racial discrimination, the study was modified and replicated in New York (Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009) with Black, Latino, and White testers applying for the same jobs. The White tester received a job

offer or callback 31.0% of the time, compared to 25.2% for Latinos and 15.2% for Blacks (though only the black–white comparison was statistically significant). When comparing the stigma of record to the stigma of race, Whites with criminal records obtained positive responses in 17.1% of job applications, compared to 15.9 for Latinos, and 12.9% for Blacks. The authors conclude that New York employers view minority applicants as essentially equivalent to Whites just out of prison.

Large-scale surveys have yielded important information on the rate at which employers conduct background checks (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2004, 2007). They have also been administered to employers to assess a company's likelihood of hiring ex-offenders and to assess what company characteristics are related to their responses. In a study of 619 Los Angeles employers, Stoll and Bushway (2007) found that employer-initiated criminal background checks were negatively related to hiring ex-offenders. Another survey of California establishments reconfirmed that employers who routinely check backgrounds are significantly less likely to hire people with criminal records (Raphael, 2010).

The ease and low cost of performing criminal background checks has likely exacerbated the effect of punishment on work. While in the past, criminal background checks involved a material process of obtaining a paper record from the state or county, many employers are now turning to the computerized and unregulated private industry to obtain criminal histories: current surveys show nearly 80% of employers outsource such checks to a security establishment (Raphael, 2010). Yet, even those who choose to use official state repositories of criminal records run into barriers; overall, accuracy and completeness of criminal records continues to be the most serious problem affecting criminal history databases (Harris & Keller, 2005).

These practices and barriers suggest that those with criminal backgrounds are typically limited to finding work in the low-wage labor market, as Cook observed in 1975 and Raphael, 2010

observes today. The scope of which job-types are being checked has also widened because of the ease and flexibility of obtaining records (combined with the risk of not), even applicants for these “menial” jobs are being screened (Solove & Hoofnagle, 2006).

Earnings and Skills

Labor market research also shows that male ex-inmates earn less and experience more unemployment than comparable men who have not been to prison or jail (Western, Kling & Weiman, 2001). Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a fixed effects model, and a comparison of subgroups, Western (2002) shows that incarceration reduces later earnings and employment opportunities by disrupting connections with potential employers (e.g., Granovetter, 1973; Hagan, 1993), although the duration of incarceration does not appear to be closely related to employment prospects (Kling, 2006).

Criminal punishment, particularly incarceration, can also disrupt the acquisition of new job skills, entry into high-quality employment, and the development of social networks that aid in obtaining legal employment (Western et al., 2001). In addition, behaviors learned through the process of punishment and incarceration (what Clemmer 1940 and Sykes 1958 termed “prisonization”) are likely to be incongruent with workplace behavioral expectations (Irwin & Austin, 1997). This erosion of job skills likely continues throughout the life course. In the careful reexamination of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data noted earlier, Apel and Sweeten (2010) find the well-documented employment gap between those with and without criminal records is almost entirely accounted for by labor market nonparticipation—an effect especially strong for those who were incarcerated, as opposed to convicted without incapacitation. Incarceration thus appears to lead to job detachment by interrupting work history and education, deepening rates of unemployment for those who have been incarcerated. This line of research, taken together, demonstrates how

individuals with criminal records are both shut out of, and select away from, future employment.

Directions for Future Research

The research described here shows the cyclical nature of the employment–crime relationship. For example, either too much or too little work in adolescence can increase the likelihood of delinquency. The resulting punishment, in turn, can “knife-off” the educational and employment opportunities typically available in emerging adulthood (Maruna & Roy, 2007; Sampson and Laub, 2003). These, in turn, can engender greater criminal activity—and hence greater punishment—in adulthood. The resulting cycle of criminal activity, punishment, and employment difficulties can continue throughout the life course. Yet, over time, there is much evidence that desistance from crime and the assumption of adult work roles act as mutually reinforcing processes. Further specification of these life-course processes is the task of current and ongoing research on employment and crime.

In particular, there is urgent need to develop interventions for youth that will both improve employment outcomes and reduce criminal activity. We thus call for deeper inquiry into age-graded differences in approaches that have been successful with older clients, particularly subsidized and transitional employment schemes. While we are beginning to understand the differential impact of work across the life course, we must now turn toward the difficult work that will help translate these findings into policy. For instance, should youth crime prevention programs put greater emphasis on building human capital in these earlier stages of the life course, or focus more narrowly on building work maturity skills? If youth work fewer hours as a crime prevention strategy, will they be adequately prepared for the job market in adulthood?

We also recommend an expansion of the emerging qualitative literature on the cycle of crime and punishment as it relates to employment (Braman, 2004; Goffman, 2010). This could take the form of case studies, interview projects, or

longer-term ethnographic fieldwork. These studies have the ability to carefully describe and contextualize in the lived experience of employment and crime, including the expanding segment of the population whose criminal history information is now routinely screened by employers.

In a related field of inquiry, it is essential to study work and crime through the perspectives of employers and hiring managers. With a significant proportion of Americans now having electronically accessible criminal records, research should examine what qualities of criminal histories matter the most for obtaining employment (Lageson, Vuolo and Uggen, 2010). Does the timing and severity of the offense matter in employer decisions to hire applicants with a criminal background? How does personal contact with applicants, workplace composition, and labor market characteristics influence these decisions? How are criminal histories interpreted for older and younger applicants? What are the structural and interpersonal nuances to this process?

Experimental research, including randomized evaluations of ongoing programs (Bloom et al., 2007; Zweig et al. 2011) and audit studies (Pager, 2003, 2007), should continue to receive emphasis. Yet, these can also be expanded to understand how other stratification dimensions—such as age and gender—modify the relationship between criminal stigma and employment. Such work is especially important in the context of the recent economic recession, as policymakers contemplate a new wave of publicly subsidized job programs and transitional assistance for the long-term unemployed. There is evidence of some success for such programs in the 1970s, but it is unclear whether or how such programs would operate in the current policy environment.

Finally, research should carefully examine the effects of recent initiatives to lessen the effect of stigma of criminal record on future employment, particularly those developed from federal “Second Chance Act” funding, criminal record expungement efforts, and “Ban the Box” campaigns. With regard to the latter, some laws are prohibiting public employers from asking an applicant to report their criminal history until a job interview has been offered (thus allowing all applicants an

equal opportunity to be evaluated without regard to criminal history). With regard to expungement, we still know relatively little about whether removing old, dismissed, or low-level offenses from an individual’s criminal record actually improves their employment prospects. There is today a healthy public debate around the openness, availability, and accuracy of criminal records in the electronic age, as well as a rising awareness of employment discrimination on the basis of criminal history. Yet, these debates are not fully informed by social scientific evidence—a gap in knowledge and its dissemination that should animate sociological and criminological researchers concerned with employment and crime.

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