

# Study explores incarceration, employment and re-offense during COVID-19 pandemic

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There are more than 2 million people incarcerated in the United States. In 2019, more than 608,000 individuals were released from prison. It is estimated that up to 55 percent of people released from prison will be re-

incarcerated within five years. The cause of high recidivism or re-offense rates in the U.S. is multi-dimensional. Moreover, the relationship between employment and crime is complex.

To combat an unstable work history and lack of interpersonal skills, some communities have implemented transitional [employment](#) programs, which rapidly place participants into temporary, subsidized jobs, usually in nonprofit or government agencies. Transitional employment programs seek to reduce structural barriers to obtaining employment and increase interpersonal skills. To date, evidence on the effectiveness of these programs is mixed.

Cassandra A. Atkin-Plunk, Ph.D., a researcher from Florida Atlantic University's College of Social Work and Criminal Justice, conducted a [randomized controlled study](#) to examine the intended and unintended effects of a transitional employment program in Palm Beach County, while taking account the natural experiment that occurred during the study period—the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study not only examined the effects of the transitional employment program participation on employment and recidivism, but also looked at the program's mechanisms such as hours worked and hours spent in cognitive behavioral interventions and three employment sectors—construction, kitchen and warehouse/retail—on future system involvement.

The randomized control trial conducted from Nov. 26, 2018 to March 31, 2021, included 175 study participants ranging in age from 19 to 67, who on average, had between eight to 10 prior arrests and three to 10 prior convictions. Almost all study participants were unemployed at the time of enrollment (92 percent in the treatment group; 95 percent in the control group), and the majority were frequently unemployed in the year prior to their incarceration (70 percent in the treatment group; 75

percent in the control group).

Results of the study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, found that although there was no significant impact of the transitional employment program on recidivism, those who participated in the program were significantly more likely to be employed, and those who were employed were less likely to recidivate.

Those who received reentry services prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and also obtained employment, were substantially less likely to recidivate during the one-and-a-half-year follow-up period after their release from prison.

"Obtaining employment, rather than participation in transitional employment programs, is the driving factor for reducing recidivism," said Atkin-Plunk, senior author, associate director and associate professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College of Social Work and Criminal Justice.

"As such, reentry programs should focus efforts on assisting individuals with prior incarcerations to get employment. They can do this through increasing networks and connections to local businesses, organizations and others to identify and expand job opportunities for program participants."

The transitional employment program in this study provided hands-on employment opportunities and also incorporated evidence-based cognitive behavioral interventions into its curriculums—all with the overarching goal of increasing employment and reducing recidivism.

When implemented with fidelity or as intended, cognitive behavioral interventions are very effective and one of the most successful treatment options for system-impacted individuals. This study, however, found that

individuals who received more cognitive behavioral treatment hours had marginally lower odds of reconviction.

"A number of research questions were examined through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Atkin-Plunk. "Unfortunately, the program in this research study was not immune from the impacts of the pandemic such as tremendous job loss and challenges in delivering intervention programs. If participants in the program had received the full dosage of the cognitive behavioral intervention, it is likely that its impact would have approached intended effects."

Study findings suggest that recidivism reductions can be achieved if implementation challenges are overcome and participant buy-in increases so that people receive more programmatic hours.

"Using and incorporating these intervention strategies into reentry programs while also ensuring participant buy-in remains increasingly important," said Atkin-Plunk.

The study sheds new light on the topic while continued efforts are needed to fully understand how to support residents returning to communities and identify essential elements associated with employment programs.

**More information:** Cassandra A. Atkin-Plunk, Examining the effects of a transitional employment program for formerly incarcerated people on employment and recidivism: a randomized controlled trial during COVID-19, *Journal of Experimental Criminology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s11292-023-09578-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-023-09578-6)

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