



Knocking on the Ivory Tower: The Experience of Ex-Convicts Applying for Tenure-Track University Positions

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Abstract

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Introduction

Getting post-prison employment remains one of the most significant problems facing ex-convicts (Fletcher, 2001). Well-paying jobs require educational qualifications and/or work experience that most inmates lack. At the same time, few correctional facilities are able to prepare prisoners for life outside by giving them job-relevant instruction or educational opportunities beyond a General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

On top of the problems surrounding poor qualifications, people recently released from correctional facilities often experience a degree of social stigmatization on the outside (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Uggen, Manza & Behrens, 2004) that frustrates not only their job search efforts, but also their ability to hold on to a position. Many employers are reluctant to hire ex-convicts because of their fear that they may engage in criminal activity on the job, or somehow tarnish the reputation of the organization they work for. Thus, a combination of poor education, deficient job skills and deleterious societal beliefs about ex-cons impedes their chances of finding gainful employment within the free community (Austin, 2004).

In the absence of widely-established prison-based training programs, a few ambitious inmates may initiate their own education by enrolling in vocational or academic correspondence courses offered by technical schools, community colleges, or

¹ The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this article.

universities (Tregea, 2003; Richards 2004a, 2004b). Others go to school after they get released from prison. In most correctional facilities, despite the dwindling of prison-based college courses (Rose et al., 2005; Richards et al., 2006, 2008), there are small groups of prisoners working on either undergraduate or graduate degrees. As incarcerated populations have burgeoned in the United States (Austin et al., 2001) – growing from one million to 2.4 million since 1990 – there is a correspondingly greater number of prisoners likely to be interested in higher education.

Every year, a very small number of former prisoners complete PhDs. We have no exact figures, as successful ex-convicts rarely advertise their past history. But we do know that a small number enter the field of criminology/criminal justice. By the late 1990s, in fact, the number of ex-convict PhD graduates who had opted to become academic criminologists had grown to a point where they decided to form an independent organization known today as the Convict Criminology Group (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003). Although the history of this group has been documented elsewhere (Jones, et al., 2009), one of the major themes that initially united these individuals was the uncertainty they faced when applying for university employment (Jones, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to examine what happens to the relatively small number of ex-convicts who complete PhDs and attempt to enter academia as tenure-track professors in departments offering criminology/criminal justice programs. We provide the following caveats: First, the number of ex-cons with PhDs who attempt to teach in academia is relatively small. Second, the data are anecdotal, thus we make no claims about the representativeness of the sample. Third, although we believe that ex-cons bring

valuable and intimate perspectives to teaching and conducting research on criminology or criminal justice, this is not our major argument. We are primarily concerned with the hurdles ex-cons face in securing academic employment.

Ex-convicts have applied for positions in a wide spectrum of academic fields, but our discussion is limited to the social sciences, especially criminology and criminal justice. It is here, we argue, that the life experience of ex-convicts, combined with their academic training, can provide a unique and useful contribution to their field and to pedagogy in the classroom. It is widely known that the profession hires former and current criminal justice practitioners (e.g., ex-law enforcement, correctional, probation and parole officers, lawyers and judges) because of the value that their vocational knowledge brings. The awareness of those who have experienced criminal justice from the receiving end is no less valuable. Thus, it is of particular interest to discover whether a criminal background is perceived as a positive or negative factor in the hiring process.

To date, although the trend has not gone unnoticed by the news media (e.g., Ruark, 2002; Railey, 2003; St. John, 2003; Van Sant, 2003; Barton, 2006; Gieske, 2006), since few ex-cons possess the necessary credentials to apply for university tenure-track positions, little scholarly research has been done on them. The current paper is our effort to fill an emerging gap in the literature. In doing so, it has a number of interwoven objectives. These include providing a brief review of prior research on ex-convicts applying for post-prison employment, discussing the literature on academic job search experience, and then presenting the results of a survey of ex-con academics. Through this approach we try to explain the complex social dynamics and problems ex-convict PhDs

have encountered when applying for faculty positions in social science disciplines at colleges and universities.

Prior Research

There has been a lot of research conducted on the difficulties the average prisoner might have finding work after release from prison (Albright & Deng, 1996; Uggen, 2000; Fletcher, 2001; Harding, 2003). Pager (2003) has documented the struggles that men and women with the stigma of a criminal record face in finding employment. Pager (2003) reports three findings directly relevant to our study: first, that “criminal records close doors in employment situations” (p. 20); second, that “ex-offenders are only one-half to one-third as likely as nonoffenders to be considered [for hire] by employers suggests that a criminal record indeed presents a major barrier to employment” (p. 24); third, that “not only are blacks much more likely to be incarcerated than whites; based on the findings presented here, they may also be more strongly affected by the impact of a criminal record” (p. 25).

Western et al. (2001) looked specifically at the devastating effects of incarceration on black men. Typically, “visible minorities” with felony records have the highest rate of unemployment. Obviously, criminal background checks and questions on employment applications about arrest and convictions add to the problem. Many ex-convicts find gaining employment nearly impossible even years after they have been discharged from prison, despite the fact that they may have completed their sentences with no further arrests. Some, lacking any family support, join the ranks of the homeless, and/or survive by working in the underground or ‘sub rosa’ economy (Wilson, 1996; Miller, 1996).

A second strand of research relevant to this paper relates to the academic job interview process itself. Some of the work on university job interviews is quite general and is pertinent to a variety of academic disciplines (e.g., Zanna & Darley, 1987; Heiberger & Vick, 1992/2001; Kronenfeld & Whicker, 1996; Boufis & Olsen, 1997; Formo & Reed, 1998). Other work is discipline-specific (e.g., Reingold, 1994; Brems, Lampman, & Johnson, 1995; MacKenzie & Piquero, 1999; Cotten et al., 2001; Owen & Burke, 2005). Cotton et al. (2001) reviewed the experiences of five sociologists in their search for jobs and produced interesting findings. In particular, they "[highlight] the sociological importance of identity work, self-presentation, and interactional patterns in the job search process" (p. 27). Owen & Burke (2005) outlined the typical concerns of persons searching for work in a criminal justice department - although their points can be equally applied to other fields. This research is significant for our study, as in demonstrating the factors affecting normal applicants in their job searches, it may be used to juxtapose the difficulties faced by convicted felons in the same vocational market.

Academic Qualification and Job Recruitment

The PhD is an advanced degree and is usually a minimum requirement for university employment. Most successful PhD graduates will have studied at a number of universities during their academic careers, in different states and sometimes in different countries. During the course of their doctoral programs they are likely also to have been involved in teaching-assistant duties, and some may have taught complete courses at their universities. They also may have been involved in research and publishing. Of course, many aspiring PhD candidates drop out of this rigorous process and fail to complete their degree programs, but those who finish typically serve a lengthy apprenticeship in

teaching and research by the time they graduate. At this point they enter the job market and begin competing with other PhD-qualified applicants for faculty appointments in the academic world.

When a vacancy in a program occurs most departments form a search committee, headed by the chair or by a senior member of faculty. Typically, search committees try to fill vacant positions through a combination of methods, including placing ads in professional periodicals, in employment listings of professional associations, and also, perhaps, in newspapers. Departments seeking to fill a position will often send representatives to national or regional academic conferences that prospects might attend. Here candidates and prospective employers meet to discuss various offers and opportunities. During the course of this process, departmental emissaries generally collect curricula vitae from interested parties, ask questions, identify who they may want to invite for a formal campus interview, and spread the word of the vacancy through a network of contacts. When they return to their host institutions, search committees most typically meet, form short lists, and determine what extra information they need.

For first-time job applicants, securing an initial university appointment (whether contractual or tenure-track), can be an arduous experience even without the stigma of a criminal conviction. The burdensome process of formal job application, followed by a lengthy interview and often a seminar presentation, can test the mettle of even the most resilient prospect (Lyson & Squires, 1978). Repeated failure may demoralize a candidate, perhaps prompting him/her to consider a career alternative (Ross, 2005). Recognizing the frustrations that this produces, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has periodically run satirical articles on the process, bearing titles such as, "Fruitless interviews and tasteless

rejections: Job hunting in academe” (Anonymous, 1992), and “The hazing of job applicants” (Lester, 2001).

For the convicted felon, the hurdles of getting hired may be even greater than for the standard candidate. Academia can seem a hostile and foreign environment to an ex-convict and he or she may find adjustment to it difficult. Faculty appointments, for example, are often subject to criminal background checks, discouraging candidates with felony records. For them, the options of an alternative vocation are further reduced due to most corporations and state agencies having policies that exclude convicted felons from employment.

In making hiring decisions, of course, universities must also consider their own interests. They must balance the academic merits of a candidate against the potential for negative public attention if they do not display some sort of due diligence in the hiring process, including criminal background checks. A valid consideration when hiring ex-cons is the risk of embarrassment if the appointee continues with, or reverts to, criminal activity. One of the most nebulous clauses in tenure documents is the dismissal for ‘moral turpitude’ - essentially a catch-all for deviant activity that may affect an institution’s credibility and standing. Unwarranted publicity arising from ‘moral turpitude’ can negatively affect admissions, alumni donations, and state funding.

Blumstein and Nakamura (2009), have demonstrated that a felon’s chances of reoffending are dependent on a number of variables (such as type of crime and age of first conviction), and that offending probability tends to diminish with time spent ‘clean.’ For the hiring college or university, the logic of requiring criminal background disclosure is thus clear: convicted felons may have a higher chance of offending than crime-free

'cleanskins.' The above authors argue that offending likelihood is a valid component of the decision of whether or not to employ.

The Study

In order to investigate the extent to which convicted felons perceive difficulty obtaining jobs in the academic world, this paper used the combined personal experiences of its authors, together with the returns from a semi-structured questionnaire.¹ The method adopted was thus essentially qualitative, employing elements of retrospective- and auto-ethnography (e.g., Tilly, 1984; Irwin, 1987; Pelias, 1994; Ross, 2000; 2007; Gatson, 2003). This involved asking a select group of ex-convict respondents to reply to questions using memory, notes, correspondence, and files to reconstruct what took place when they applied and interviewed for faculty jobs (e.g., Ross, 2005). The method is thus historical, using the heuristic observations of key informants to recall the way in which a criminal record may have affected their employment searches. Although essentially non-representative, it is hoped that valid inferences can be made about the structural and procedural aspects of interviewing for professorial positions (Steier, 1991).

In this pursuit, in the spring of 2007, the authors developed an open-ended questionnaire which they themselves filled out and which was then distributed to seven ex-convicts who had obtained PhDs and secured academic positions at universities in the United States. A further respondent was working in New Zealand. Submitted responses were then subjected to analysis and interpretation. Today, these respondents include two assistant, four associate, and two full professors of sociology, criminology, or criminal justice. All but three had tenure at the time of the interviews. Names of institutions where

applicants applied and/or were interviewed were deleted to connote a measure of anonymity.

Findings

Although the job search experiences of respondents varied in terms of the time they had been on the job market and the states or countries in which they applied and/or worked, we believe that certain generalities can be drawn from the material we have collected. In most cases, aspects of the job search, like pre-interview questions, payment for travel and related expenses, and tours of the campus or town were standard, and differed little from what would normally be expected. However, from this point onward, some interesting diversities emerged.

The Question of Disclosure

In the questionnaire, candidates were asked whether, or at what point, they decided to reveal their criminal records. Because of its potential to affect the treatment of a candidate as well as the final decision, this choice was obviously a matter of critical importance. The question of whether, or when, to make a potentially ruinous disclosure was consequently associated with considerable tension and uncertainty among our respondents. Some chose to make the information available at the commencement of the process. One ex-convict candidate wrote:

I made my ex-con status very clear on the front end; prior to interview. The universities requested writing samples as part of my application packet. Here I included a chapter I wrote for the book, *Convict Criminology*. In the first couple sentences of paragraph one I delineate the fact that I spent in excess of five years confined within the FBOP. This was a pre-thought decision. I determined if I was

not upfront people would ultimately find out and be of the opinion I was hiding the fact of my criminal conviction. Also, during the ‘speed dating’ faculty interviews I was the one who raised the issue of my confinement.

Another followed a similar approach:

When I applied for academic positions I would disclose my conviction for 2nd degree homicide and my 15 years of imprisonment in the cover letter accompanying my vita, even though my conviction was over thirty years ago. I thought that a full disclosure of my past would allow departments and search committees to simply cull my application if it presented a problem for them in considering me for the position. In practice it was never that simple.

Another said:

Although I had never hidden my criminal convictions while in graduate school, or teaching at various universities, and did inform the hiring committee during a two day campus interview, I was still concerned that the fact would be used against me.

In some cases a candidate’s criminal record was known prior to interview and the issue did not arise. In one case, a respondent was already employed as a Visiting Assistant Professor when he went on the national market and assumed his prior status would be known:

I applied to numerous schools and was invited for a number of campus interviews. While I do not recall stating I was a former prisoner in my cover letters, I expected my references at different universities would discuss my background with respective hiring committees making inquiries about my applications.

Besides, my application packets included published work that discussed my time in federal prison.

In another case, the candidate was already well known nationally through publication of a highly-profiled book on his prison experiences (Newbold, 1982/1985). Since this book provided quite detailed material about criminal activity both before and during his time in prison, he was unsure of the impact it would have on his job chances.

Some candidates were forced to disclose in the process of explaining significant gaps in their vita:

When I interviewed at _____, it was the Vice-President who asked about this gap in my resume, which led to a discussion of my criminal past. The most striking thing was the difficulty that the schools had in raising the issue. They wanted to know about my past, but were not sure how to go about asking.

One respondent decided to keep his criminal history concealed for as long as possible, believing it would certainly destroy his chances of success. He stated, "All my interviews have gone very well as long as I did not disclose my *master status* of ex-con." Eventually, he was hired, despite his prison record.

So, responses to the question of disclosure were various. The majority of respondents, however, realized at the outset that their criminal convictions were already known or would become known if they were employed, and chose to discuss details of their records relatively early in the process. At many universities, failure to reveal a significant employment detail such as a past conviction can result in dismissal; therefore most candidates had little choice but to be open about their histories during the hiring phase.

The Interview Process

Respondents whose records were, or became, known to the search committees were asked about their experiences during the interview process. Responses to this question varied. One candidate, for example, wrote:

I was treated like any other candidate. I had a taxi chit to and from the airport and was treated with the same courtesy any candidate would expect. After the interview, they took me to lunch and I was made to feel very comfortable and welcome. Conversation was relaxed and informal, and everyone was very nice to me.

Another person had a similar experience in the interview process:

In the interview the department made no mention whatever of my previous life. They were concerned solely with my competence as a teacher and a researcher. Yes, it went fine. No questions about status.

For another a person, however, their criminal history did raise concerns:

When I interviewed at _____, my first faculty interview was with _____. He knew that I was an ex-con because a colleague of his had been a discussant on a panel that I had a paper in, and he was the guy who recommended me for the job. _____ was trying to figure out how to ask me about my ex-con status, and finally just blurted it out. Later on at lunch with about eight faculty members, one faculty person asked how I got interested in studying prisons. I thought the question was a set up, figuring that everyone knew about me. (However, no one else knew but _____). So, I figured that the best thing to do was to say that I was an ex-con, where I did my time, and then after it sunk in, some of them started asking me

questions. As it turned out, this all worked to my advantage. One guy was a born again Christian who was involved in prison ministry, so he asked if I knew about Chuck Colson and the Prison Fellowship, and I was able to tell him that I met Colson while I was in prison. Another asked me my impression of John Irwin's work, and I gave the answer that he hoped for.

Another respondent commented:

Having interviewed for a number of jobs, I have had different experiences. In my first campus interview, I remember being picked up at the airport in the dead of winter. It was thirty below zero and the professor's truck had a frozen battery. Still, he was very friendly and receptive. Upon getting the vehicle started we proceeded to a hotel bar and grill for a bite to eat, a beer or two, and conversation. While I did not know it at the time, I think I blew the interview when I told my host I was an ex-convict and wanted to teach corrections courses. Later I found out he was the resident prison expert, already taught the courses, and was less than tolerant of my background. While the interview proceeded as planned the next two days, it appeared there was something wrong. No matter what I said, there was some underlying tension, like the committee was struggling with private information.

Having passed through the initial interview phase, respondents were also asked about their experiences when meeting informally with faculty. Here responses also varied, from, "Mine was a pretty standard interview," to "It was clear the faculty was aware of my prison experience prior to my arrival. I could sense they so wanted to ask me about it, but out of politeness or legal stricture they did not."

Some of the more direct questions about the convicts' backgrounds happened around meals. According to one writer:

It is here that the most direct discussions as to my prison experience took place. We were off campus, and I got the sense [that] the strictures about what I could be asked relaxed. From my perspective it worked out quite nicely. I wanted my prison experience discussed. I did not want to take a job at a university where the faculty and administration were uncomfortable with the reality of my past. Why walk into the fire?

Another respondent recalled:

In a number of campus interviews, where I had told one or more members of the hiring committees that I had a felony record, I remember being surprised at the lack of questions about my past. After all, there I was, fire away, ask the questions, I have nothing to hide. I suspect the faculty were discussing their opinions between themselves. Maybe they were consulting with university human resource or legal staff.

In one case, the opposition of a single faculty member to the awarding of an offer of employment contract on the basis of a candidate's criminal convictions caused such uproar within the faculty that several threatened to resign if the contract was withheld. In this event the contract was issued, the dissident acquiesced, and nothing more was said about it.

Respondents were also consulted about whether the matter of "political correctness" had colored the interview; that is, whether the fact of having been in prison might have affected their social attitudes, and whether this was perceived as a problem by

the hiring committee. In most cases, the issue never came up. When it did, it did not seem to matter. One respondent, for example, wrote:

I was already well known through media commentary and from my first book for having forthright views that were not necessarily “PC.” That would have become clearer during interview, when I spoke about matters such as female and Maori (New Zealand native) offending. To that extent I was out of step with many others in the department, but it didn't seem to affect the final decision. I think the “lefties” in the department probably thought it was appropriate and maybe even a bit “cool” to have an ex-con teaching criminology.

For another, the issue of appropriateness came up indirectly:

A faculty member at my university of employment is a retired police officer. I have learned that discussions took place prior to my arrival between this faculty member and the Department Chair. The question asked was would you, as a retired police officer, feel comfortable working with an ex-con. His reply was that he did not arrest me so there should be no problem whatsoever.

Another responded:

I have interviewed in both sociology and criminal justice departments where the political spectrum ran from liberal to conservative. Although I think the faculty were fairly sensitized to being politically correct concerning race and gender, although that does not prove they were in fact, they were unprepared or had not considered the issues involved with hiring an ex-convict. I guess they never thought the situation would ever come up. They appeared a bit shocked that an

ex-convict could apply for a position with their university and be invited for a campus interview.

Again, as we see, experiences of interviewees were various. In general, however, it seems that the majority found early disclosure of their criminal histories to be necessary or advantageous in the overall scheme of things. Interview committees were sometimes tense, and sometimes curious about the information before them, and were unsure how to deal with it. However, the consensus was that the matter was handled with politeness and sensitivity, and sometimes disclosure of past criminality proved advantageous.

Committees appear largely to have kept an open mind in relation to the potential political and social differences between them and their ex-con candidates. In the example we gave of a negative response from the 'resident prison expert', professional jealousy, rather than the ex-con status, may have been the determining factor. Indeed, in the experience of the current authors, some senior academic criminologists appear to feel threatened when confronted by a junior colleague with intimate personal knowledge of a field in which they feel themselves to have proprietary concern.

Teaching a Class or Giving a Presentation

At some universities, part of the recruitment process involves having a candidate teach a class or present scholarly research they have conducted. In the former case, this provides a hiring committee an opportunity to observe a prospect in a classroom-type situation and to judge how he or she might perform in lectures and seminars. In the latter case it is supposed to be an indication of the candidate's scholarly ability. For first-job applicants this can be a harrowing test, since the quality of delivery, and its potential to attract or

repel students and future departmental colleagues, may be critical in the employment decision. So we asked our respondents to report on their experiences.

Some candidates were asked to teach a class while others were not. One respondent said there simply was not time to teach a class, although teaching assessments from his current contract were available. Once appointed, however, his new colleagues were interested to see how he would perform *in vivo*. He wrote:

When I gave my first lecture (on deviance) to the Stage I (Freshman) sociology class, the department staff all turned up to see how I'd go. At the end of the lecture the 400 students gave me an ovation, while one older female student laid an official complaint with the university about me saying that police tend to be biased against ethnic minorities. The department backed me 100% in this. Years later, the woman who complained, who by then was doing social work in a local prison, apologized to me.

A second respondent, who had interviewed for a number of jobs in the USA, reported:

I was always asked to guest lecture at least one class during a campus interview. Having taught for five years in graduate school, I knew how to manage a classroom, peak the interest of students, and deliver a decent lecture. If the class was in sociology, no problem. I remember teaching a corrections class where I discussed my background and a little of the inside perspective on prisons. While the students were receptive, and quite attentive, there may have been a few that registered their concerns.

A third said:

My research presentation went very well. However, here again I made my prison background quite clear via the very nature of my research. I presented my findings as to the relationship between enduring the prison experience and onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms. In my presentation I provided quantitative analysis conducted post -release and qualitative data generated during the period of my incarceration. The point is there was no question as to my prison background by interview's end.

A fourth person added:

In one class I did a research presentation taken from my dissertation on prison release. At some point in the lecture, I don't remember when, I discussed my own time in prison. Switching from third to first person always gets their attention. You could sense the lecture hall growing quiet as the students strained to hear every word. I guess they had never heard a lecturer talk about their direct experience with prison.

At this critical phase in the vetting process, the experiences of our respondents were encouraging. Using first-person accounts in the teaching setting tended to enliven the audiences, relax the presenters, and probably enhanced, rather than detracted from, their employment chances. None of our respondents reported negative reactions to the strategy of complementing theoretical or general commentary with accounts taken from their own life experiences.

Meeting Administrators

At some universities it is common for new or prospective staff to meet with university administrators. We asked our respondents about this but once again we found little evidence of perceived prejudice based upon past criminality. The following comments were typical:

“At ___ I met with Deans at the other schools but never talked about my history.”

“Again, my prison experience was not discussed but it was very clear that the ‘suits’ were aware of my prison experience.”

Two respondents elaborated a bit more. One wrote:

Soon after my appointment, as was the case with all new staff in those days, I was taken by my departmental chair for a cup of tea, cookies and a chat with the university Vice Chancellor (President). It was all very polite, and he seemed genuinely interested in my appointment and my progress. He supported me until his retirement, and both subsequent VCs have done the same. I've been very well treated here as far as the administration is concerned.

Another reported:

At different schools the process appeared to be different. At some schools I only met with the Department Chair, at most with at least the Dean, at others all the way up the line with Provost and President. Looking back, I doubt all the administrators did their homework and read my application materials. Maybe I'm wrong; it just appeared like they knew very little about me. As I recall, they spent most of their time promoting the university and telling me how I would enjoy the community, if I was offered the position. Then again, maybe they were being

cautious, and were trying to find a legitimate excuse to not recommend employment.

In general, it appears most of the candidates found university administrators to be polite, and possibly careful, in their discussion with candidates. In some cases, it was not clear what the search committees had told the administrator about the candidate's background. The candidate was left to guess as to how the search committee would vote, and what recommendation they might forward up the chain of command.

To Hire or Not to Hire?

The critical point, of course, is whether or not, at the end of this process, an applicant receives an offer and whether ex-convict status is perceived as having impacted on the employment decision. We interrogated our subjects specifically on this point and received an interesting array of responses.

One respondent discussed his experience in New Zealand:

I had to wait a fair while for an offer, but I know I was the department's first choice. I've since found out that at a higher level, however, Staffing Committee was concerned about my previous convict status. Here it was the Dean of Law who was my strongest supporter. He was good friends with two law professors in Auckland who had helped me when I first got out and had really gone to bat for me during my PhD years. They were, and still are strong supporters of mine and are now my very close friends. The Law Dean was the same. He was a powerful figure in university politics and he chaired the Staffing Committee. He was also the Vice Chancellor's right-hand man. Influenced by what the Auckland professors had told him, the Dean of Law assured the committee of my competence, honesty and

integrity, thus removing any misgivings members may have had about my past. So they decided to give me a shot. I got the offer in mid-January 1988, giving me just six weeks to move, relocate and start teaching two new courses! The offer was low: L.3, which is near the bottom of the lecturer (associate professor) scale. The salary was only \$37,000. But I willingly accepted it and I have subsequently been promoted rapidly.

Another explained his adventures at different schools in (unnamed state):

However, my very first job was at _____. And, a few months earlier, I had been told at a conference by a faculty member that I was the #1 candidate for a sociology position at _____. However, I waited and waited and never received a call for an interview. While at ____, a colleague of mine played cards with faculty at _____, and he found out that I was the top candidate, but once it was discovered that I was an ex-con, my name was no longer in the pool.

One respondent, who is a former police officer and federal agent as well as an ex-convict, and has been actively recruited because of his law enforcement experience, has had a number of positions offered to him and then withdrawn when he informs search committees of his ex-convict status. At one university he had the following experience:

The chair just before I was leaving told me how much they valued my experience in law enforcement and all but said you are hired. At that point I told him I was an ex-con which quickly ended our conversation and I received a rejection letter within days.

Another university took steps to protect the institution from ex-convict hires:

Nothing has ever happened on an interview that was other than normal up until it looked like I was going to be hired and then you know. For example, at the Midwest Sociological Society meeting in Chicago last month the department chair at ____ came up to me and apologized for not hiring me after he said I was their guy. He informed me that ____ found out I was an ex-convict and started raising hell. In fact, now the university has everyone sign a disclosure form stating whether or not they are an ex-convict because of my almost sneaking in under the wire in 2003.

It appeared from the range of responses the ex-cons got that polite treatment notwithstanding, past criminality did in some cases impact on a candidate's chances of getting a job. It will be noted from the above cases, however, that all of the negative experiences related to candidates who had not revealed their criminality and were subsequently "found out," or who had disclosed at the end of the interview process. It is quite possible in these cases that a department's decision not to hire may have been influenced by a sense of having been deceived by a candidate who had withheld relevant information. Thus, a perception of candidate dishonesty, rather than the criminal past itself, may have been the deciding factor.

However, sometimes the stigma of a conviction appears to remain and full early disclosure provides no guarantee of protection. One of our respondents, for example, reported:

I made the short list for a tenure-track position with a state university department with a strong progressive reputation. I was invited for a campus interview. I presented some research; taught a class, and met with faculty and students. In the

Dean's Office we had a frank discussion about how my knowledge of our criminal justice would allow me to bring a unique depth to my research and classes. However, once selected for the hire a faculty member decided more information about my case was needed. Within a surprise phone interview he not only asked me to disclose the facts of my conviction, which are public record, but he then also began to inquire about the intimate background details surrounding the offense. It was perhaps one of the most disturbing interviews I had ever had.

The candidate was not hired at this university. In this case the search committee apparently succumbed to its fears. The candidate had served 15 years for a homicide committed when he was 20. He was over 50 when he completed his PhD and went on the academic job market. In the opinion of this respondent, a number of search committees at different universities were influenced by these historic events and he found it difficult to find work once he disclosed details of his past. His experience was unusual among our respondents, however, and it is possible that his age at graduation was an added factor in some cases.

Despite evidence of fear abiding with some faculty and departments over a former conviction, none of the respondents who disclosed early had great difficulty finding academic employment. As noted, we suspect that the impact of a past conviction is softened by full disclosure early in the application process. One of our respondents suggested that perceived candidacy problems can arise from deficient or obscure policies regarding former offenders:

When universities and departments are confronted with a novel situation for which they are unprepared, such as having an ex-convict as a strong candidate for

a faculty position, they can easily make mistakes that would be less likely to occur with a candidate from another minority or stigmatized population. Without relevant and fair policies to guide the process, even well-intending faculty can flounder in uncertainty and confusion as to how to proceed. If they then discard professional constraints, the process can descend into a quagmire of unprofessional bigotry from which there is no recovery for either party.

In the current political climate, where background checks are increasingly favored, it may be that obligatory disclosure of a felonious past will become a universal component of the job application process. The main underlying issue, as Blumstein and Nakamura (2009) suggest, may well be how to encourage universities, departments, and faculty to develop and implement fair and informed policies, guidelines and procedures for dealing with the growing number of convicted felons joining professional ranks.

Discussion and Findings

This inquiry into the experiences of ex-convicts when applying for jobs within the realms of the academy revealed some interesting and sometimes surprising results. Perhaps the most significant was that the majority of our respondents reported little in the way of perceived systemic prejudice at any stage in the recruitment and interview process. On the contrary, most reported having been received with sensitivity and grace by their hosts. At the critical point of extending an offer, however, we found mixed results, with some candidates reporting what appeared to be prejudice against them once their criminal records were known.

The problem of when to tell, and what to tell, appears to be both distinct and interrelated. Our results suggest that it is better to disclose a felony record early in the

hiring process in order to avoid the impression of duplicity. (Parenthetically, we offer that this may be easier for candidates with convictions for drug crimes than for those with violent or sexual histories. For example, while a search committee may overlook a conviction for distribution of marijuana, it may become alarmed if the candidate has a conviction for homicide or rape. “When to disclose,” and “what level of detail to share,” become critical factors when a criminal record is likely to bring a negative response).

We have seen that some committees or individuals involved in hiring wish to examine the details of a candidate’s past criminal record before making the decision to hire. Indeed, we have one reported instance where members of a search committee actually traveled to find court records, and researched legal cases in law libraries and newspapers, in order to retrieve offending details. The respondent believed that these details were then used to deny him employment.

As we have observed, the reticence of employment authorities appears to be founded on a fear that an ex-con candidate may reoffend and impugn a university’s reputation. In our opinion, this risk is counterbalanced by the fact that in most cases the candidate’s crime was committed when he/she was a younger person, many years ago, and long before he/she completed a PhD. It is known that a person’s likelihood of reoffending declines with age and time (see, e.g., Spier, 2002). Further, in agreement with Brown (1991), we contend that achieving higher education transforms individuals, indicates a commitment to change, and mitigates the risk of recidivism.

We acknowledge, however, that universities have a responsibility to exercise diligence in relation to the hiring of former felons. We suggest that search committees, when evaluating an ex-convict for tenure-track appointment, do the following: First, keep

to the same procedures and criteria used to evaluate all candidates; Second, when discussing a criminal record, to pay attention to the nature and extent of the offending, the date of the most recent conviction, the age of the candidate when last convicted, and any evidence including the academic references that provides a more contemporary portrait of a candidate's makeup. Federal law and natural justice require that search teams treat all candidates fairly and without prejudice. As with all workers, the law also provides recourse to discontinue an appointment if an employee fails in his/her duties or brings his/her employer into disrepute.

Conclusion

In the United States, burgeoning prison populations have generated a responding escalation in ex-felons within the free community. Some felons have become educated in prison, a small proportion have obtained PhDs, and some have applied for faculty positions after graduation. At the same time, there is an increasing tendency for universities to employ criminal background checks in the screening of faculty, staff and administrator hires. As the number of highly-educated former felons in the community increases, and discussion about the hiring of ex-felons for faculty positions is likely to intensify, the potential hurdles they face is of interest to university personnel, students, and parents of children enrolled in college. .

This exploratory study has examined the cases of eight former felons who have secured academic positions in university departments. Although the sample is small, we believe that the experiences and observations of this select group are instructive. While some universities may be prepared to eliminate prospective job candidates on the basis of historic criminality, we found little direct evidence of it. For the most part, provided

disclosure of a criminal past was made early, our respondents encountered little obvious acrimony or bias at interview. Candidates report, by and large, that they were treated with courtesy and sensitivity by recruitment committees. If asked to teach a class or give a presentation, the audience was largely receptive, attentive, and appreciative of the speaker's candor. Audiences were particularly responsive when a speaker used personal narratives to illustrate general points. Meetings with administrators were similarly benign, with little evidence of prejudice based on past criminality. Sometimes a candidate's past was not even discussed but when it was, the approach of administrators was cautious and polite.

Although all of the respondents used in this survey are currently employed as fulltime academics, they did not get every job for which they applied. Some had experiences of believing they would be hired, only to be told later that their application had failed. When this happened there was a tendency to attribute the failure to their criminal pasts. We have no way of knowing whether this was actually the case, but there was evidence that criminal records may have been a factor in some cases, particularly if the disclosure was delayed. For the most part, our respondents' fears of negative prejudice were greater than the reality but it is worth mentioning that such fears may become a self-fulfilling reality if they affect interview performance.

Although this study is small and requires validation with more extensive research, the findings should offer hope to current convicts and ex-convicts contemplating academic careers. If a candidate's academic credentials are sound and he/she is honest about his/her past, there is no reason to believe that hard work and perseverance will not be rewarded with scholarly employment. Immediate success is not guaranteed;

Commented [JIR1]: As per reviewers comments this is a little confusing. If not contradictory. Not sure who among us wrote this originally. Perhaps we can clean up.

disappointments occur in any person's career. However, if our findings are valid, a criminal record, in and of itself, is unlikely to result in exclusion from the halls of the academy.

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NOTES

¹ With the exception of the lead author, all contributors are convicted felons and ex-convicts.