

Re-entry programs, from an anti-unconventional ex-offender

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Abstract The purpose of this article seeks to question the relationship of higher levels of educational attainment and the ability for successful reintegration into mainstream society for the formerly incarcerated. Specifically this article highlights societal negligence for individual success of the formerly incarcerated, opting for a corporatized exploitation of those in the reentry process premised on the socially constructed label “ex-con.” Research surrounding labeling and reentry suggests once individuals are released from prison the social stigma experienced in society is a recipe for failure and reoffending. One way this emerges is in the form of hiring policies in corporate occupations, prohibiting the hiring of individuals convicted of a felony. Critical criminology suggests the class structure is in place for those in power to stay in power and keep those who are inferior in inferior social positions. Using both points of view as a framework, with the idea of corporate monopoly as a lens, allows for an untraditional critical perspective of the reentry process as a capitalist, for-profit industry. Questioning the role and intentions of reentry initiatives provides a general discussion for increasing success rates of those in the reentry process and reducing capital costs spent for incarceration. The specific focus of this article presents my experience of the reentry process.

Keywords Reentry · Employment · Education · Unregulated

While attending Hampton University I was convicted of a felony, ‘Conspiracy to Sell Cocaine,’ the second semester of my freshman year. The years spent attending Prep School with the likes of Bill Cosby’s son, Max Roach’s daughters, Watt’s son (extreme jazz drummer), the President of the Levi Jean Corporation’s (1988)

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daughter, and the son of the President of Harvard University (1987), made me long for an alternative to help my family with the financial burden of my college education; this longing led to my experimenting with unconventional methods of financial prosperity. These unconventional methods served as the impetus for my felony conviction. Once I completed my full sentence (including parole), I transferred from Hampton to Howard University. I lifeguarded my way through to attain my BBA in Finance.

Preceding graduation, several Wall Street firms exhibited interest in offering me a position in their organization. As I reached the date of graduation, I began to pursue the different employment opportunities available, as did other students completing my program in 1998. The difference was that I was then a former prisoner with a felony conviction, so I lied during the application process at each of the firms that had shown interest in hiring me. The possibility of my being hired by a Wall Street firm, having a felony conviction, was something no one thought would be possible so I was instructed by my Advisors, Professors, and members of our University Administration to lie. They all believed it best for me to move forward with this strategy to give my new environment/colleagues the chance to know my personality and character before making a decision concerning my felony conviction. Ironically, this strategy was not successful. In fact this strategy resulted in my getting removed from a training program on Wall Street. Once my felony conviction was detected, I was barred from that firm and red flagged throughout the entire Street.

Once banned from Wall Street, I commenced my temporary job placement quest. I managed to work at all of the temporary job firms within a 30 mile radius of my home, Trenton, New Jersey. I always excelled at my temporary job assignments and usually received a permanent employment offer within 2–3 job assignments, but once my felony was detected, all offers of employment were rescinded immediately. I think this is where my training and attention to detail worked against me. My stellar job habits permitted permanent job assignments to get extended to me, rather quickly. Consequently, once the temporary agency learned of my felony conviction they severed ties to me, also. I found myself joining the ranks of the unemployable—the former prisoner—seen as undesirable by potential employers.

The multitude of disappointments that I experienced, due to my temporary job quest, compelled me to take advantage of the re-entry programs in New York City. My anxiety led me to the following four programs: The Osborne Association, Strive, Exodus Transitional Community, and The Fortune Society. The first re-entry program I came into contact with was The Osborne Association, located in Long Island City, New York. This agency services ex-offenders via five paradigms: Adopting Healthy Lifestyles, Reconnecting Families, Achieving Economic Independence, Reducing Reliance on Incarceration, and Strengthening Communities. My involvement was focused around Achieving Economic Independence—a division of the agency. This division operated two programs, Employment and Training Services and Janitorial/Maintenance Services. I was involved with the Employment and Training Services program. Even though I arrived at the Osborne Association with a BBA from Howard University I was still placed in a training program where the average grade attainment for participants was the 8th grade. Most of the work place rituals this training program emphasized, I had already

mastered while in college or within my previous work place experiences. The training I was asked to participate in was beneath my skill set, daily affecting my own self image.

Close to the completion of the training (1-week), The Osborne Association scheduled one round of interviews at Circuit City, for a Sales Associate. The agency mandated me to be involved with the entire Circuit City process. Here I was, a college graduate with a BBA from Howard University, asking a re-entry program for help with securing employment as a Sales Associate, only because I was mandated to do so by agents of the reentry industry. I could have acquired an interview for a position of this type on my own accord. My potential boss had just completed her GED. Subsequently, no offer of employment was extended to me.

After completing the program, every client is given a Job Developer. My Job Developer sent me on many fruitless interviews, while keeping her file active on me (meeting funder's milestones with no real fruition intended for the client). Finally, I was offered an Accounting Clerk position with the Osborne Association. This was a salaried position at 28K per year. I could not make that commitment, commuting from Jersey daily. I needed 35K, at least. At this point, I moved on from The Osborne Association and ended up at Strive.

Strive is a non-profit agency servicing ex-offenders (like Osborne), located in Harlem. Strive accomplishes its mission via the following six programs: Outreach/ Intake, Training, Job Placement, Supportive Services, Career Advancement, Social Services. Strive's daily ambience was much more rigid, when compared to The Osborne Association. The Osborne Association accepted any ex-offender as a client. Strive would not accept an ex-offender unless they were willing to be broken down (by Strive's methodology). Until an ex-offender was broken down, they were not worthy of being a Strive client. I inquired about my prospects of 'near future employment' gravely before engrossing myself with Strive's Training Program. All of the staff assured me that their agency had employment waiting for me after I completed Strive's 3-4 weeks Training Program. I entered Strive's Training Program with high expectations. Strive's Training Program engulfed me with a population that occupied the same literal prowess as Osborne's population. During the course of the training program, I was broken down (like all the other clients) and my resume was done over. The resume format I learned at Howard was not up to Strive's standards. Upon completion of Strive's Training Program, all clients' are assigned a Job Developer. The Job Developer has the job opening list and sends clients out to interviews according to the Job Developers perspective of a potential good match (between potential employee and potential employer). My first three appointments with my Job Developer got canceled at the last minute, after I traveled 2.5 hours from Jersey to Harlem.

After dealing with Strive, I was literally broke. I decided to enter Graduate School. My reasoning for entering Graduate School was two pronged. I desperately needed the surplus of loan capital that accompanies Graduate School and I also wanted to compete against the Jail Administrators (from my time incarcerated). Attending John Jay's Graduate program equipped me with the resources to maintain my successful re-integration. These resources mandate me to acquire a Ph.D. degree. I have been influenced by Professors involved in all levels of re-entry, these

Professors mentor and support me with my re-integration. These relationships allowed me to get an internship for me at Exodus Transitional Community (ETC.).

ETC., located in East Harlem, facilitates ex-offenders via the following programs: Employment Readiness Training, Job Placement, Computer Training, Life Coach (Mentoring), Substance Abuse and Anger Management, and Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents. My internship position occupied the Faith Based Coordinator title, concentrating on employment training and coordinating the Life Coach program. This position yielded me a stipend of \$75 per week, in exchange for a 40-h work week. Working at ETC. exposed me extensively to the internal operations of re-entry programs. While at ETC. I worked with current clients of The Osborne Association and Strive, as re-entry programs shuffle numbers (to meet funder's milestones). A directive of my position held me responsible for a dimension of the monthly reporting to Private Partners Ventures (PPV), funders of several re-entry programs. I am qualified to argue these re-entry institutions need regulation. As I continued to observe ETC. hire new employees, employees with lesser skills than I, while continuing to pay me a stipend of \$75.00 a week, I decided it was time to exert all of my efforts toward my curriculum vitae (material required for admission to Ph.D. programs).

I began this process by concentrating on my Master's of Public Administration (MPA) and immersing myself in research with Dr. Thompkins and Dr. Curtis. While involved with this research, my curiosity led me to see if the Fortune Society could help with my frantic employment plight, since they consistently denied my resume for employment. The Fortune Society is regarded as the 'Mother Load of re-entry programs.' The Fortune Society offers the following services for its clients: Housing, Health, Counseling, Education, Career Development, Family, Alternatives to incarceration, Drop-In Center (on Rikers Island). The Fortune Society trumps the other re-entry programs by having the resources to service diagnosed ex-offenders. These detailed resources serve as the impetus for the Fortune Society staying on the cutting-edge with its services for ex-offenders. Because Strive and the Fortune Society receive funding from the same sources, I was eligible to access Fortune's employment resources without completing Fortune's Employment Training Program. Again, I was assigned a Job Developer. At best, this is a very bland process for anyone with a Bachelor's Degree. Strive and the Fortune Society use identical job banks. This resulted in me hedging against forming any long-term relationship with the Fortune Society.

The four re-entry programs discussed serve as the 'Four Giants' of the re-entry industry. New York City boasts that these programs serve as prototypes for the world to follow, within the re-entry industry. The Fortune Society leads the re-entry industry with its cutting-edge services offered to ex-offenders. Strive and The Osborne Association are competing for second place as these agencies try to construct mutually exclusive models for re-entry, extrapolated from the Fortune Society's model of re-entry. Within the re-entry industry ETC. serves as the 'Mom & Pop' brand of re-entry services. This level of service does not diminish ETC's ability to secure funding. The 'Mom and Pop' brand individualizes ETC. as having no tangents to being a franchise (unlike Strive, the Fortune Society, and The Osborne Association).

In many aspects I also applaud the efforts of the Four Giants. Within the precedent and parameters of the ‘conventional ex-offender’, the Four Giants have made exceptional advancement. But there are two dimensions of the Four Giants that I am in direct opposition to: (1) within the arena of addressing the needs of the ‘unconventional ex-offender’ (as myself), the Four Giants are more than lacking. When these programs are forced to empathize with someone above an 8th grade education (with a college degree), their resources are very scarce. For all of the reentry programs that I participated in, there was never an option of my securing a college-entry level position. This is what I needed and longed for. Ironically, these programs focused my attention on Porter positions, Sales Associates positions, etc.; (2) the Four Giants operate within an unregulated province, outside of the non-profit accounting guidelines. These programs receive a high level of government funding and operate in a non-regulated vacuum, with no formal oversight. No one ensures the ‘unconventional ex-offender’s’ needs are being met by the Four Giants. Yes, there is still work to be done and the future looks bleak for most of us returning to the community from prison. I send out an alert—a warning to all of us leaving prison; if you have an education, do not look to the reentry industry to assist you with your transition back into the community. If you are poor and black, guard against becoming a pawn of the reentry industry. Refuse to allow yourself to be pushed from space to space—filling the ‘roll calls’ which justify the very existence of these organizations.

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