AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF EX-OFFENDER EMPLOYMENT IN A NON-URBAN SETTING

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ABSTRACT

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The large number of offenders being released from incarceration and returning home presents numerous challenges for both the offenders and their communities. Difficulties in finding housing, gaining employment, and reconnecting with families/friends are some of the main hurdles ex-offenders face throughout the reentry process. While many of the challenges faced by ex-offenders are significant, securing gainful employment can often prove to be the most challenging. Many of the offenders returning to the community have gaps in their employment history, limited skill sets, and insufficient education. This exploratory study investigated the differences between non-urban and urban reentry by relying on the literature provided concerning reentry in urban areas and data collected from employment applications within a non-urban area. Previous research has mainly taken place within large, urban areas and has ignored non-urban areas. This study examined the content of employment applications in Wood County, Ohio. This study specifically explores the use of employment applications as an initial screening for employment. Also, included is a discussion on the concerns of ex-offender employment, encompassing all ex-offenders not just ex-offenders released from a period of incarceration. Results show that barriers to employment upon reentry differ between urban and non-urban settings. Implications of the differences for offender reentry are discussed.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The United States has experienced an increase of incarceration for over two decades. The total population of prisoners incarcerated in the United States grew from .5 million to 2.1 million between 1980 and 2004 (Bushway, Stoll, and Weiman, 2007). Ohio has experienced incarceration rates similar to the national growth. The prison population in the state of Ohio nearly tripled in size between 1982 and 1998, and by year-end 2002, Ohio maintained the seventh largest prison population in the United States (La Vigne, Thomson, Visher, Kachnowski, and Travis, 2003). The increased incarceration rates throughout the late 20th and early 21st century have not only resulted in overcrowded institutions and record high correctional budgets, but has resulted in more offenders being released from incarceration after serving their sentence. As long as offenders are being incarcerated, offenders will be released back into society.

Offender reentry refers to the process of reintegrating offenders into the community, typically after a period of incarceration, although those who have been convicted but not incarcerated also need to be reintegrated into society. The process of offender reentry has created substantial barriers for offenders, families, and communities. Most previously incarcerated persons (PIPs) are released from prison ill-equipped to meet probation or parole mandates and to live a crime free life. Once released, offenders must gain housing, employment, and reconnect with family and friends (Anderson-Facile, 2009; La Vigne, Davies, Palmer, and Halberstadt, 2008; Morenoff & Harding, 2011). PIPs may face additional obstacles to obtaining and maintaining employment with less than stable transportation options. Without access to employment, housing, and transportation many PIPs see no other options than to revert back to criminal behavior (La Vigne et al., 2008). These same problems face many ex-offenders who
remain in the community (for ease of discussion, this thesis subsumes ex-offenders who have not been incarcerated with PIPs).

Similar to the growth in reentering offenders is the growth of the body of literature aimed at analyzing offender reentry. Much of the current literature remains consistent in the basic struggles and major concerns for PIPs throughout the reentry process. Three of the most basic concerns for offender reentry are transportation, housing, and employment (Anderson-Facile, 2009; La Vigne et al., 2008; Morenoff & Harding, 2011). These concerns have been widely researched and analyzed, mostly in urban areas, across the United States.

Previous research has ignored the implications of reentry in non-urban areas. Non-urban areas have the same basic reentry concerns, transportation, housing, and employment, but from a different perspective. PIPs returning to urban areas may not be able to afford to buy their own transportation, but can rely on public transportation. Urban areas have taxis, subway systems, and buses. While navigating these systems can be a daunting task for a returning offender, these systems exist as an alternative to owning a vehicle. In non-urban areas, public transportation is not an option; residents must own a vehicle or rely on family or friends for transportation. Ex-offenders need transportation to maintain employment and meet court mandated expectations in the way of attending meetings and programming (La Vigne et al., 2008).

Non-urban areas also offer fewer places to obtain housing. Urban areas have many buildings designated as low-income housing complexes, whereas in non-urban areas only one or two buildings may exist. In non-urban areas the chance of finding any low-income housing is remote—it does not commonly exist. A low supply of available housing leaves PIPs to rely on family or friends. If low-income housing can be found in non-urban areas the chance of finding an available unit is low. A low supply of housing options for PIPs can lead to homelessness and
increased opportunity for recidivism. Ex-offenders need housing to be successful once released from incarceration.

Non-urban areas also have fewer employment opportunities compared to the opportunities for employment within urban cities. For PIPs, employment is necessary for successful reintegration back into communities (Anderson-Facile, 2009). Finding and maintaining employment is one of the greatest challenges for PIPs while reintegrating into society (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013; Holzer, Rahael, & Stoll, 2007; La Vigne et al., 2008; Visher & Courtney, 2007). In non-urban areas, potential employers might remember the behavior of an ex-offender prior to incarceration. For the PIP, not being able to escape this stigma may make finding employment more difficult. Potential employment opportunities are also less common in non-urban areas to the fewer businesses compared to the frequency in urban areas.

As a result of the reentry movement, the topic of employment as a key to crime desistance has again come to light as a major challenge for persons with criminal histories. Based on the currently available data, research studying the implications of reentry in non-urban areas would be beneficial, particularly the implications of ex-offenders gaining employment within a non-urban area. Many offenders are released from incarceration each year and have been found to return to non-urban and rural areas, not just urban areas. In order to reduce recidivism and better aid the reentry population it is important to know if PIPs will be able to find employment, housing, and transportation when returning to non-urban areas. If employment is less likely in a non-urban area, understanding why this is the case and what makes employment more likely in urban areas would be beneficial. Based on the notion that employment is a predictor of reentry success, it is important to understand if the successful reintegration of an ex-offender or failure of an ex-offender differs not only within what the
literature describes about urban areas, but also what types of challenges occur within non-urban areas.

The present study will look at employment in a non-urban area and discuss employment differences within communities in a non-urban setting. Specifically, this study is comparing the differences in what the literature provides about reentry and employment within urban cities and counties to what is found within a non-urban county. This study will utilize data from employment applications collected in Wood County, Ohio. The employment applications serve as an initial screen for employers throughout the hiring process. This study serves as a new and unique contribution to the field as nobody to date has studies the implications of employment applications. Wood County, Ohio, is an area that contains both non-urban and cities and villages, and is in close proximity to urban areas. There is limited public transportation in Wood County and towns are spread out and not within walking distance. Wood County does not possess a bussing or mass transit system that connects the cities and villages to one another. Employment applications will be analyzed to assess the types of businesses and forms of employment available and what types of questions are asked that pertain to ex-offenders. A content analysis of the applications will be performed studying questions regarding history of arrest and conviction, consent for a background check, having reliable transportation, educational background and work history.

The focus of this research is to study the challenges of ex-offenders gaining employment within a non-urban setting. The second chapter defines the necessary terms for the study of reentry, as considered within the context of the present study, as well as reviewing the current literature relevant to the study. Major findings of previously completed studies have found employment, transportation, and housing to be the three main concerns for PIPs once released.
from incarceration. Using the notion that employment, housing, and transportation are imperative for reentry success, employment can be considered the most essential because PIPs cannot afford stable housing or reliable transportation without employment. The third chapter discusses the methodology used to examine the relationship between employment and reentry. The fourth chapter discusses the major results gained from the content analysis of applications. The final chapter discusses the implications of the results, limitations of the current methodology, and suggestions for future study.
CHAPTER II. EX-OFFENDER REENTRY AND EMPLOYMENT

In order to study the employment implications of offender reentry, it is necessary to discuss the additional problems faced by offenders when reentering society. The relationship between employment and success is reviewed, along with the barriers offenders may experience that affect employment.

Transition from Prison to Community

The United States experienced a steady increase of incarceration for over two decades. Between 1980 and 2004, the total population of prisoners grew from .5 million to 2.1 million (Bushway, Stoll, and Weiman, 2007). When probationers and parolees are included, the total number of persons under some form of correctional supervision in 2004 was nearly 7 million (Bushway et al., 2007). A 2008 report by the PEW Center on the States found that 1 in 100 Americans are behind bars (Pew Center on the States, 2008). Incarceration rates in the United States surpass every other country in the world. The United States accounts for less than five percent of the world’s population but houses almost a quarter of the world’s prison population (Solomon, 2012). Correctional spending has grown as dramatically as the population of prisoners. More than $74 billion is spent annually on corrections at the federal, state, and local level, averaging roughly $30,000 per inmate per year (Bahr et al., 2010; Solomon, 2012).

Ohio has experienced an increase in imprisonment similar to the national growth rate. Between 1982 and 1998, Ohio’s prison population nearly tripled in size and by year-end 2002 had the seventh largest prison population in the United States (La Vigne et al., 2003). Ohio’s increase in incarceration can be attributed to two main factors - increased admissions and longer sentences (La Vigne et al., 2003). As of November 2013, the total prison population in the state
of Ohio was 50,545 offenders, of which only 435 are serving life without parole (ODRC, 2013). This means that over 50,000 offenders will one day be released from custody back into society.

Reentry refers to the process of reintegrating ex-offenders back into the community. This includes finding housing, gaining employment, and reconnecting with family and friends. Once released, some ex-offenders remain under correctional supervision. In 2012, just over 22,000 offenders were released from incarceration (ODRC, 2013). Of the 22,000 released, almost 14,000 were placed on some sort of supervision and the rest exited prison without supervision conditions of any kind (ODRC, 2013). Many ex-offenders do not have the skills or support to succeed once released from custody. When ex-offenders are not successfully reintegrated back into the communities, some are returned to prison due to new crime of technical violations for those under mandatory supervision requirements and the incarceration cycle begins again (Anderson-Facile, 2009).

**Barriers to Successful Reentry**

The transition from prison to the community is challenging for most previously incarcerated persons (PIPs) and ex-offenders. Successful reentry requires PIPs to overcome a substantial set of barriers in pursuit of a crime-free lifestyle. These barriers include housing, employment, transportation, and social support (Anderson-Facile, 2009; La Vigne et al., 2008; Morenoff & Harding, 2011). Barriers to reentry are complex and dependent on each other. Offenders need to gain employment to afford housing and transportation, but may face additional obstacles to obtaining and maintaining employment with less than stable transportation options. Official identification is also needed to gain employment but, without employment, an ex-offender does not have the money to pay for the needed identification. Without access to
employment, transportation, and housing, many ex-offenders see no other option than to revert back to criminal activities to survive (La Vigne et al., 2008).

**Financial stability**

Financial stability is a major hurdle for returning offenders. Once released, offenders return to a society where success is dependent on the ability to earn a living and support oneself. Prisoners typically have outstanding financial obligations owed to the court and lack the means to make payments. Offenders lose their eligibility for any federal benefits they qualified for prior to incarceration. As a result, many offenders rely on their families for financial support to a much greater extent than they expected prior to release (La Vigne et al., 2008). While some ex-offenders are able to turn to family members to aid them in the reentry process, many have lost contact with their family and must resort to whatever support they can find. This disconnection can be detrimental to offender success because, without a positive environment, an offender is more likely to revert back to criminal behavior.

**Official documentation**

For ex-offenders to be able to gain employment and find housing, official identification is needed. This is a barrier for many returning offenders because documents such as a driver’s license, social security card, and birth certificate are no longer in their possession. The cost associated with obtaining new documents can be seen as a barrier in itself for some offenders (La Vigne et al., 2008). Also, the process of finding the correct office and then figuring out how to get themselves to the office with the proper documentation needed is a major obstacle. Some documentation can be ordered online but for ex-offenders to take advantage of this route they will have to know how to use the Internet. They will also have to use a credit card to order the documents and have an address to have the documents delivered. For many offenders obtaining
personal identification is a major obstacle that is often over looked in the reentry process.

Personal identification is critical; it is a requirement for the long-term goals of reentry which are finding a job and housing (La Vigne et al., 2008).

**Transportation**

Transportation is a significant barrier for many returning offenders. Ex-offenders cannot get to work or look for a place to live without access to transportation. For some offenders, close friends or family members will help drive them around or get them a bus pass, but for many ex-offenders, friends and family members are few and far between. In cities, public transportation can be an option for returning offenders. In non-urban areas, public transportation is very limited. One in four released offenders reports having problems finding transportation (La Vigne et al., 2008). Public transportation presents a problem for offenders due to restrictions in where the bus and train stops are located and the hours of operation. Depending on public transportation can make returning offenders vulnerable to victimization and create opportunities for criminal behavior (La Vigne et al., 2008). Ex-offenders also need to access transportation to follow up with post-release services. Some offenders are released to post-release supervision and are mandated to follow up with probation or parole officers and follow through with service providers (La Vigne et al., 2008). If ex-offenders fail to follow through with these mandates, even if they have no access to transportation, they risk being reincarcerated. Ex-offenders need to have access to transportation to be able to get to work, find housing, and meet all of their post-release mandates. Transportation is key to successful reentry.

**Housing**

Finding a place to live can be a daunting task for offenders. Most ex-offenders live with a family member, significant other, or friend once released; however this is frequently a
transitory arrangement (Anderson-Facile, 2009). Ex-offenders have trouble reuniting with family members and friends due to extended prison stays and severed relationships (Anderson-Facile, 2009). If families or friends do not aid in housing ex-offenders, few options exist (Thompson, 2004). The relationship between housing and employment is interconnected. To obtain more permanent housing, ex-offenders need to have a job. Housing contracts require a security deposit and evidence of employment so the renter knows the rent will be paid (Anderson-Facile, 2009; La Vigne et al., 2008). The difficulty in finding housing affects the ability of an ex-offender to gain employment. When ex-offenders are applying for work, an address and phone number where they can be reached is necessary (Thompson, 2004). Ex-offenders also face barriers in finding housing, even when they have the ability to pay for it. Renters can perform background and credit checks on potential renters, further complicating the search for housing.

**Employment**

Finding and maintaining gainful employment is one of the greatest challenges for offenders returning to the community (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013; Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2007; La Vigne et al., 2008; Visher & Courtney, 2007). Working is the main activity of most adults; it is how people earn money. Employment aids in the reentry process by giving offenders a sense of structure and routine in their day, while earning money to gain financial independence. Many ex-offenders depend on the financial support of their family and friends throughout the reentry process until employment is established. Ex-offenders who engage in lawful employment are less likely to commit new crimes resulting in decreased recidivism rates (Solomon et al., 2004). Securing legitimate employment is a challenge for ex-offenders and serves as a strong predictor of living a crime free life (Morenoff & Harding, 2011).
Many ex-offenders are unskilled and uneducated. A lack of skill and education added to the fact that ex-offenders have a criminal past decreases the likelihood of employment once released (Anderson-Facile, 2009). It is well known that ex-offenders are stigmatized in the search for employment no matter the crime for which they have been convicted (Morenoff & Harding, 2011). The longer ex-offenders spent incarcerated, the bigger the gaps in their employment history. Extended amount of time spent in prison also lead to depreciation in skills that offenders had prior to incarceration (Stoll & Bushway, 2008). Some federal and state laws prevent the hiring of ex-offenders in occupations that deal primarily with vulnerable populations, such as children and elderly (Anderson-Facile, 2009). Many laws that are in place to prevent the hiring of ex-offenders into positions dealing with vulnerable populations exclude all ex-offenders.

Each of these challenges is linked to the others. Ex-offenders do not have money to find housing and support themselves without employment, yet they cannot gain employment and housing without official documentation, and cannot get to work without transportation. Whether an ex-offender is adhering to a condition of his release or trying to provide for himself or his family, employment is the most critical activity for post-release success (Kelly & Fader, 2012). Employment is the gateway to earning money for housing and transportation and for building a crime free lifestyle.

**Relationship between Employment and Success**

Consistent employment provides ex-offenders with routine, an opportunity to earn money, a pro-social environment, and less incentive to commit crime. Theoretically, the more time an ex-offender spends working the less time there is to commit crime. Employment gives ex-offenders a sense of purpose and meaning, while providing a routine and reducing exposure
to situations that can result in criminal behavior (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Bloom, 2006). A job represents time spent earning money that could otherwise be spent getting into trouble. Employment removes the financial incentive to commit crime (Kelly & Fader, 2012). When ex-offenders are earning money from legal employment the incentive to commit crime for money lessens. A job enables an offender to pay for housing, transportation, and other bills. Positive social networks are developed through employment. An increase in time that an ex-offender spends with people who lead pro-social lives increases the chance of desistance from criminal behavior (Zweig et al., 2011). Successful reentry of offenders depends on finding and maintaining employment.

Stable employment is a predictor of reentry success (Zweig et al., 2011). Ex-offenders that can maintain stable employment are less likely to be reincarcerated within the first year of release (La Vigne et al., 2007) and are less likely to reoffend. Employment enhances earnings, which result in a decrease in recidivism. Employment has been consistently proven to be one of the most effective ways to reduce offender recidivism (Sung & Richter, 2006).

More than 90% of ex-offenders report that gaining legal employment is paramount to long-term success and desistance from crime (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013). Becoming financially independent, however, can be an intimidating task for ex-offenders given that the majority of jobs require a high school diploma, specific skills, and prior work experience (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013). Predictors of success in obtaining employment include work prior to incarceration, work throughout incarceration, and having a support network of family and friends (Visher & Courtney, 2007).

Complicating matters, more than 80% of offenders serving time in Ohio did not complete high school and the average reading level is at a grade level of 7.5 (ODRC, 2013). Low levels of
education create additional challenges for offenders throughout the reentry process. The average age of offenders currently housed in Ohio prisons is about 36 years old and the average length of stay is about two years (ODRC, 2013). This means that majority of returning offenders in the state of Ohio are about 40 years of age (ODRC, 2013). The implications for employment are further complicated by an older release population. Employers are more likely to hire younger people without criminal convictions than older people with criminal convictions.

**Positive Influences**

**Social Ties to Family**

Ex-offenders who maintain social ties to family are found to have positive employment outcomes after being released (Anderson-Facile, 2009; Berg & Huebner, 2011; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011; Visher & Kachnowski, 2007). Offenders rely on family members for support throughout the reentry process. Many offenders use their connections with family to arrange employment opportunities and to support them financially until employment is secured. Empirical data indicates that not only do strong family ties help ex-offenders to find employment but to reintegrate into society as a whole (Anderson-Facile, 2009). Employers have been found to hire applicants with criminal records based on the knowledge gained about an ex-offender’s character from his family (Berg and Huebner, 2011). Family members who own businesses themselves are also known to hire relatives who have criminal records. Social ties to family members consistently correspond with post-release success of offenders (Berg and Huebner, 2011). Visher and Kachnowski (2007) find that ex-offenders with the greatest employment longevity are more likely to have strong family relationships.
**Work Prior to Incarceration**

Work history prior to incarceration is a significant predictor of employment after prison. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 21 and 38 percent of offenders were unemployed prior to imprisonment (Solomon et al., 2004). Berg and Huebner (2011) found that men who had an insufficient work history prior to incarceration were 92% less likely to be employed once released compared to men that maintained pre-prison employment. Many offenders that lack a stable work history also lack the social and professional skills that are developed from employment, further hindering their employability once released (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013). Visher and Kachnowski (2007) reported that offenders who worked prior to incarceration were not only more likely to find a job once released, but were also more likely to be working more frequently and for longer increments of time. For ex-offenders that were employed prior to incarceration, many reported working in positions related to construction, maintenance, cleaning, automotive, and food services (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013).

**Work While Incarcerated**

Offenders who held a job while incarcerated experienced more positive employment outcomes once released. Employers are more likely to hire an ex-offender who used their prison time to work and develop skills applicable to life outside of prison (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). Research has also shown that ex-offenders who worked while incarcerated are not only more likely to be employed, but have lower rates of recidivism (Solomon et al., 2004). The work programs available to inmates help to develop job skills that can make up for the deficits from an offender’s life prior to incarceration. Also, the wages earned from working in the prison can help the offender to pay court costs and other legal obligations, as well as contribute to their families (Solomon et al., 2004). Work behind bars allows an offender to work
on job-specific skills. This aids in finding employment once released, thus resulting in lower recidivism rates.

Ex-offenders who also participate in employment training programs have increased instances of gaining employment. Program completion serves as a signal to an employer that an ex-offender is serious about a commitment to work (Bushway & Apel, 2012). The completion of a voluntary work program indicates that an ex-offender can commit to a program and is interested in gaining skills that will aid in desisting from crime and becoming a productive member of society (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Piquero, 2012). Ex-offenders with a college degree also have a higher likelihood of gaining employment. A college degree shows employers that while a potential employee might be an ex-offender, at one point in life that potential employee knew how to work hard (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Employers have been found to take a chance on ex-offenders who have been found to participate in some sort of training. Regardless of whether that training is a training program or a college degree, training matters. When ex-offenders have someone in their past that can attest to the fact that the individual promptly arrived to work, completed all assigned tasks, and learned some kind of skill, chances for employment are augmented.

**Work after Incarceration**

Once released many offenders return to previous employers and rely on friends and relatives to gain employment. For ex-offenders, a former employer can serve as a major resource having knowledge of an employee’s work history prior to offending and incarceration. Conversely, for ex-offenders without positive past employment, a former employer could serve as a barrier. Ex-offenders commonly found work in fast food, manufacturing, and construction fields, as well as in warehouses and factories (Kohl et al., 2008; Visher & Courtney, 2007). For
ex-offenders with previous work experience, the impact of incarceration was substantial with few ex-offenders achieving the pay levels they had experienced prior to incarceration (Visher & Courtney, 2007).

Ex-offenders tend to earn less money when compared to individuals with comparable backgrounds who have not been convicted of a crime (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). Visher and Kachnowski (2007) found that the hourly pay for employed ex-offenders ranged from $4.50-$40, with the average pay being $9. Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner (2011) found that unemployed ex-offenders were three times as likely to recidivate when compared to ex-offenders earning at least $10 per hour. Low compensation rates correlate with increased instances of recidivism. The inability to make ends meet to support oneself or ones family results in returning to criminal behavior (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011).

Ex-offenders who participate in employment training programs have increased instances of gaining employment. Program completion serves as a signal to an employer that an ex-offender is serious about a commitment to work (Bushway & Apel, 2012). The completion of a voluntary work program indicates that an ex-offender can commit to a program and is interested in gaining skills that will aid in desisting from crime and becoming a productive member of society (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Piquero, 2012). Ex-offenders with a college degree also have a higher likelihood of gaining employment. A college degree shows employers that, while a potential employee might be an ex-offender, at one point in life that potential employee knew how to work hard (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Employers have been found to take a chance on ex-offenders who have been found to participate in some sort of training. Regardless of whether that training is a training program or a college degree, training matters. When ex-offenders have someone in their past who can attest to the fact that the individual promptly arrived to work,
completed all assigned tasks, and learned some kind of skill, chances for employment are increased substantially.

**Problems/Issues with Employment**

The stigma of being an ex-offender creates a barrier to employment. A criminal record will keep many ex-offenders from gaining employment even if they are qualified for the job and are unlikely to reoffend (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Solomon, 2012). Time spent in prison results in lost work experiences and social contacts, further exacerbating the difficulty in gaining employment. Ex-offenders are likely to have deficits in both their education and work history and lack a valid form of identification (La Vigne et al., 2008; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). The typical job for which an ex-offender retains the required skill set includes, construction, manufacturing, food services, and other low-skill jobs (Solomon et al., 2004).

**Lack of Education**

Lack of education creates a substantial barrier to gaining employment for many offenders. Berg and Huebner (2011) report that approximately one-third of state prison inmates had already earned a high school diploma, compared to 90% of males outside of prison. According to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 80% of currently incarcerated offenders are high-school dropouts. Additionally, 30% of males and 20% of females read at less than a sixth grade level making them functionally illiterate (ODRC Website). The prison environment is naturally not conducive to expanding educational knowledge. Time in prison can strengthen social ties to antisocial peer groups (Solomon et al., 2004). For offenders attempting to maintain a certain status amongst the other offenders, educational and other skill building programs are not fully utilized. Even when education and employment programs are taken advantage of, offenders face bleak prospects of employment once released.
**Offender Restrictions**

After release from incarceration, the stigma of being an ex-offender further complicates the deficiencies in work history and education. Visher and Kachnowski (2007), in a survey of 3,000 employers spanning four metropolitan areas, found that two-thirds of the employers would not hire an ex-offender. Approximately 70% of offenders were found to attribute their lack of employment to their criminal record and not their education and skill deficits (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013). Many ex-offenders are willing and able to work but have demanding parole conditions (including treatment program participation, a curfew, daily or weekly reporting, and mobility restriction) that limit the ability of the offender to find and maintain employment (La Vigne et al., 2008; Solomon et al., 2004).

**Criminal Background Checks**

Criminal background checks are becoming increasingly popular among U.S. employers. Blumstein and Nakamura (2010) found that more than 80% of employers in the U.S. are performing background checks on prospective employees. Background checks have progressed into being one of most common activities of the hiring process and are increasingly popular among the low-skill, low-wage jobs for which ex-offenders apply (Western, 2008). Employers may not trust individuals who have been convicted of a crime to handle merchandise or cash. An ex-offender can be seen as an employee who is more likely to harm a customer or steal from the employer (Stoll & Bushway, 2008). In addition, many employers question how many offenders have the skills necessary to not only work, but to interact with the customers effectively (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013; Pager & Western, 2009; Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman, 2007; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). An applicant with a criminal record carries a stigma that leads people to believe that person lacks basic job skills and lacks desirable traits such as
trustworthiness, responsibility, and intrapersonal skills (La Vigne et al., 2008). Some employers are legally barred from hiring persons with criminal records. State laws and occupational licensing requirements disqualify persons who have been convicted of a crime, regardless of the nature and extent of the crime (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011). This creates a barrier for many ex-offenders when attempting to gain lawful employment.

**Type of Offense**

For employers who do hire persons with a criminal background, the type of offense is an important factor in the hiring decision. Employers are more likely to hire applicants convicted of theft, burglary, and drug related crimes and least likely to hire ex-offenders who have been convicted of murder or rape (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013). Atkin and Armstrong (2013) found that 54% of respondents expressed a willingness to hire an ex-offender compared to 14% who expressed an unwillingness to hire an ex-offender. The likelihood of hiring an individual with a criminal record also depends on the past experiences with ex-offenders in the workplace (Pager & Western, 2009). Approximately 85% of employers who have previous experience working with ex-offenders are likely to hire ex-offenders in the future (Pager & Wester, 2009). Employers who have experience hiring ex-offenders have found that for many ex-offenders maintaining employment is a condition of their release resulting in the ex-offender employee taking the job more seriously (Pager & Western, 2009).

**Computer-Based Applications**

Computer-based job applications are becoming increasingly popular among employers. For larger corporations, the online application process is set up at corporate headquarters standardizing the application process at every location (Kelly & Fader, 2012). Some corporations have in-store kiosks for applicants rather than a paper application. Computer-based
applications have far reaching implications for the ex-offender population. For many ex-offenders, using a computer and navigating the Internet are not common skills. Ex-offenders may get discouraged from starting and finishing on-line applications (Kelly & Fader, 2012). Many returning offenders also do not have a computer, let alone easy access to the Internet. Having to locate a computer with Internet access to search for job applications may also create a barrier for ex-offenders attempting to gain employment.

**Conclusions**

Employment is a key factor in an ex-offender’s development of a crime-free life. A job provides an ex-offender with a positive, pro-social environment while earning an income and developing useable skills (Anderson-Facile, 2009). Ex-offenders who are engaged in lawful employment are less likely to recidivate. It is well known that ex-offenders face discrimination in the workplace. A lack of workplace skills and education on top of a criminal past decreases the likelihood of gaining employment. Maintaining employment shows that an ex-offender is willing and able to make a change to living a crime-free life.

Each challenge an offender faces is linked to other challenges. Ex-offenders lack the financial means to find housing and support themselves without employment, yet they cannot gain employment and housing unless they have official documentation, and cannot get to work without transportation. Employment is a crucial aspect of offender reentry and is necessary for post-release, post-offending success. A job is the key to gaining transportation, housing, and building a crime free life.

The extent of online applications and their influence on job placement success is rarely explored, particularly for individuals with criminal records. While it is common knowledge that online applications are becoming increasingly popular, it is not known how many employers
have migrated to exclusively online application procedures. In addition, it is unclear if online applications categorize or automatically disqualify applications from information that is disclosed on an online application. This is especially relevant for ex-offending populations, as online applications with lengthy questionnaires are becoming more and more commonplace but it is uncertain how important answers are to securing employment and if given answers immediately disqualify applicants. Further, very few studies to date have examined the correlation between employers who ask for consent to perform a criminal background check actually follow through with them and the potential impact of such procedures on ex-offenders.

Thus, the effects of the process an ex-offender actually has to navigate in securing a job is unidentified. Prior research raises several questions concerning barriers to employment and reentry but the actual process from application to hire is unclear. Ex-offenders have to find housing, transportation, and employment simultaneously to survive outside of prison. The process by which ex-offenders accomplish this is unknown. It is known that some ex-offenders are sent to government run halfway houses or find housing with family and friends, but the process of these actions is not clear. It is known that offenders do find work, some through family and friends and some by returning to former employers, but how do ex-offenders without social ties and a poor employment history find employment?
CHAPTER III. METHODS

The purpose of the present study is to determine to what extent offender reentry in a non-urban setting differs from the literature regarding offender reentry in an urban setting. The literature consistently provides descriptions of the challenges of offender reentry in urban areas but fails to effectively examine the challenges within a non-urban setting, or to explore differences within non-urban settings. More specifically, the focus of the research is to study the implications of ex-offenders gaining employment in non-urban county, specifically the differences that exist between gaining employment in cities and villages and compare that to the extant literature on urban areas. The content of employment applications is examined to decipher what types of questions businesses ask and how that may affect ex-offenders when looking for jobs.

Areas of Exploration

Three main areas of exploration will be addressed throughout the present study:

Exploratory Area (EA) 1 - The challenges of offender reentry are exacerbated in a non-urban area compared to an urban area.

EA 2 - Offenders are less likely to gain employment in a non-urban area compared to an urban area.

EA 3 - Based on the predictors of reentry success, success is more challenging in a non-urban area.

This study uses data from a sample of employment applications collected in Wood County, Ohio. Wood County is an excellent locale to study reentry and employment. It is a non-urban, largely rural locale containing five modest size cities. Most reentry studies take place in urban areas, where public transportation and public housing are common and more opportunities
for employment are present. In Wood County, there are some city areas but these city areas are not large, do not have a public transportation system, and do not have excessive employment opportunities. Wood County has a substantial number of non-urban communities, and these non-urban communities have few places to work, outside of farming, and are not within walking distance to any city areas. To maintain employment in Wood County, residents must have their own transportation or have family or friends to drive them to work.

The Sample

The study sample consists of a collection of employment applications gathered in Wood County, Ohio. Employment applications were collected using a convenience sampling method. Each application was placed into one of six categories. The six categories are: (1) restaurant, (2) retail, (3) hotel (4) industry/manufacturing/production, (5) entertainment and (6) city/government. Once employment applications were collected, the information requested on the application was analyzed to ascertain how many applications asked questions related to reentry and employment of ex-offenders. Employers offering hard copies of paper applications and referrals to online applications were also documented.

Variables were determined based on the content of the applications. Five groups of variables emerged, including: (1) criminal history variables, including questions inquiring about any arrests and convictions at both the felony and misdemeanor level; (2) transportation; and (3) personal history factors, including work experience and level of education; (4) application category, including restaurant, retail, hotel, industry/manufacturing/production, entertainment and government; and (5) method of application, including both obtaining a hard copy in person and online submission.
Criminal history questions are frequently included on employment applications but the specific questions and wording tend to vary. Some applications ask simply if an applicant has been convicted of a felony. Some applications ask if an applicant has ever been arrested, yes or no and then also, if an applicant has ever been convicted of a felony. Other applications ask more specific questions such as if an applicant has ever been convicted of a drug crime or a sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminal History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of arrest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any conviction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misdemeanor conviction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felony conviction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reentry Concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History of arrest</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any conviction</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misdemeanor conviction</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felony conviction</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable transportation</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>One year, Two years, Three years, Four years, Five or more years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>High School, GED, College, College Graduate, Trade School, Trade School Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application category</td>
<td>Restaurant, Retail, Hotel, I/M/P*, Entertainment, Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application process</td>
<td>Hard copy, Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>City, Village</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I/M/P = Industry/Manufacturing/Production*
crime. Some applications ask if an applicant has ever been convicted of a crime, but put a time frame on it (such as five years). These types of questions can serve as an automatic disqualification for applicants. For ex-offenders applying for employment admitting to a felony conviction on an application can decrease chances of gaining employment. Some offenses are more likely to be a disqualifying offense than other offenses. Finding out which types of questions employers ask, and whether or not the questions will be disqualifying for employment, will be beneficial in suggesting to ex-offenders businesses that will consider them for employment despite their criminal record.

Asking if applicants have reliable transportation is another increasingly common question found on applications. Employers do not want to hire applicants who cannot get themselves to work on time. For ex-offenders, transportation is a major obstacle. Many ex-offenders rely on public transportation or friends and family members to drive them wherever they need to go. In Wood County, public transportation is limited. People cannot take the train or the bus to work like they can when they live in an urban area. When offenders are applying for jobs and cannot mark that they have reliable transportation, chances for gaining the job can be lessened. Finding out how many applications ask about having reliable transportation will be beneficial in knowing if this will be an increasing concern for ex-offenders.

Applications frequently include a section for employment and education history. Employers want to see that applicants have had stable work experiences. Employers also want to see that applicants have completed some sort of education. For offenders returning from prison, gaps in employment will be unavoidable. Some offenders make up for this by working while incarcerated. Other offenders find that when they return to a former employer, they have success in gaining their former job back. Offenders also use friends and family members to help them
find employment. For offenders without friends and family or former employers to aid them, they will have to make up for gaps in their employment history. Knowing what types of information employers want about education and employment history will aid in helping ex-offenders to prepare answers for the questions asked by employers.

Applications were divided into six categories: (1) restaurant, (2) retail, (3) hotel, (4) industry/manufacturing/production, (5) entertainment and (6) city/government. Public schools, day care centers, and health care institutions were excluded from the study due to licensing requirements and exclusion of persons with felony convictions. Recognizing the various types of employment available in non-urban areas will be beneficial to the study of reentry. Also, knowing which category of employers will be the most conducive to the hiring of ex-offenders will aid in the reentry process.

The availability of online applications compared to paper applications was also examined. For the purposes of studying reentry and employment of ex-offenders, online applications can serve as a potential barrier to employment. If offenders have been imprisoned for an extended period of time, knowledge of how to use a computer could be nonexistent. Ex-offenders would also need to find a computer to apply for jobs, removing the face-to-face opportunity of applying. For ex-offenders, the chance to meet a potential employer while applying for a job can be beneficial. Knowing how many employers have migrated from paper applications to online applications will aid in navigating the employment process for ex-offenders.
CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

There are several challenges for ex-offenders, particularly previously incarcerated persons (PIPs), when returning to society from a period of incarceration. Known challenges include employment, transportation and education. This study aims to explore which types of questions are asked on employment applications that could apply to not only returning offenders but all ex-offenders. For the purposes of this analysis the term ex-offender applies to all offenders, not just offenders who have been incarcerated and released. When studying employment applications it is important to note that applications do not ask if the applicant is an ex-offender who has been incarcerated. The applications simply ask if the applicant has been arrested and/or convicted of a crime. The distinction between the two is important to note when studying the implications of ex-offenders gaining employment. Types of questions include questions in the categories of education, previous employment, transportation, and criminal background.

Employers and Location

The data collection for this study consisted of 160 applications collected from employers in Wood County, Ohio. Applications were selected using a convenience sample. Due to the nature of the study, a convenience sample was used based on the accessibility of the applications and the proximity of employers within Wood County. The applications were separated into one of six categories based on the type of employer. These are restaurant, retail, hotel, industry/manufacturing/production (I/M/P), entertainment, and government. Table 2 shows that most of the Wood County employers are either restaurants (35.6%) or retail establishments (36.9%). Only 5 entertainment businesses were included in this study. Bars that are also
restaurants were included in the restaurant category, not entertainment, limiting the sample of entertainment businesses.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Manufacturing/Production</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Applications were also separated into categories based on location within Wood County (see Table 3). The bulk of the employers are in Bowling Green (48.1%), the county seat, followed by Perrysburg (25.6%). No other city or village contributed more than 5% of the study businesses and many locations included less than 2% of the employers (fewer than 4 businesses).

Throughout the process of analyzing the data, the location of each application was regrouped into one of two categories—one representing cities within Wood County and one representing villages within Wood County. Regrouping the location variables served as a further refinement to better study the differences at the level of cities and villages within non-urban areas, as well as the non-urban area as a whole compared with literature regarding urban areas. As shown in Table 4, over 80% of applications were collected within the five cities of Wood County. The remainder of the applications were collected from villages throughout the county.

Applications were also categorized into whether the application was available through the internet for online submission or if the application would be completed in hard copy and turned in to the employer in person or through the mail. Overall, 31.3% of the collected applications can be submitted electronically rather than in hard copy format. As shown in Table 5, none of the
applications in the entertainment or government categories were available to be submitted online. Also, the majority of the applications available to be submitted online are found in city areas rather than villages.

Table 5

*Availability of Online applications by location category (n = 160)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Manufacturing/Production</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the data were being collected a potential concern with the online applications was identified. Some applications have the entire application available to view while other applications offer individual questions sequentially on different screens. This later situation raised the possibility that a particular response to a question could alter the subsequent questions that were asked. The concern existed that once a criminal history was revealed the sequence of the application would change edging an applicant out of the application system. Twenty-five of the 50 online applications were each completed twice altering the responses on key variables related to past offending, but not submitted, in order to check for this possibility of changes in sequencing. In no instance did changing the responses alter the questions asked.

**Key Variables on Applications**

Table 6 lists the key variables taken from employment applications broken down by business category. The percent of applications including the key variables is indicated in the table. Interestingly, having a driver’s license is important to hotels, I/M/Ps, and government agencies (50% or more of each category ask about having a license), but restaurants, retail and entertainment show little interest in this. The variable “reliable transportation” was found to be present in 28.1% of restaurant applications and less often in all other business categories. Two categories, hotel and entertainment, did not have any applications that asked about having reliable transportation. The most common question on applications was whether the applicant was a high school graduate, with all businesses in three categories asking about graduation and over 80% of the businesses in the other three categories asking about a high school diploma. Interestingly, having a past criminal conviction was asked on less than half the applications in four of the six categories, and only on 60% of the other two categories. At the
Table 6
Percent of applications including key variables by type of business (n=160)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Restaurant</th>
<th>Retail</th>
<th>Hotel</th>
<th>I/M/P*</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driver’s license</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable transportation</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificates/licenses</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug testing consent</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED recipient</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact employer(s)</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felony conviction</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misdemeanor conviction</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any criminal conviction</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any criminal arrest</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain arrest/conviction</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background check consent</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I/M/P = Industry/Manufacturing/Production
same time, being asked to explain an arrest or conviction was found on 60% or more of the applications in all but the restaurant category (where 42% asked for an explanation).

Table 7 lists the key variables broken down by location. These figures show little difference in applications between businesses in cities and villages. The only real difference appears in asking about “any criminal conviction,” where half of the city businesses and only one-quarter of the village businesses inquire about this. For only two questions (high school graduation and explaining a prior arrest or conviction) do a majority of the applications in both cities and villages inquire. Interestingly, no applications from a city ask about prior arrest and only two from a village ask about this topic. The focus in the applications is clearly on prior convictions.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>City %</th>
<th>Village %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driver’s license</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable transportation</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificates/licenses</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug testing consent</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
<td>96.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED recipient</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact employer(s)</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felony conviction</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misdemeanor conviction</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any criminal conviction</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any criminal arrest</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain arrest/conviction</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background check consent</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variables Related to Criminal Background and Reentry Challenges

The main variables of interest for this project are those related to criminal backgrounds and reentry challenges. Ex-offenders face many obstacles when returning to society from a
period of incarceration. Challenges also are common for offenders who are not incarcerated. Applications commonly inquire about any kind of criminal history, not just if an offender has been incarcerated or not. On an application, depending on the question asked, a person either has to admit to a criminal past or he does not. Applications can also ask a variety of questions about previous employment, leaving the applicant to explain any gaps in employment history. For ex-offenders, gaps in employment history can be explained no other way than to admit to being previously incarcerated. Applications also ask questions about having reliable transportation and a driver’s license.

**Variables related to a criminal background**

Questions related to criminal backgrounds are commonly found on employment applications. Some applications ask for only for the disclosure of felony convictions whereas others ask for any prior convictions. As shown in Table 8, 73 of the applications collected in this study required the applicant to disclose any prior criminal conviction whether it be a misdemeanor or felony (the “any” column). Forty-six of the applications asked the applicant to disclose a conviction only if the prior conviction is at the felony level. Of the 73 applications asking for disclosure of any criminal background, 67 applications were for positions within a city compared to six applications within a village. For felony convictions, 37 applications only requiring the disclosure of a prior felony conviction were collected from a city compared to nine applications from a village. Only two of the collected applications asked for the disclosure of a misdemeanor separately from a felony. A majority of the collected applications asked for the disclosure of any conviction or exclusively a felony conviction.

It is a common perception that employers complete a background check on potential employees. According to Table 8, only 40 of the 160 collected applications require the applicant
to agree to a background check when submitting the application. Thirty-five of the applications requiring consent for a background check were collected from a city and five were collected from a village.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application location and criminal history questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Background Check (n)</th>
<th>Explain (n)</th>
<th>Time (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>26.3% (35)</td>
<td>58.6% (79)</td>
<td>10.5% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>20.0% (5)</td>
<td>64.0% (16)</td>
<td>4.0% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the applications that required either the disclosure of a felony conviction or any conviction, 95 applications left room for the applicant to explain any history of criminal behavior. Seventy-nine of the applications that left room for an explanation of criminal behavior were collected from a city and 16 were collected from a village. Some applications only required the disclosure of criminal convictions if the conviction has occurred within a selected time frame. Fifteen of the collected applications (14 from a city), required the applicant to disclose a criminal conviction if the conviction has occurred within the company’s selected time frame.

Other Variables Related to Reentry Challenges by Type of Business

Education can serve as an obstacle for many offenders. It is not uncommon for offenders to enter the prison system without a high school diploma. Of the 160 applications collected in the present study, 147 asked the applicant to disclose if a high school diploma has been earned. Fifty-four of the applications ask the applicant to note if the completion of their high school
coursework was completed through GED coursework. Table 9 details the variables related to education and to reentry in the context of location and employment category.

Transportation is a known barrier for many offenders throughout the reentry process. Of the total collected applications, about 19% asked the applicant to disclose whether or not they would have reliable transportation to and from work. When looking at the number of applications asking about reliable transportation with both the application category and location (see Table 9), 30% of the applications for restaurants in a city asked about reliable transportation. Within the literature having reliable transportation is one main reentry concern. In the arrest data, it can be seen that few applications ask about reliable transportation.

Employment history can serve as a barrier for many offenders throughout the application process. Ex-offenders, particularly those who have served time in prison, have substantial gaps in their employment history that will need to be explained when filling out job applications. Applications also ask for consent to contact current or former employers. As shown in Table 9, each category within business type and location had more than 50% of its applications ask about contacting previous employers. Contacting a previous employer could be a problem for ex-offenders. For example, if an applicant is a previous addict he may not have been the best employee and may not get a positive review by a previous employer.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the types of questions asked on employment applications varies across type of business and location. Specific emphasis was placed on variables related to transportation, education/training, and past arrests/convictions. These results show that having a high school diploma is the most common question asked within all employment applications.
Table 9

Reentry variables within application category and location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Driver’s License</th>
<th>Reliable Transportation</th>
<th>High School Graduate</th>
<th>Contact Previous Employer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Village</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I/M/P</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Felony Only</th>
<th>Any Conviction</th>
<th>Background Check</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Village</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I/M/P</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also, it was found that the applications mainly ask about prior convictions and not about prior arrests. This will be discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to explore challenges faced by ex-offenders living in non-urban settings when applying for employment. When studying the issue of employment and how employment affects all offender populations it is important to note that all offenders are included, not just offenders who have been incarcerated. Employment applications tend to simply ask for if the applicant has a criminal record not if the applicant has been incarcerated. One part of the reentry process, for all ex-offenders, is gaining employment. Some PIPs leave incarceration with probation or parole obligations, which typically include securing gainful employment (Bahr et al., 2010). Even PIPs who are not released under any kind of supervision obligation need to gain employment in order to earn money and support themselves. For ex-offenders who did not spend time incarcerated, the challenges of gaining employment are very similar in nature.

A common theme within the reentry literature is that employment is one of the three most significant concerns for offenders once released from a period of incarceration. Obtaining employment is a major part of the reentry process. Unfortunately, little is known about the application process for those with criminal backgrounds. Pager, Western and Bonikowski (2009), in a hiring study in New York City, found that throughout the hiring process a white male with a criminal record is more likely to be hired than an African-American male without a criminal record. While this study contributes to the literature on the hiring practices concerning ex-offenders, there is no information gleaned from the content of the application itself.

A majority of the prior research concerning offender reentry is conducted within largely urban areas. Research in non-urban areas is nearly non-existent. Further, research comparing communities within a non-urban area is unstudied. The reentry challenges faced by ex-offenders
in largely urban areas are well researched. The main challenges concerning housing, transportation, and employment are applicable to non-urban reentry, but the complications are different. For example, in an urban area transportation is an issue but there are busses and other transit systems available for public use. In a non-urban area public transportation is limited. In regards to housing, urban areas have a greater amount of available public housing, whereas in a non-urban area there are few choices.

The current study explored the types of questions an ex-offender will encounter when filling out applications for jobs upon release from incarceration. This study adds to the existing literature by exploring potential barriers to employment for offenders living in a non-urban area, specifically Wood County, Ohio. This study focuses on employment applications and how they serve as a screening instrument for employment. This is a major contribution to the study of ex-offender employment and reintegration because there is no study to date that studies employment applications in regards to ex-offenders. The project focused on the content of employment applications collected within this non-urban area. There is no existing study focused on employment issues in non-urban settings or that uses employment applications as a source of data. Most previously completed research uses qualitative data gained from interviews with ex-offenders and employers in urban settings about the obstacles ex-offenders face within urban cities when attempting to gain employment.

**Challenges Faced by Ex-Offenders**

Ex-offenders face many obstacles when applying for employment. It is common for ex-offenders to lack the education to be competitive in the job market. Also, ex-offenders commonly have gaps in their employment histories. The more time spent incarcerated the more employment gaps will grow. Along with educational deficits, gaps in employment history, and
other reentry challenges previously discussed, ex-offenders also have to gain a job with the stigma of being an ex-offender.

**Educational Deficits**

Many ex-offenders lack the education to be competitive in the job market. Ex-offenders tend to be uneducated and possess few job skills that are marketable when applying for jobs (Davis et al., 2012). Results from the content analysis of collected applications show that 147 of 160 collected applications ask for the applicant to note completion of a high school level education. Completing high school serves as a proxy for effort and ambition in the eyes of employers (Berg & Huebner 2011). Fifty-four of the collected applications in the sample also asked if the applicant has obtained a high school level education by earning a GED. For offenders in the State of Ohio, many who lack sufficient basic education are required to work towards earning their GED while incarcerated. Earning a GED while incarcerated increases the likelihood of employment once released (Visher & Courtney, 2007). The fact that less than one-third of the applications ask about a GED while almost all ask about a high school diploma suggests that, in this non-urban setting, the demand for a formal education is greater than in urban areas. This would be an obstacle for many ex-offenders. For ex-offenders returning to non-urban areas, services including non-traditional education, may be less common than in urban area (Zajac, Hutchison, & Meyer, 2014).

**Employment History**

Many ex-offenders have unavoidable gaps in their employment history due to time spent incarcerated. A history of frequent unemployment shows employers that an applicant may not be able to be a worthwhile employee (Berg & Huebner, 2011). Former employers can also serve as references for ex-offenders. If an offender has an average work history, gets into trouble and
then has to reapply for employment, having a former employer to vouch for an average work history would be to the benefit of the applicant. Throughout the review of data gained from this study, 100 of the 160 collected applicants asked the applicant if previous employers could be contacted as part of the application process. Other applications required a number of references to be former employers. Contacting former employers and explaining gaps in employment history can serve as a substantial barrier for ex-offenders in their search for employment.

Despite the request to contact former employers that appears in the applications, for ex-offenders returning to a non-urban area, any gaps in employment history could be less problematic than in an urban setting. This is a result of the existing friendship and acquaintance networks. In non-urban areas, people know other people within the community. If an ex-offender has a friend or acquaintance who either owns a business or works at a business, an ex-offender may be vouched for to gain employment. Also, some businesses, especially within the small villages, are locally owned allowing the business owner to implement his own hiring practices. Some businesses within villages also do not use applications. Not using an application in the hiring process could prove beneficial for ex-offenders when searching for employment.

**Ex-offender Stigma**

The stigma of being a former offender can affect the search for gainful employment. Visher, Debus-Sherrill, and Yahner (2011) found through qualitative interviewing that 70% of offenders felt their criminal record had an effect on their job search. Bahr, Harris, Fisher and Armstrong (2010) also found through interviewing ex-offenders that having a criminal history, especially a violent criminal history, hinders the ex-offenders in finding employment.
The results from the present study indicate that 73 of the collected applications ask for the disclosure of any prior criminal convictions. Also, 47 applications ask exclusively about prior felony convictions. This suggests that prior criminal convictions could be problematic. However, of the applications that ask about any criminal history or felony conviction, the vast majority leave room for the applicant to explain their specific criminal history. Knowing that it is common for applications to not only ask about prior criminal history but then to leave room for an explanation gives ex-offenders an opportunity to write something in an attempt to combat the ex-offender stigma. This suggests that the simple existence of past criminal behavior is not a virtual barrier to employment.

The stigma of being an ex-offender can be less detrimental to finding employment within a non-urban area. While Zajac, Hutchison, & Meyer, (2014) found the stigma of being a released inmate in a non-urban area contributes to difficulties in gaining employment, it is possible that the more intimate and personal relationships that exist in the smaller, non-urban setting allows many people to minimize the impact of the criminal activity in favor of what the individual was like prior to engaging in crime. This could help an ex-offender gain employment. At the same time, the fact that everyone knows the offender and may know more details about the crime or harm committed may hurt an ex-offender and make employment harder to secure. Further research on the influence of prior knowledge of an ex-offender’s behavior before incarceration is needed to address this issue.

**Limitations**

One limitation of the current study is that the sample was restricted to the establishments in the chosen research area. The data was collected was exclusively from Wood County which represents only one county in northwest Ohio. Wood County is predominantly agriculture based,
while also supporting a state university. The university is not only a major employer, but draws in businesses that may not otherwise exist in Bowling Green. The effect of the university on the town’s employment is unknown. In a predominantly agricultural-based county without a university, the sample size and categories could change.

This study purposely left out categories of businesses within Wood County. Businesses that serve vulnerable populations, such as schools, nursing homes and hospitals have laws that automatically exclude hiring most anyone with a felony conviction. Banks were also excluded from the data collection due to financial regulations and handling massive amounts of money. These places of business were not included in the data collection so as not to skew the results. Also not included was any type of family farming business. Wood County has a large population of farmers, all of which are considered individual businesses. Family and corporate farms were not included due to lack of access and accessibility to applications, as farmers most often do not have applications.

Throughout the data collection process, when the researcher attempted to collect applications in many of the small villages throughout the county, the villages either did not have any places of employment or the establishments do not use employment applications. Those establishments that do not use formal applications (that is, they simply talk to the potential employee and make a decision) are excluded from this study. It is unknown what the hiring practices of those businesses would be and how employment of returning offenders would be effected.

It could be possible that returning offenders would have a higher likelihood of gaining employment within the small village businesses that do not use employment applications. Interviews would need to be conducted with these business owners. Interviews with business
owners and managers were not included in the current study. This data only studied what questions appear on business applications, not how those questions change the hiring process. Using the notion that if an ex-offender does not have to fill out an application it may be easier to gain employment, the lack of interviews with small businesses within villages serves as a limitation to the current study. Interviewing employers who do not use applications should be considered in future research.

The data was also limited by the chosen sample. Only Wood County, Ohio, was used in the project. It is possible that Wood County is not representative of other non-urban counties. Also, the data analysis only consisted of a content review of the collected applications. No interviews were conducted to ascertain the perspective of employers. Also, no data was collected to gather the opinions of the offenders reentering Wood County.

Implications

The purpose of the current exploratory study is to assess how the challenges of offender reentry in an urban area compare with the challenges experienced with a non-urban area. Specifically, this study explores the differences between non-urban and urban areas by relying on findings from literature studying urban offender reentry. Within the current study, the terms cities and villages are used as a part of the study within non-urban areas. Much of the research pertaining to offender reentry has been completed within urban areas leaving a substantial gap in the reentry literature. The current study takes a new approach at studying offender reentry by studying the employment process, specifically the use of applications as a screening tool, for all persons with criminal records, not just ex-offenders who have been incarcerated. This study serves as a major contribution to the field. To date, no one else has completed such a study
exploring employment applications and how all persons with criminal records are potentially affected. Within the current study three areas of exploration were explored:

Exploratory Area (EA) 1 - The challenges of offender reentry are exacerbated in a non-urban area compared to an urban area.

EA 2 - Offenders are less likely to gain employment in a non-urban area compared to an urban area.

EA 3 - Based on the predictors of reentry success, success is more challenging in a non-urban area.

**Exploratory Area 1**

The project data suggest that the challenges of offender reentry are about the same in a non-urban area compared to the challenges found throughout the literature based on urban areas. Depending on the challenge, reentry can be made easier or more difficult. Transportation serves as a substantial barrier within non-urban communities. Lacking a comprehensive public transportation system within a non-urban area makes traveling throughout the area more difficult if someone cannot provide his own transportation. It was found that few applications (28.1% of all collected applications) included in the data collection asked about having reliable transportation. This means that businesses within non-urban areas are not concerned with an applicant having reliable transportation. Businesses are assuming that if you are applying for the job, you have the ability to get yourself to work on time.

**Exploratory Area 2**

The current study found that the most common question on applications asks the application to disclose having a high school diploma. Few applications asked about the possession of a GED. A GED is not the same as a high school diploma. The fact that the
applications are consistently not including a GED within the application form serves as a barrier for many returning offenders. This shows that in non-urban areas a GED is not commonly considered. Many offenders earn their GED while incarcerated. If businesses in non-urban areas are not asking about earning a GED and exclusively ask about possessing a high school diploma, gaining employment based on level of education is made more difficult.

Ex-offenders returning to non-urban areas face different challenges from their counterparts returning to urban areas. In non-urban areas the jobs are spread out and fewer jobs are available within cities and villages. Through the data collection used for this study, villages were found to have very few places of employment. People living in the villages may need to secure transportation to another city or village to find work. Businesses within villages rarely used applications. Most businesses within village areas took down a potential applicant’s name and phone number rather than using a formal application. Not having to fill out a formal application may prove beneficial for ex-offenders. If ex-offenders do not need to disclose acriminal record on an application they may have a better chance of gaining employment. Also, businesses within villages are mainly locally owned. Locally owned businesses can make hiring decisions on their own rather than having to abide by company policies. This could result in a greater chance of an ex-offender gaining a job.

**Exploratory Area 3**

Not all offenders returning to a non-urban area can find work within the same non-urban area in which they reside. Transportation to other areas would prove beneficial for ex-offenders returning to non-urban areas. Reentry success is made more complex due to lack of transportation. Not only would help with transportation benefit ex-offenders in the employment
process, but also in making sure court mandated meetings are attended on time. For ex-offenders, having the ability to rely on consistent transportation may aid in reducing recidivism.

Reentry success is also made more challenging in the way of housing and employment opportunities. There are fewer opportunities to gain employment due to fewer businesses in operation within the area. There are also fewer options for low income housing. When the combination of fewer employment opportunities is juxtaposed with fewer housing facilities and limited transportation, reentry success is made more complex.

**Policy Implications**

Results found within the current study suggest some policy changes. It was found that the collected application documents did not consider having a GED as an equivalent substitute for a high school diploma. Of the collected applications, 147 of the total 160 applications asked about having a high school education and few applications asked about having a GED. For ex-offenders this serves as a substantial barrier. Many ex-offenders have a low level of education and many ex-offenders who spend time incarcerated earn their GED during that time. If the non-urban counties are not asking about a GED on employment applications, changes could be made to make ex-offenders who have earned a GED more competitive in the job market. For instance, community officials could partner with local high schools so that when an individual earns a GED they could be given a diploma from a high school rather than a GED certificate. Ex-offenders would then be able to note a high school level education rather than leaving the space blank if a GED is not on the application form.

**Future Research**

The data collected for the present study serves as a starting point for future studies. Most research regarding offender reentry uses data collected in largely urban areas. The current study
implements data collected from a non-urban area that may be more generalizable to areas across the country. Not all ex-offenders return to urban areas. Many return to non-urban areas. Further research on employment and the implications of other challenges within non-urban settings would be beneficial within the field. The increasingly common use of online applications was included in the present study but data collected only considered the questions asked throughout the application process. Future research testing the submission of online applications versus hard copy applications may have different implications for ex-offenders. It is currently unknown if employers using online applications utilizing application software to screen out candidates.

Further research could attempt to gain the perspective of the employer through qualitative interviewing. Gaining the perspective of the employer in regards to which types of crimes they will consider hiring, if any, would be beneficial in the advancement in knowledge about ex-offender reentry and employment. In regards to studying employment in a non-urban setting, throughout the data collection process many employers in the small villages throughout Wood County noted that they did not use applications and simply just took down names of interested potential employees. These types of business are also locally owned family businesses. Gaining the perspective of a rural, small village business owner and comparing how their opinion is similar or dissimilar to that of a manager in a national chain store would advance the study of non-urban vs. urban employment practices.

The ban the box movement employs the idea that rather than checking a box noting prior criminal history on a job application, an applicant would be able to explain criminal history and include instances of rehabilitation in an interview setting. Now that the ban the box movement is becoming increasingly popular, studies could be completed to ascertain if more offenders are gaining jobs. Having to disclose criminal history information prior to an interview eliminates job
opportunities for many ex-offenders (Visher et al., 2010). The current study found that questions regarding prior criminal history were the second most common question after high school education status. With criminal history questions being so popular, gaining information as to how the ban the box movement is being employed would be beneficial.
REFERENCES


Latessa, E. (2012). Why work is important, and how to improve the effectiveness of correctional reentry programs that target employment. *Criminology & Public Policy, 11*(1), 87-91.


APPENDIX A. Employment Applications Code Book

Category of Business
1 Restaurant
2 Retail
3 Hotel
4 Industry/manufacturing/production
5 Entertainment
6 Government

Location
1 Bowling Green
2 Cygnet
3 Fostoria
4 Haskins
5 Milbury
6 Northwood
7 North Baltimore
8 Pemberville
9 Perrysburg
10 Rossford
11 Walbridge
12 Wayne
13 Weston
14 Other

Online
0 No
1 Yes

Driver’s License
0 No
1 Yes

Eligible for Employment in US
0 No
1 Yes

Have Reliable Transportation
0 No
1 Yes

Certificates/Licenses
0 No
1 Yes

Special Skills
0 No
1 Yes

Consent to drug testing
0 No
1 Yes

Space to fill in if applicant is a high school graduate
0 No
1 Yes

Space to fill in if applicant has earned a GED
0 No
1 Yes

Space to fill in if applicant has attended college
0 No
1 Yes

Space to fill in if applicant has graduated from college
0 No
1 Yes

Space to fill in if applicant has attended a trade school
0 No
1 Yes

Space to fill in if applicant has completed trade school
0 No
1 Yes

Number of spaces left to fill in previous employers
0 None requested
1 One
2 Two
3 Three
4 Four
5 Five

Ever fired or asked to resign
0 No
Currently employed
  0  No
  1  Yes

Permission to contact previous employer
  0  No
  1  Yes

Asks about felony conviction only
  0  No
  1  Yes

Asks about misdemeanor conviction only or separately from felony
  0  No
  1  Yes

Asks about any conviction
  0  No
  1  Yes

Asks about any arrests
  0  No
  1  Yes

Notes to only disclose a conviction if within a certain time frame
  0  No
  1  Yes

Leaves room to explain arrest/conviction
  0  No
  1  Yes

Consent to background check
  0  No
  1  Yes