

# [Methodology: impact of stigma on offender employment](https://assignbuster.com/methodology-impact-of-stigma-on-offender-employment/)

Design

An experimental design will be used in this research. This study will use a mixed design, with disclosed criminal convictions (group 1, 2, or 3) as the between subject’s variable, and judgments of job applicant as the within subject’s variable. The independent variable in this research will be the disclosure of criminal convictions. The dependant variables will be the attitude towards the job applicant, and the participant’s political ideology.

Procedure

60 participants were collected overall, with 20 participants for each experimental group. These participants were gathered via my personal social media and the university’s SONA system. These participants were all over the age of 18, in order to give consent, but their age and gender was not tested. Once I had established my participants, I collected their email addresses and then emailed them a copy of my participant information sheet, so that they had a few days before the research took place to read over what is expected of them and decide that they definitely wanted to take part. The data was gathered over a three-week period, until all participants had taken part. Before the experiment took place, the participant was presented with a consent form for them to provide informed, written consent to take part in the experiment. They were informed that they could leave at any time if they no longer want to take part in the research. All research took place in a quiet, but public room, such as the labs in P5 and the study rooms in the library. The participants all sat the experiment individually to ensure their decisions were not influenced by others, but also to make availability easier for the participants. They were randomly allocated into 1 of 3 groups using an online generator. In all groups participants were asked to pretend they were employers in a hotel that is looking to hire. The participants were given a job description that listed the duties required and the skills the applicant needed to possess to get the job. They were then given one of 3 CV’s, all included the same personal and working information, however, in group 1, no criminal convictions of any kind were included. In group 2 the applicant disclosed a previous minor criminal conviction (a record for possession of a class C drug, an offence that would not lead to incarceration). In group 3 the application disclosed a major criminal conviction which they have been previously incarcerated for (possession of a firearm with criminal intent). The participants were then given an 11-point questionnaire that asked them to rate the extent to which which they believe the applicant fit certain requirements of the job description. Next, participants were given the 20-point Ideological Consistency Scale (Pew Research Centre) to measure their political ideologies, to assess whether the participant’s political ideology effects their likelihood to employ the person. This is based on the hypothesis that liberal minded people are more open minded, and so would be more likely to believe that people can change, and so may be more likely to give someone a second chance. Once the experiment was finished, participants were given a debrief sheet, explaining that the purpose of this research is to see if the participants’ preconceived stereotypes of ex-offenders effected their perception of the applicant’s personal and working abilities. Participants were also informed that they can withdraw all their data from the experiment at any point, up until 16/03/2017.

Analysis

The data was analysed using Microsoft Excel and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A one-way ANOVA was used to analyse the data gathered from the judgements questionnaire in order to compare the mean attitude towards the applicant and the standard deviation across the 3 groups. The data gathered from the ideology scale was analysed against the data from the judgement’s questionnaire using a ANCOVA in order to assess the impact of the participant’s ideology on their likelihood to employ the person.

Materials

An example job description, a 20-point Ideological Consistency Scale (Pew Research Centre) to measure their political ideologies. The questions of the ideological scale are split into 10 conservative position questions and 10 liberal positions questions. Individual questions are scored as +1 for a conservative response, -1 for a liberal response and 0 for an unsure response. Scores on the full-scale range from -10 (liberal response to all questions) to +10 (conservative response to all questions). An 11-point questionnaire to measure participant’s judgements of the job applicant. Each question on this scale receives a score out of 10, which is the number the participants indicate on the Likert scale. Question 1 is not scored, the answer of ‘ yes’ or ‘ no’ is simply to compare the participants’ initial judgement of the applicant. The overall score for this scale will be out of 100.

Participants

The participants were all over the age of 18 to give informed consent, and of any gender. A lot of participants were students, which made the participant selection process easier, but students were not necessary. Participants were not required to have any specific characteristics in order to take part in the study.   They were selected via social media and the university’s SONA system. While I did not foresee many potential risks to participants, it is possible that they may have become distressed, embarrassed, or fatigued while taking part in this experiment. To deal with these potential risks, participants were informed that they can stop the experiment at any moment and leave, or they can continue later if they would like. The participants were also informed that they could go and talk to someone at student support if they need to, and would be provided with links to online help, such as the SANE organisation, if requested.

No deception was involved in this research. The full aims of the experiment were not disclosed to the participants, for example, they were not informed that it is their willingness to employ the applicants with criminal convictions that is being analysed, but the basic facts of the experiment were not lied about. All research took place in daylight hours, in a safe, public space. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the experiment at any point. The participant information sheet, the debrief sheet, and myself before the experiment took place explained that participants can withdraw from the experiment at any time, during the experiment, they just needed to explain that they do not wish to continue anymore. My email address was included on the participant information sheet and the debrief sheet, so if participants wanted to withdraw from the research after the experiment has taken place, then they could send an email and then be withdrawn. Participant’s consent forms were coded, and these codes were placed on their questionnaires and data, in order to ensure that all data is completely anonymised. The consent forms were then locked away to ensure that I was the only person who could view the identity of the participants. Any data that included anything that could lead to a participant being recognised was removed. All physical data was kept inside a locked draw that only I have the key to, to ensure that nobody can access it, and all electronic data was encrypted with a password that only I know, so it can’t be accessed. All data will remain this way until after dissertation marks are received, at which point the physical data will be shredded and the electronic data will be electronically shredded.

Discussion

Previous research by Maruna & King, (2004) suggests that the success of ex-offender’s re-entry into society is dictated by the attitudes of the community around them. Within this research, only 41% of participants in the ex-offender group stated that they would employ the candidate, compared to 81% in the control group. Because of this, it could be proposed that the main difficultly ex-offenders face upon re-entry into non-institutionalised society is battling preconceived stereotypes that society places upon them. In the criminal record group, 57% of participants said that they would employ the candidate, which, while being a significant increase when compared to the ex-offender group, still suggests a strong prejudice towards those who have had issues with the criminal justice system. This is a concern, because, while neither offence in the two conviction groups suggest that the candidate would have trouble dealing with customers and staff, both groups showed a significantly lower mean score in every question presented to participants.

The findings from this research are consistent with previous research that suggests society does stereotype ex-offenders, which may lead to stigmatisation in terms of employment desirability. For example, when asked ‘ how suitable do you think the candidate would be at maintain high professionalism with customers and staff?’ participants in the control group exerted a mean response of 8. 4, however, when asked the same question, participants in the group were the candidate revealed a previous incarceration had a mean response of only 4. 4, potentially signifying that the participants believed by having been to prison, it would be unlikely that the candidate would be proficient. This supports Fehn (2004)’s theory that ex-offenders are normally stereotyped as being “ educationally illiterate and socially inadequate”, and are therefore unable to act in a professional manner within a workplace.

However, Goffman (1987) emphasised that while a status may be stigmatising in one social context, it can also be worn as a “ badge of honour” in another, and those who can relate to the stigma are likely to serve as “ sympathetic others”. In the context of this research, it could be suggested that some participants in the criminal record and ex-offender groups would in fact be more likely to give higher ratings to the candidate because they can sympathise with the situation. Goffman (1963) acknowledges that those with personal familiarity to ex-offenders and individuals who have criminal records are more likely to see past the stereotypes surrounding them, and therefore reduce the stigmatising attitudes towards this group. Furthermore, Braithwaite (1989) notes that reintegration is more likely to be successful when ex-offenders are viewed as members of the in-group that have made mistakes, rather than dangerous, incurably criminal individuals.

Although the results from the coefficient analysis of variance where inconclusive, it is evident that the ideology of the participants did have an impact on the participants’ total score. Table 3 shows the comparison of the mean total score for those who were reported as ‘ consistently conservative’ compared to ‘ consistently liberal’. For the control group, the difference in mean total score is not noteworthy, however, in both the criminal record group, and the ex-offender group, the mean total score is significantly lower for those who were consistently conservative than those who were consistently liberal, suggesting that those with consistently liberal core political values were more likely to remove the stigma surrounding the applicant, and instead simply assess how suitable the candidate was for the job at hand. Unnever and Cullen (2007) suggest that people with conservative core values hold more disciplinary attitudes towards those who violate the law, and are more opposed to the reintegration of ex-offenders into society. Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz (2004) found that those with conservative core political values are more likely to uphold the stigmatisation of ex-offenders and criminals, primarily due to the belief that criminals are unlikely to ever be fully rehabilitated, and so will always be criminal.   However, because those with liberal core values are more likely to blame society for crime (Welch, 2007), it is proposed that they will be more compassionate when dealing with ex-offenders and individuals with criminal records. This theory is maintained by Demski & McGlynn (1999) who found that those who identified with liberal values were more willing than others to rent an apartment near a halfway house for recent parolees.

Chiricos et al., (2007) demonstrates how an individual’s confidence in the criminal justice system can lead to stigmatisation. They suggest that those who trust the legitimacy of the criminal justice system should therefore place conviction in the justice system’s evaluation of a person’s guilt and moral character. This leads to stigmatisation because imprisonment is one of the most severe forms of punishment available in the UK, and so is seen as a thorough basis for condemnation. Therefore, it can be proposed that those who trust the justice system would be unlikely to have confidence in employment abilities of an ex-offender, or even someone with a criminal record, because it is probable that they believe that people who have served time must have the lowest form of moral character. However, perceptions of over leniency in terms of treatment of offenders may also lead to increased stigmatisation. The ideology consistency scale given to participants in my research contained four questions about the government, and those who chose the negative responses were classified as conservative. Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher (2007) found that white people, conservatives, and victims of crime are more likely to challenge the police and courts for being too lenient on criminals. These groups of people often believe that most criminals have not paid penance for their crimes, and so deserve stigmatisation upon release, particularly within the employment sector, as they believe criminals should not be given employment over law abiding citizens (Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006).

Due to the continuously increasing numbers of imprisonment rates, the support of sometimes violent stigmatisation of ex-offenders, and the rising rates of recidivism, is its more important than ever to combat the stigmatisation of ex-offenders, particularly in the employment sector. Ward & Brown (2004) established that offenders who experienced meaningful relationships with prison staff were more likely to experience effective reintroduction into society. Similarly, Dowden & Andrews (2004) discovered a correlation between recidivism and interpersonal relationships between offenders and staff. While In no way does correlation equal causation, it is evident that contact with individuals from noninstitutionalised society while incarcerated can benefit offenders upon release. This concept is supported by Wagner, Tropp & Pettigrew (2009), who demonstrated that contact between opposing groups is a powerful and effective way of reducing prejudice. However, my results indicated that participants did not feel it was appropriate for an ex-offender, even somebody who is highly qualified for the job at hand, to be around both staff and customers, suggesting that they may not have had previous experience with somebody who has been to prison.

A drawback to this research is that participants were never asked whether they had experienced contact with an ex-offender, doing so may have led to a greater understanding as to why the participants stigmatised the candidate in the criminal record and ex-offender groups. However, the impact of contact with ex-offenders may have led to increased stigmatisation, depending on whether the experience was positive or negative. For example, Wikstrom & Loeber (2000) explains that in disadvantaged communities with high imprisonment rates, an individual may develop more lenient views of ex-offenders, because in areas like this, incarceration is not an abstract concept, but something that is experienced frequently. Living in these communities means that an individual is less likely to stigmatise ex-offenders, and so it is probable that ex-offenders would not experience negative employment desirability. However, because communities like this are usually disadvantaged and poverty stricken, finding employment, even as a law-abiding citizen, may be increasingly difficult (Wikstrom & Tafel, 2003).

Though the theory that contact with ex-offenders may significantly reduce stigmatising behaviour, a major disadvantage of this is that many members of the public may avoid any possible interactions with ex-offenders. My results indicated that participants feel that customers would feel uncomfortable being around somebody who has been to prison. Crisp & Turner (2009) developed imagined contact, produced to be an extension of the classical contact paradigm, in order to show valuable aspects of contact with offenders, but without provoking anxious emotions within participants. This may be useful in helping decrease the stigma surrounding ex-offenders, because imaging contact may enable society to disregard fear, which may lead to increased contact, and potentially understanding the individuals behind the stereotype, which could then decrease the negative employment desirability surrounding ex-offenders. Unnever & Cullen (2009) suggested that a further way to reduce the stigmatisation of ex-offenders is to demonstrate empathy towards them. Johnson et al., (2009) discovered that when participants were encouraged to feel empathy they recommended less severe punishments to a hypothetical defendant, and were more likely to examine and empathise with reasoning behind criminal acts. Because of this, it could be proposed that if the public were able to understand why offenders committed criminal acts, particularly those from poor and disadvantaged neighbourhoods, they may be more likely to be empathetic, and therefore disregard the stigmatism of the ‘ violent and incurable criminal’, which may lead to more employers being willing to hire ex-offenders.

Obviously, not everyone feels like the stigma towards those who have been incarcerated should be reduced. As highlighted earlier, many believe that using stigma as a general criminality deterrent is effective at preventing further crime. Undoubtedly, this may be the case for some communities. However, for people living in high crime areas, usually poor, disadvantaged, and essentially ‘ forgotten’ by the government, crime is only ever increasing. It is in areas like this that offending, and then subsequently reoffending is highest, meaning that a large minority of people at some point will have been to prison, or at least will have a criminal record. It has been acknowledged numerous times that employment is one of the best ways to decrease reoffending rates, but generally, society holds such a negative view of ex-offenders that employment is rare. Perhaps, if the stigma against individuals who have committed crimes is reduced, finding employment as an ex-offender may be easier, and so reintegration could be more successful.

In hindsight, even my using the term ‘ ex-offender’ could be seen as pre-conceived stigmatisation. Classing someone as an ‘ ex-offender’ creates a disastrous cycle where in which the individual being referred to is unable to move on from their past transgressions, which could be detrimental to rehabilitation. Also, it is unclear at which point a person progresses from ‘ offender’ to ‘ ex-offender’. The majority of the literature I reviewed when researching this topic refers to individuals who have previously been incarcerated as ‘ offenders’, without identifying whether these people did in fact reoffend, and if not, why they are still being referred to as an offender. It is issues like this that represent the ever-present stigma ex-offender’s face; while they may have served their sentence, and been successfully rehabilitated back into society, they will always be associated with the word ‘ offender’ and whatever negative connotations and stigma that brings with it.

A limitation of this research is that the sample size of 60 is incredibly small compared to the population of the UK. The small sample size may have contributed to the non-significant relationship between ideology and stigmatisation of ex-offenders. An issue with small samples is that they do not usually have the ability to represent the larger population, and therefore are not generalizable. However, gaining a sample size of even 60 was difficult in the time allotted for data collection, and so future research should attempt to replicate the findings, but with a larger sample size, in order to test for accuracy. A further limitation is that I did not ask for reasoning behind answers, and so, although it is evident that stigmatisation did occur, I cannot provide the specific reasons why participants stigmatised the candidate in the criminal record and ex-offender groups. This limits findings to understanding the influence of stigmatisation on ex-offenders’ employment desirability, and does not allow investigation into how reducing stigmatisation effects employment.

The purpose of this research was to establish whether the stigmatisation of ex-offenders effects their ability to gain employment, and whether people’s political ideology has an impact on their attitudes towards ex-offenders. Overall, this research has found that preconceived stigmatisation did effect the participants attitude towards the applicant with a criminal record, and the applicant who had previously been incarcerated. Within this research there was a significant decrease in the mean scores for each individual question asked about the applicant, and the overall judgement of the applicant in the criminal record and ex-offender group, when compared to the control group, representing stigmatisation towards individuals who hold criminal records, and those who are ex-offenders. This study also analysed whether the participant’s political ideologies effected their attitudes towards the applicant with the criminal record and the ex-offender applicant, and while the analysis of covariance was not significant, the data showed that in both the criminal record group, and the ex-offender group, the mean total score is significantly lower for those who were consistently conservative than those who were consistently liberal, suggesting that those with consistently liberal core political values were more likely to remove the stigma surrounding the applicant, and instead simply assess how suitable the candidate was for the job at hand.

It is evident from both this research, and all the previous research conducted beforehand, that stigmatisation is detrimental to ex-offenders trying to find employment. To rectify this, it could be suggested that future employers allow ex-offenders and individuals holding criminal records a ‘ watershed’ period, where in which they do not have to disclose their previous convictions until a set period of time has passed after employment. It should be stressed that this is only suggested for minor offences, in order to give employers and other staff members a period of time to get to know the individual before knowing of their previous offence. Hopefully, this could mean, as suggested by Hirschfield & Piquero (2010), that people in the individuals working environment would be able to witness first hand that not all ex-offenders conform to the abstract stereotype unwillingly placed upon then, and so may be more likely to employ ex-offenders and disregard stigma, when compared to employers who have had no contact with anybody that has been incarcerated.