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## LAW, CRIMINOLOGY & CRIMINAL JUSTICE | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A phenomenological study of employer perspectives on hiring ex-offenders

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**Abstract:** Several researchers established a direct relationship between recidivism and ex-offenders' unemployment. While the consequences of ex-offender unemployment to society are known, the lived experiences of employers or business owners making employment decisions about ex-offenders were unknown. Using data obtained from in-depth interviews with employers who have considered hiring an ex-offender in the Baltimore Metropolitan area, this phenomenological study yielded findings that perception and trust played significant roles in employers' hiring decisions. The study further revealed that employers recognize ex-offenders need assistance with basic workplace skills and that one of the primary concerns about employing ex-offenders is a backlash from customer perceptions.

**Subjects:** Crime Control; Victims and Victimology; Crime and Crime Prevention; Sentencing and Punishment; Probation; Criminal Behaviour and Forensic Psychology; Criminal Justice

**Keywords:** ex-offender employment; public perception; recidivism; reentry; stigma; trust

### 1. Introduction

With more than 6.8 million Americans living in American correctional facilities (Glaze & Kaebe, 2014, p. 1), the financial costs of public safety policies are increasing exponentially. According to a study conducted by The United States Department of Education (2016), total state and local corrections

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

More than 6.8 million Americans are living in American correctional facilities and once released are often rearrested within 6 months due to their inability to secure employment and lack of access to support systems. Because the economic strength of the nation depends on the productivity of its citizenry, it was important to investigate why employers might be hesitant to hire ex-convicts. Using in-depth interviews to gather data, employers voiced common themes related to employing ex-convicts. Findings revealed that perception, lack of trustworthiness, and backlash from customers' perception of ex-offenders, make hiring decision difficult for employers. Each of these themes reflects the life experiences of employers as they considered ex-offender for employment. As suggested by the findings, society leaders might consider giving ex-offenders an opportunity to rebuild their lives by providing skills for employment, a supportive context to rebuild trust, and a more balanced media presence free from unfounded stereotypes.

expenditures increased by 324% from \$17 to \$71 billion between 1980 and 2013, a rate that tripled the rate of increase in overall education spending. Walmsley (2013) noted that the United States incarceration rate has grown to more than twice that of 90% of the countries of the world.

Many of those incarcerated have been in prison before. Durose, Cooper, and Snyder (2014) reported a recidivism rate of approximately 70% within 3 years and 77% within 5 years, with almost 50% of the re-arrests occurring in the first 6 months after release. According to Leverentz (2008), ex-offenders committed new crimes mainly because they could not get a decent job or access to a support system. Bryan, Haldipur, and Williams (2008) and Haslewood-Po'csik, Brown, and Spencer (2008) revealed a higher likelihood existed for an ex-offender (a person who have served jail or prison time for an offense committed) to be depressed and become entrapped in a cycle of self-defeating behaviors, possibly resulting in re-engaging in illicit activities when denied employment opportunities.

The high recidivism rate was supposed to have been reduced by the Second Chance Act, enacted by Former President George W. Bush in 2004. According to Pogorzelski, Wolff, Pan, and Blitz (2005), the Second Chance Act was expected to help connect ex-offenders to social services and public health support, employment opportunities, apprenticeships, skilled training, and job placement services. The Act was also expected to help expedite provisional housing and case management services.

Despite the objective of the Second Chance Act—to urge Americans to give ex-offenders another chance to prove themselves—several studies revealed public hostility toward ex-offenders. Park (2009) revealed that conventional society did not welcome released offenders (ex-offenders) home, rather ex-offenders were denied the opportunity of employment and other essential human and constitutional privileges of being a citizen through a combination of mistreatment called invisible punishments. Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) revealed that labeling released offenders as *ex-offenders* results in a social stigma by portraying them as criminals or as individuals with a tendency to recidivate to bad behavior. The failure of ex-offenders to gain employment is an indicator of the pervasive perception and apprehension of business owners and hiring managers toward ex-offenders (Crawford & McBride-Owens, 2014) hence the focus of the study was on employers rather than ex-offenders. Whereas many researchers identified the consequences to society of ex-offender unemployment (Crawford & McBride-Owens, 2014; Schmitt & Warner, 2010), the lived experiences of employers or business owners making employment decisions about ex-offenders were unknown.

### **1.1. Advantages of employment**

Released offenders, regardless of their offense, require jobs to survive in their new domain of liberty. Trimbur (2009) reported that employment reduced recidivism tendency and facilitate ex-offender's adjustment to civilian life in several ways. According to Mesters, van der Geest, and Bijleveld (2014) the probability of criminal behavior amongst ex-offender's reduces significantly when employed. First, employment provides ex-offenders an opportunity to earn wages, which helps to pay for transportation, food, and other daily expenses and may enable them to rebuild lost relationships with children and family. Second, employment helps build social contacts with colleagues and provide structured activity. Employment helps build social status and provides ex-offenders an opportunity to prove to the public that they have learned their lessons (Lalonde & Cho, 2008).

### **1.2. Barriers to employment**

In a study of 201 ex-offenders, Bryan et al. (2008) reported the most pressing challenge they faced was realizing (a) they were haunted by their past deeds and (b) the punishment received for such deeds in the form of conviction and incarceration could be an impediment to getting a job and earning a decent living. According to Williams (2007), many ex-offenders find it very difficult to reintegrate or reenter the society partly because of difficulties finding employment after release, due to past convictions or criminal records, lack of job-seeking experience, lack of work history, and lack of occupational skills. These difficulties hinder an ex-offenders' ability to settle into society while enhancing the tendency to reoffend (Williams, 2007).

Because most job applications request information about prior convictions, ex-offenders are quickly labeled *ex-prisoner*, one of the most stigmatized statuses in the world (Chiricos, Barrick, Bales, & Bontrager, 2007). Just as names help with ease of identification, labeling an ex-offender as *ex-prisoner* quickly helps the community to identify the returning offender as deviant and a person of possible recidivate behavior (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). According to labeling theory, even if the label is inaccurate, others perceive the carrier as representative of what the label signifies and may discriminate against him or her (Chiricos et al., 2007; Gold & Richards, 2012). Chiricos et al. (2007) argued that tagging a person *ex-offender* served as further punishment for a convicted offense and separated that individual from the community. Blumstein and Nakamura (2009) asserted that offender labeling or stigmatization, prompts public antipathy towards ex-offenders; however, little research appears to exist on the cause of the antipathy.

### 1.3. Employers' perspectives

Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2002) reported that 60% of the employers in five United States cities studied said they reviewed a prospective employee's criminal records before hiring. Perception—a process by which people choose and arrange their thoughts or information to interpret or explain their feelings or situations (Wu & Kurylo, 2010)—explains the meaning employers make from reviewing the records. Binning and Sherman (2011) noted that an individual's judgments of an event, even though they may be wrong, could be strongly influenced by the communications of those around the individual who is perceived as in-group members or similar to self. Binning and Sherman (2011) also noted that a person's perception of others could be a summation of orientation, nurture, and personal lived experience that was private and known only to him or her. Understanding how employers form perceptions about ex-offenders may help explain any reticence they experience in the employment process. Reviewing candidates' criminal records may help the employer avoid negative publicity and liability (Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009), an indication that customers' perceptions may be even more important than the employers' views.

Attesting to employer's antipathy against ex-offender, Schmitt and Warner (2010) reported that many employers would rather employ welfare recipients than an ex-offender. Though notable scholars have conducted studies on business owners' perception of ex-offenders (Holzer et al., 2002; Pogorzelski et al., 2005), none of the researchers examined or explored the lived experiences of business owners/employers related to ex-offender employment. The focus of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore and interpret the lived experiences of employers who have interviewed and considered hiring an ex-offender. The following central research question and sub-questions guided the investigation:

*What are the lived experiences of employers as they consider an ex-offender for employment?*

- How do employers' perception of ex-offenders relate to their consideration of ex-offenders for employment?
- What are employers' concerns when considering an ex-offender for employment?
- What experience informs employers' decisions to hire or not hire an ex-offender?

## 2. Method

The study followed a hermeneutic phenomenological design to interpret and understand experiences shared by participants by relating them to relevant features of context (Groenewald, 2004). The approach goes beyond mere descriptions of core concepts or essences, "to look for meanings embedded in common life practices" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 728). In-depth interviews, which provide greater depth of information that can be obtained through other sources (Polit & Beck, 2004), were used to collect data. Based on feedback provided by a peer debriefer and an auditor, the interview protocol, including the research questions, was finalized.

Baltimore, Maryland, was chosen as the study site, in part because it has one of the highest crime rates in the US—up to 1,767 violent crimes rate per 100,000 residents (Grawert & Cullen, 2017). After receiving IRB approval, a purposive sampling method was adopted to recruit business owners operating in Baltimore who had considered hiring an ex-convict. Of the 25 potential participants identified, 10 were willing to share their experiences hiring ex-offenders. After obtaining informed consent, data was collected using in-depth interviews with each of the participants. Data obtained from the open-ended, semi-structured interview questions and stories retold in participants' own voice formed the primary source of data for the study. Confidentiality and participant privacy in the study was protected by assigning each participant an alphanumeric code to make it impossible for any part of the data to be linked to any of the participants.

A trustworthiness model depicting elements of rigor in qualitative research, developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), includes the concepts of credibility (source of truth), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency), and confirmability (neutrality) was employed in the research process. Strategies used to ensure credibility included purposive sampling, member checking, peer debriefing, and use of the participants' own words to describe shared meanings. Purposive sampling also enhances transferability, along with the thick description of the participants' experiences (Polit & Beck, 2004). To help others decide if the findings can be applied to similar locations, groups, or situations (Whittemore & Melkus, 2008), the research process is reported completely and in detail. Dependability was enhanced by using an auditor to review and assess the entire research process, from data collection to results. Whittemore and Melkus (2008) indicated that researchers could accomplish confirmability when credibility, transferability, and dependability were ensured in a research study. To fulfill both the dependability and confirmability requirement, a peer auditor reviewed and confirmed the data and data interpretations reflected no undue bias.

### **2.1. Data analysis procedure**

A five-step analytical process was developed based on similar processes used by other researchers (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, Standing, 2009):

Step 1: Immersion. In this step, the researcher listened intently to the interview recordings in their entirety and made notes to get a sense of the whole. Data collected were transcribed into text and compared again with the recordings to ensure that no relevant information was omitted or missed. Several meanings emerged at this stage, and each meaning was given initial coding using NVivo 10 software.

Step 2. Generalization/abstraction. Similar codes were combined to form sub-themes, then grouped into themes that responded to the research questions. This step helped reduce complexity and provided insights into the common themes emerging from the study.

Step 3. In this step, all the transcripts were read again to identify any new meanings that emerged; codes were assigned to the new meanings. All emerged themes from the interview responses were compared to check for differentiation between themes and unity within themes.

Step 4. Also known as the integration and critique step, all transcripts were reviewed for the final time to ascertain if the findings and main themes were consistent with the data. This involved reviewing the interviews to confirm the validity of findings and to modify codes if needed. The themes were then reconstructed using a hermeneutic circle to reflect participant experience (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Emerging themes were analyzed and processed to create an understanding of the phenomenon.

Step 5. The final stage of this analysis was descriptions of the essential meanings that were discovered through the analytical process. These essential meanings are presented without bias and supported by some of the participants' quotes before recommendations are made for the application of new knowledge.

### 3. Findings

Data used for this study were collected from 10 employers of labor who consented and shared their lived experiences regarding ex-offender employment in response to open-ended semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed for emerging themes that might ameliorate the lack of knowledge about lived experiences of employers or business owners making employment decisions about ex-offenders.

The central question that guided the present research study was,

What is the lived experience of employers as they consider an ex-offender for employment? To fully describe and interpret the phenomenon being studied (an experience as it is lived by the participants). The following three sub-questions supported the central question:

- (1) How do employers' perception of ex-offenders relate to their consideration of ex-offenders for employment?
- (2) What are employers' concerns when considering an ex-offender for employment?
- (3) What experience informs employers' decisions to hire or not hire an ex-offender?

Six themes emerged from the data analysis. Because data were analyzed holistically instead of separately for each research question, some themes respond to more than one guiding question. The six themes and their alignment with research questions are presented in Table 1.

#### 3.1. How do employers' perceptions of ex-offenders relate to their consideration of ex-offenders for employment?

Two themes responded to this question. The first was theme 1, *ex-offenders need help with integration into society*. From their personal interaction and/or experiences with ex-offenders, employers noted that ex-offenders are released into the society without any form of aid or assistance that can help them reintegrate easily into the society. Data collected and analyzed showed that employers were willing to help ex-offender reintegrate by providing ex-offenders with jobs to help with their reintegration. Employers acknowledged the need to provide a helping hand whenever possible, especially as there is no defined support system available to help ex-offenders stay away from crime and prison. As noted by Participant 2, "They [ex-offenders] need help and somebody needs to help them. "Some of these guys are without family, and if societies refuse them they definitely will go back to jail." In explaining the need to help ex-offenders, Participant 4 added: "If people had paid the price for their mistakes, they should be forgiven. These guys have

**Table 1. Alignment of research questions and emerging themes**

Research question	Supporting themes
RQ 1: How do employers' perceptions of ex-offenders relate to their consideration of ex-offenders for employment?	Theme 1: Ex-offenders need help with integration into society. Theme 2: Ex-offenders are not work ready because they lack basic work readiness skills.
RQ2: What are employers' concerns when considering an ex-offender for employment?	Theme 3: Lack of trustworthiness is a primary barrier to ex-offender employment. Theme 4: The risk cost, including that of backlash from customers' perception of ex-offenders, makes the hiring decision difficult.
RQ 3: What experience informs employers' decisions to hire or not hire an ex-offender?	Theme 5: Perceptions are formed through an interaction of personal experiences and media reporting. Theme 6: Employers adopt a probing interview approach when considering an ex-offender for employment.

served their time, do probations and got released.” These guys have been punished and paid the price; we need to let the past go.

Theme 2, *Ex-offenders are not work ready because they lack basic work readiness skills*, also helped illustrate how employers’ perceptions of ex-offenders relate to their consideration for employment. Employers believed that the prison system was not designed to prepare a released offender for life after prison and as such, ex-offenders lack basic work skills. According to Participant 9:

Ex-offenders are not job ready because the prison system did not prepare them to be job ready. They are not educated. They are not job ready. When I worked in the jail, I didn’t see the jail prepare them for any out of prison life, which is why they came out unprepared.

Participant 6 stated that he had: “Never seen any ex-offender ready for employment, the jail is not doing any good job to prepare these guys for interview or job.”

Participant 2 also added:

In terms of readiness, the jail is not helping them at all. The system is not designed to prepare them at all or make them ready for life outside jail. Jail should be teaching them skilled work such as carpentry, plumbing, etc. to prepare them for the society rather than keep them sitting in jail.

### **3.2. What are employers’ concerns when considering an ex-offender for employment?**

Themes 3 and 4 provided information relevant to this research question. Theme 3, *Lack of trustworthiness is a primary barrier to ex-offender employment*, revealed that employers’ primary consideration when considering an ex-offender for employment is trust. The meaning employers attached to the issues of trust is so complex that a lack of trustworthiness is seen as a primary barrier to ex-offender employment. The component of trust is what determines if the ex-offender should be employed or not and it formed the major component of the experience employers lived with. According to participants, the issue of trust was complex as the decision to employ an ex-offender could turn out to be a great experience or a significant risk. According to Participant 1, an ex-offender could not be trusted “he is somebody who cannot be trusted and has a tendency to violate established laws or procedures.”

Participant 3 added that the perception of trust could be temporary or permanent depending on the ex-offender:

To mitigate the risk associated with ex-offender employment, employers sought behavioral references from family members and community leaders to ensure that ex-offenders had a family that could support them. The following statements from Participant 8 clearly captured the essence or the importance of references as related to trust issues “can anyone be willing to stand for him in case something goes awry? What happens if the trust fails or the guy recidivate. You need someone to hold responsible.”

Theme 4 also provided new understanding of employers’ concerns about hiring ex-convicts: *the risk cost, including that of backlash from customers’ perception of ex-offenders, makes the hiring decision difficult*. Employers perceived some ex-offenders as talented and with potential that could be exploited. As noted by Participant 2, “Ex-offenders are people with potentials to add value to the society but had been labeled as bad by the society.” Supporting this view, Participant 7 said “past experience has made us realized that some of them (ex-offenders) can be an asset and that their negatives can be turned around to become an asset.” However, they were very careful in making hiring decisions as they considered the cost to the business due to the public perception of ex-offenders. Participant 4 said,

I give them chance to make a living and hide this from my customers because of societal perception. You know my customers don't want to hear that I hire ex-offenders. If they know, then the issue of safety becomes a concern to them. So, I keep it under the table.

When considering an ex-offender for employment purposes, employers sought to answer the questions *how would the customers react if they found out that the person serving them is an ex-offender? What will happen to the business if one of the ex-offenders recidivates?*

### **3.3. What experience informs employers' decisions to hire or not hire an ex-offender?**

Similar to the first two research questions, two separate themes aligned with this question. Theme 5, that *perceptions are formed through an interaction of personal experiences and media reporting* illustrates that the employer's decision to hire or not hire an ex-offender was influenced by the source of their perception, which could be personal experiences, interaction with other employers, and media reporting. Also revealed was that employers with positive past work experience with an ex-offender, would be more willing to employ an ex-offender than an employer with bad experiences.

According to Participant 2, "The first opportunity I provided was positive and since then I never look back." Contrary, to participant two positive experience, Participant 8 said, "Personal experience has not been positive. I see them as violent and people who have a tendency to violate laws." Participant 3 noted that "they were offenders not properly rehabilitated and that most of them still steal and lack confidence." Feedback from other employers and media reporting of ex-offender activities also influence employment decision as revealed by Participant 1, who said, "The name ex-offender triggered a negative picture in my mind, and I believe media reporting of crime played a part in this."

One factor that informs employers decision-making is their experience interviewing the job candidates. *Employers adopt a probing interview approach when considering an ex-offender for employment* (Theme 6). In this interview style, employers spend time with an ex-offender during the interview process probing and asking questions that can help them determine the ex-offender's level of rehabilitation and openness. Findings revealed that the probing interview style is used to help the ex-offender retell their story as is. This interview method involves asking a series of questions designed to get the ex-offender to talk about their conviction, the prison life, lessons learned, how they plan to amend for or give back to the society what they took away from it, and how they will handle certain situations should they arise on the job.

Participant 6 said, "I spend more time with an ex-offender because I want to hear his story and how he planned to reestablish himself." Participant 7 said, "The interview process is a little bit different because we asked more about their crime and the lessons learnt from the prison experience." Employers later compare their story with their background check for truth and integrity. Interviewing an ex-offender was described as sensitive and mentally exerting. There is the fear that runs through employer's mind, the fear that the decision to hire may backfire. This thought process forms the lived experience that is personal to each employer. As noted by Participant 10, "the process is always hard, emotional, and troubling because now you have to make a decision that may backfire or work out fine." The experience gathered from this interview process is what informs an employer's decision to hire or not to hire an ex-offender.

## **4. Discussions**

### **4.1. Employers' perceptions of ex-offenders relate to consideration for employment**

Previous researchers had suggested that the failure of ex-offenders to gain employment was an indicator of the pervasive perception and antipathy of business owners toward ex-offenders because of the stigma associated with the label *ex-offender* (Chiricos et al., 2007). Theme 1, *employers' perceptions that ex-offenders need help with integration into society*, revealed that employers are willing to assist ex-offenders whenever possible, especially as there is no defined support system

available to help ex-offenders stay away from crime and prison. The employers' perceptions align with the findings of Chiricos et al. (2007), Bryan et al. (2008), and Haslewood-Po'csik et al. (2008), who all noted that without help, ex-offenders were exposed to recommitting crime as a means of defense.

Employers' perceptions that *ex-offenders are not work ready because they lack basic work readiness skills* (Theme 2), also align with the findings of Pogorzelski et al. (2005), and Williams (2007) that lack of proper education and job skills are factors limiting ex-offender employment. Participants believed that ex-offenders were released into the society with poor job readiness attitude, lack of required education, and job-related skills that were needed to compete favorably for jobs in the current market.

#### **4.2. Employers' concerns about hiring an ex-offender**

Theme 3 revealed that *lack of trustworthiness is a primary barrier to ex-offender employment*. Employers' consideration of trust (lack of trustworthiness) as a primary barrier to ex-offender employment revealed that trust is a significant element in a successful employee–employer relationship and a critical determinant of individual and organizational effectiveness or success (de Jong, Schalk, and Croon, 2009; Searle, Hope-Hailey, and Dietz, 2012). Employers can impart skills and knowledge through training, but trust must be earned. One of the main barriers ex-offenders faced in gaining employment is identifying employers who are willing to take risks (National Technical Assistance Center, 2008). Trust is a combination of positive expectations and a willingness to accept vulnerability, a trade-off between risk perceived and employers' reliability or dependability (Searle et al., 2012). Whereas previous studies suggested that carriers of the ex-offender label, are automatically perceived as a deviant who cannot be trusted and who is likely to recidivate a behavioral and or physical characteristic that is not socially acceptable (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008), some of the employers interviewed believed that trust in an employed ex-offender might develop over time.

The greatest challenge as revealed by the participants was in having the courage to take the risk and hire an ex-offender. Participants seek references from family members and to evaluate the support available to an ex-offender applicant before making an employment decision. This aligns with the findings of Doekhie, Dirkzwager, and Nieuwbeerta (2017) who asserted that ex-offenders are likely to recidivate in the absence of social or family support.

The second greatest risk employers perceived in hiring an ex-offender was revealed in Theme 4: *backlash from customers' perception of ex-offenders*. An average employer may not be averse to employing a person with a criminal conviction, or one without the basic work-readiness skills or one who has the possibility of attracting public attention for a reason other than a positive conviction. Participants believed that if customers knew the person serving them was an ex-offender they would be concerned for their safety and may discontinue the business relationship; hence, they preferred to keep it away from public knowledge. Participants revealed that employers' goodwill to help ex-offender reintegrate successfully through job provision are not well applauded by the public, forcing many employers to do under the table employment of ex-offenders. Findings revealed that employers exercised due diligence in ex-offender employment because of the potential risk factor which might include adverse publicity or negative attitudes towards a new ex-offender employee.

Interview findings also revealed that employers acknowledged that some ex-offenders were undoubtedly talented, naturally skillful, and had potentials that could be exploited. To some of the employers, an ex-offender was a person who could be an asset to or add value to the community, country, and nation, but had been unfortunately caged by the label, which portrays them as evil and untrustworthy. Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) revealed that the label ex-offender on released offenders was a social stigma that portrayed them as criminals or as individuals with a tendency to recidivate bad behavior to the public. Employers lamented the possible economic loss of the ex-

offenders' potential and stated the negative perceptions attached to the label *ex-offender* must change for that potential to be fully realized.

#### **4.3. Experiences that inform employers' decisions about ex-offender employment**

The findings of Theme 5 aligned with the theoretical assumptions that what a person knows or how a person perceives a thing or an event is always a product of how the person constructs meaning about the event (Raskin 2012). An analysis of the findings also aligned with Binning and Sherman (2011) notion that a person's orientation, upbringing, and personal lived experience could influence how they perceive others. The impact of media reporting of ex-offenders and their activities on employers' perceptions of ex-offenders aligns with revelations reported by Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, and Rainie (2011) on the role of the media, especially the news media, as a basis of public attitude disposition and in forming perceptions of one's social environment. Despite the power of the media, findings of the study revealed that direct experience is more influential than media reports when considering ex-offenders for employment.

Employers' experiences during candidate interviews were more important than the influence of media. Theme 6 revealed that employers adopt a probing interview approach when considering an ex-offender for employment. Through this interview approach, employers sought to know more about the ex-offender's behavioral history to determine if the ex-offender could be trusted. This finding echoes Pager, Western, and Sugie (2009), who revealed that spending time one-on-one with an ex-offender could help provide information or signals as to what to expect from the applicant (Pager et al., 2009).

The study added new insights regarding employers' perceptions of ex-offenders and ex-offender employment. As suggested by the findings, society leaders might consider giving ex-offenders an opportunity to rebuild their lives by providing skills for employment, a supportive context to rebuild trust, and a more balanced media presence free from unfounded stereotypes. The employers' perceptions led to the following specific recommendations.

#### **5. Limitations of the study**

Several study limitations may affect the credibility and transferability of the findings. A number of potential participants were unwilling to be interviewed due to the possibility of customer backlash should their employment of an ex-offender become public knowledge. According to Pati (2009), they may also have anticipated an overwhelming increase in the number of ex-offender applying for positions with them. The final sample was relatively small due to reluctance to participate, so the study findings may not completely represent the views of all employers of ex-offenders in the Baltimore metropolitan region. For the same reason, the findings may not represent the perspectives of employers in other geographic areas. A thorough description of the sample, the context, and the raw data was provided to aid others in determining if the findings may reliably be used for other situations.

#### **6. Recommendations**

To reduce crime, the society might consider giving ex-offenders an opportunity to rebuild their life and be free from any invisible punishments or stereotype. Whereas conclusions from the current study cannot be generalized beyond the sample, it could be used to provide the foundations for actions leaders can take to ameliorate the problem of ex-offender employment and how employers perceive ex-offender when considering them for employment. Criminal justice and public safety stakeholders need to determine the degree to which they can relate to the findings of the study from practical experiences. Five recommendations for leaders follow.

##### **6.1. Balanced media portrayal of ex-offenders**

In a society where there is less contact between the public and incarcerated offenders or the correctional system (Rhodes, 2008), the media, especially the news media has a major role to play in how society perceives crime rate and offenders (Rosenstiel et al., 2011). Public safety stakeholders can devote more resources to social media, print and news media to communicate the

positive experiences of employers who have hired ex-offenders. Successful ex-offender employment is not exclusively in the hands of business owners; reorienting public perceptions may decrease business owners' concern about customer backlash. Short of creating more opportunities for the public to interact with incarcerated or ex-offenders, the media may be the best vehicle for educating the public and changing their perception.

### **6.2. Community involvement in rehabilitation process**

Employers need a steady source of economical labor to reduce overhead costs (North, 2013). By involving business owners and community leaders in ex-offender rehabilitation, policy-makers will be providing a positive relationship that may move from the four walls of the prison to prerelease engagement and ultimately employment and social integration. Involving employers in an effort to support the successful reentry of released offenders by the criminal justice system may result in the employer's willingness to recruit ex-offenders for open vacancies and in-house training opportunities. This kind of relationship may help reduce public antipathy and possibly remove the demand for references as employers had been part of the ex-offender rehabilitation process.

### **6.3. Provision of job training for pre-release inmates**

Unless unemployment is nonexistent, ex-offenders need pre-release training and job-readiness to compete for jobs. Training in technical and business skills while still incarcerated may help ex-offenders integration, as suggested in the previous studies (Bryan et al., 2008; Trimbur, 2009) and this study's participants. Educational goals set by Division of Correction (DOC) policy for inmates with little education or job skills might be determined on their admission to help with their integration upon release.

### **6.4. Adoption of a family-focused rehabilitation program**

Ex-offenders success or failure after release is influenced directly by the quality of emotional, financial, housing, and transportation support they receive from their family (Doekhie et al., 2017). If the employer's fear of possible public backlash is to be allayed, there must be an increase in family acceptance and involvement in ex-offenders rehabilitation. Establishing and fostering a family-centered reentry program that encourages family involvement in the rehabilitation of incarcerated offenders may enhance social bonding, family acceptance, and ultimately public acceptance. According to diZerega (2010), recidivism would decrease as more offenders' family members were involved by public safety policymakers in the reentry process.

### **6.5. Specialized support and training to individuals and agencies hiring ex-offenders**

To improve employers' willingness to employ ex-offenders, criminal justice, and judicial system administrators may consider providing continuous support and guidance to business owners and individuals willing to hire or develop ex-offenders in the form of specialized training for working with people of recidivate behavioral tendencies. By encouraging work projects and programs that are more behaviorally and correctively inclined to produce a regenerated being, the criminal justice system and reentry stakeholders will be building a future for ex-offender's successful employment. The provision of specialized training may engender a positive employer attitude that can help ex-offenders become better than average employees and help improve the economy by lowering turnover costs and reducing the unemployment rate (Pati, 2009).

Leverentz (2008) and Bryan et al. (2008) reported that the National rate of ex-offender employment was inversely proportional to the rate of crime. Support for increasing ex-offender employment does not rest solely on the shoulders of employers but on a mix of many factors including the use of the media to provide balanced reporting of ex-offender successes and government investment in reformative programs that support reentry and foster trust. Improving ex-offenders' opportunities for employment increases their potential as productive citizens and by decreasing recidivism associated with unemployment, the crime rate is reduced.

## 7. Suggestions for future research

Leverentz (2008) asserted that neighborhood context and individual experiences had a direct influence on responses to crime and belief in ex-offender redeemability and or acceptance. The high crime rate in the “neighborhood” of Boston may have led to unique perspectives from this sample; so replicating the study at different geographical locations will indicate which themes are stable and widespread and which are associated with specific neighborhood characteristics.

Findings reported in this study are based on a limited sample of business owners identified through a purposive sampling method. By including employers from large corporations including multinational companies and organizations that are considered not for profit, future researchers may be able to provide recommendations that apply to a wider variety of businesses. Further, the inclusion of more female business owners in future studies may produce findings more representative of all employers and more useful for criminal justice stakeholders and decision makers.

The phenomenological approach adopted for the current study was considered best fit in understanding human experience (Groenewald, 2004). Repeating the study using a different research method such as case study because of its ability to produce rich and detailed insight (Neuman, 2006) may yield a new set of findings that may help improve ex-offender reentry practices.

## 8. Conclusion

This article contributes to the relatively under-researched topic of employers perception of ex-offender as they consider ex-offender for employment. The study explored and interpreted the lived experiences of employers who have interviewed and considered hiring an ex-offender using phenomenological research design. The study draws its data from participants who were purposively selected having experienced the phenomenon. The result and findings of the study, presented in this article revealed that contrary to the assertion that the failure of ex-offenders to gain employment was an indicator of the pervasive perception and antipathy of business owners toward ex-offenders, employers and business owners are more willing to help ex-offenders reintegrate through job offering. The major challenge to ex-offender employment problem is the public and how well ex-offenders family are willing to support them.

The six main themes that emerged from the analysis of the data obtained from 10 employers in the Baltimore metropolis area, were presented in this article. Each of these themes reflects the life experiences of employers as they considered ex-offender for employment. The themes were arranged in this article to answer the research questions that guided this study. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations in this articles will further enhance the employment opportunities of ex-offenders.

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