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At Risk of Social Exclusion. Labor Market Disadvantage of Ex-Convicts – The Case of Poland

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Abstract

The study on the risk of social exclusion of former convicts, presented in the article, resulting from their belonging to a disadvantaged group in the labour market, was based on the quantitative strategy (diagnostic survey). The study refers to the retrospective description by penitentiary recidivists of their own activities undertaken in the search for permanent employment in non-detention periods, the nature of the job sought, the motives behind it and the manner in which it was sought, and the frequency of employment. The results of the study indicate the activeness of the vast majority of former prisoners in the area of searching for a job. People over 50 are the least active group. The motivations to take up a job depend on the place of residence and the level of education of the convicts. They look for a job most often using the support of employment offices (the most active ones are people aged 31–40). The younger the ex-convicts and the higher the level of their education, the more often their usage of the Internet and the recommendations of acquaintances. Job offers in the construction industry were among the most sought after. The lower the education level of ex-prisoners, the more common their unemployment. People in small towns and villages most often fail in their efforts to get a job. The results of the study may be used to modernise the post-penitentiary assistance system, including the design of re-adaptation and re-integration support for ex-convicts in the field of employment, based on their socio-demographic profiles (matching motives, needs and personal resources with environmental opportunities) and to counteract discriminatory behaviours of employers.

Keywords: social exclusion, disadvantage, labour market, social re-adaptation, post-penitentiary assistance.

Introduction

Social exclusion is commonly understood as a situation in which an individual or a group cannot freely participate in the life of society. However, it is difficult to develop a universal definition of this multidimensional concept, which is why the definitions of social exclusion are formulated adequately to the area covered by the analysis. Social exclusion is considered in relation to, among others, institutional and legal limitations, the risk of exclusion or limitation of access, e.g. to information, culture or consumption (Golimowska, Morecka, Styrz et al., 2008, p. 116). What is important, these limitations result entirely or to a large extent from the deficits independent of the people and groups affected (Panek, Czapiński, 2013, p. 385). Among many definitions of the analysed term, quite interesting and at the same time extensive is the approach developed by Ch. Gore and J. B. Figueiredo (1997), who adopt the multi-faceted understanding of social exclusion and refer it to the negative process of going beyond the mechanism of allocating resources; the subjective or objective characteristic of human life, manifested, among others, in the feeling of inferiority or material deprivation; the description of individual economic and socio-political handicap; and the attribute of society perceived through the prism of existing social relations. Therefore, we can speak of social exclusion when individuals and groups, being members of a community of citizens of a state, for various reasons cannot fully participate in important areas of the life of that community (work, consumption, culture, politics or the life of local communities).

As a result of various interrelated phenomena, social exclusion is a cumulative and multidimensionally conditioned phenomenon (Grotowska-Leder, 2005, p. 40). Among its most important dimensions, exclusion through isolation occupies a prominent place, as social contacts and relations are established and maintained within marginalised and stigmatised groups (Młyński, 2012, p. 152). The broad spectrum of people and social groups at risk of exclusion includes former convicts and their families, who find themselves in the midst of threats related to the phenomenon of social stigma and multiple problems they face (e.g. poverty, addictions, unemployment, disability or low professional qualifications). Convicts suffer from the deprivation of many of their needs in different spheres of life and face serious adaptation problems when they are released from prison. A serious re-adaptation barrier is the criminal stigma

that significantly influences the attitudes and behaviour of the adapted part of society.

Former convicts form a particularly high-risk group, vulnerable to exclusion and susceptible to discrimination. This is particularly evident in the labour market, which is the place where labour services are exchanged, their size is determined, their conditions and prices are set (Ehrenberg, Smith, 2017). In the Polish labour market, former convicts form a disadvantaged group. There are few offers addressed directly to them, mainly due to criminal record and related prejudices, stereotypes and the sense of threat of crime. Despite the tax allowance offered to employers for the employment of former convicts, they continue to avoid the recruitment of people with criminal record. Low level of education and professional qualifications of many of the convicts, who most often perform seasonal work or find employment in the black market is also not without significance (Każmierczak-Kałużna, 2015, p. 7). Lack of a permanent source of income, rejection by family and the local community make many of them homeless, significantly increasing the area of social exclusion. This is the social exclusion caused by related economic and housing exclusion (Jarmołowicz, Szarzec, 2008, p. 13). In Poland, only people registered in the labour office, having the status of an unemployed person, are considered unemployed, therefore all statistics prepared by state institutions do not reflect the actual situation. Moreover, the situation of former convicts in the labour market is not monitored. In the reports of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) a separate general category of people returning to work after a break can only be found. It can therefore be only presumed that this category also includes people who leave prison. It is worrying because this specific group is at risk of the re-adaptation failure and return to crime.

Social exclusion caused by disadvantage on the labour market is explained, among others, by the common theory of statistical discrimination (Arrow, 1973), which is based on the imperfect information flow (Spence, 1973, vol. 87, p. 356; Ehrenberg, Smith, 2000, p. 536). It says that, when looking for employees, employers have to take into account serious recruitment and selection expenses. In order to reduce the cost in this respect, candidates are assessed from the perspective of belonging to a specific group of people. At the same time, neither their skills nor the traits that predestine them to perform specific professional activities or work of a required nature are important, as the employer assumes a priori that such candidates may be the source of problems related to the loss of the sense of security, unreliability in performing professional activities, or lack of employment continuity. Moreover, if there is no precise information on the candidate's

productivity, or if the contract requires investment in his/her training or if it is not possible to dismiss him/her immediately, the employer bears the risk related to his/her actual productivity (Spence, 1973, p. 356). Therefore, employers prefer to invest in the training of employees, who are characterised by greater certainty of maintaining employment continuity. The theory of statistical discrimination explains, *inter alia*, the behaviour of employers towards former prisoners applying for a job, whose characteristics include: poor education and qualifications, insufficient preparation to enter the labour market, the attitude not favouring engaging in long-term employment and the level of skills that require investment of substantial funds to prepare them to perform specialised work.

In search of answers to questions about the systemic malfunction and the re-adaptation fiasco experienced by most former convicts, a study of the motives and ways of looking for a job by former convicts and their situation on the Polish labour market was designed.

Study procedure

The presented study was conducted on the basis of the quantitative strategy in view of the objective, which constitutes a search for general regularities describing the general population (Rubacha, 2013). It is a part of multifaceted research on the threat of former convicts' return to crime and social exclusion, but perceived by them themselves (Nowak, 2017a and b). The study data were obtained as a result of a retrospective description performed by 245 penitentiary recidivists (137 one-time and 108 multiple), selected in a purposeful and random sampling scheme, detained in two types of prisons for recidivists – semi-open (110 prisoners) and closed (135 prisoners). Most of them lived in a large city (88 people) and a medium-sized one (66 people), while 91 recidivists were from small towns and villages (35 and 56 people, respectively). The vast majority of the respondents were middle-aged (31–40 years old, 100 people) and young (21–30 years old, 65 people). The remaining ones were elderly recidivists, falling within the age range from 41 to 55 years (44 people) and over 55 years (24 people). The most numerous group were single (53%), while the least numerous one were those married or having partners (21%) – similar data were obtained by T. Szymanowski and I. Rzeplińska (after: Szczepanik, 2015). Those divorced and living alone accounted for 26% of the total. The vast majority of recidivists (76.0%) had a low level of education (83 people graduated from vocational schools, 27 from middle schools, 77 from primary schools). 22.0% of the total population surveyed had secondary school education, while 2.0%

higher education.

The study was carried out using the survey method with the use of a questionnaire prepared in the course of the study. The research data were subject to statistical analyzes (Chi-square test, Pearson's *r* correlation coefficient). In the course of the study the dependencies were sought between activeness on the labour market, the frequency of employment during the times outside of prison, motivations and ways of looking for a job versus socio-demographic features of repeat offenders. It should be stressed that the presented results of the study are burdened with subjective assessment of one's own re-adaptation failure and with attribution distortions occurring while experiencing unusual situations by the respondents (Meyer, Reizenzein, Schützwohl, 1997, p. 258), including prison isolation.

Results and conclusions

The study on the risk of social exclusion of former convicts, resulting from their belonging to a disadvantaged group in the labour market, was divided into several areas of empirical penetration.

1) Former convicts' search for permanent employment

After serving prison sentences, 85.3% of all respondents applied for permanent employment. Irrespective of the place of residence, one-time recidivists were more active than multiple ones; middle-aged people (91.0% in this age category) and people with vocational education (89.2% of respondents in this group) were also more active. The least active group were people aged 51 and over (75.0%), young people (aged 21–30: (80.0%) and those with primary (83.0%) and higher education (82.8%). The passivity of older recidivists in looking for a job is somewhat understandable, as most of them returned to crime repeatedly (69%), mainly due to their low level of education and professional qualifications. The combination of interrelated factors, such as lack of work and, consequently, of means of subsistence, insufficient social support and low level of life skills, led to the conviction that they were helpless. This led to the use of unique strategies for dealing with problems and further criminal acts. What is puzzling, however, is the low activity of the most educated recidivists, which leads to undertaking further, in-depth research aimed at identifying the reasons for the passivity of the convicts falling within this category of education.

Recidivists serving a sentence in a semi-open establishment were more likely to apply for a permanent job after being released from prison than those

detained in a closed facility. This is linked to the gravity of the criminal act committed and the sentence. Prisoners receive long term sentences for committing serious and consecutive criminal offenses and are therefore exposed to long-term negative effects of prison isolation, especially in the psychological and social spheres. This translates into a significant reduction in their life competencies, including their ability to organize their lives at large, to engage in constructive social relationships and apply effective job search strategies.

2) The most common reasons for looking for a job

Long-term imprisonment results in the loss of previous jobs, friends, acquaintances, the loosening or disappearance of ties with close and distant relatives, and in a significant deterioration of neighbourhood relations. The recidivists surveyed pointed to various motivations inducing them to seek permanent employment in non-detention periods. The most frequent ones were striving to improve one's own material situation (69.8% of indications), striving to become independent (40.8%) and the following statement: "I wanted to show my family that I had changed" (45.3% of the respondents). The desire to improve the financial situation was indicated significantly more frequently by people living at large in the medium-sized city than by representatives of other milieus ($p = 0.002$). The larger the town/city the respondent came from, the more common it was that they indicated the option of proving to the family that they wanted to change their own behaviour ($p = 0.036$). This option was also more frequently chosen by the recidivists with lower-secondary and vocational education ($p = 0.007$) and convicts detained in a semi-open facility ($p = 0.005$; $r = 0.179$). The motive for self-empowerment efforts ($p = 0.003$) was more often chosen by the recidivists from small and medium-sized towns than by those living in other milieus. However, the motives for looking for a job are not significantly diversified by age or by the number of repeated offenses.

3) Job search methods

Former convicts usually seek employment through labour offices – more than a half of the respondents indicated this option. This is more often done by people aged 31–40 than by people falling into other categories ($p = 0.047$). Convicts living in cities declared looking for a job via the Internet more often than residents of rural areas. Rare use of this information channel by convicts living in rural areas may be the result of socio-cultural backwardness or limited access to the Internet. However, this result is on the border of significance ($p = 0.047$). Statistically significant results were obtained in the analysis based on

the age criterion. The younger the person ($p = 0.009$) and the higher the level of education ($p = 0.003$), the more common his/her usage of the Internet. Also, the higher the level of education, the higher frequency of asking friends for help ($p = 0.014$). This option was also more frequently chosen by one-time recidivists ($p = 0.038$). Job-search methods do not differ, however, between the types of prison.

4) Nature of the job sought

Regardless of the place of residence, age and level of education, the respondents most often sought employment in the construction industry (56.7%). It was more common for those detained in a semi-open rather than a closed facility ($p = 0.037$). Despite the lack of statistical significance, the analysis of the study data on the relationship between job search in the construction sector and the acquired profession revealed some consistency. Jobs in construction services are sought mainly by people having professional background in this field (64.0% of people in this professional category). It is also interesting for qualified personal service workers (e.g. shoemakers, tailors) – 55.6%, electricians (50.0%) and people without vocational training (44.2%). In the non-detention periods, construction workers were the most likely to take up employment in the acquired profession (75.6%), whilst the least – electricians (16.7%) and car mechanics (11.1%). During the job interview, potential employers asked former convicts about their acquired profession (81.6% of indications), specific skills (57.6%) and education level (44.9%). The least frequent questions were about their family (13.9%) and availability (31.8%). People living in a city, regardless of its size, were significantly more frequently asked about the level of education ($p = 0.018$) and the certificate of no criminal record ($p = 0.015$) than people living in rural areas. It is probably connected with the fact that the inhabitants of rural areas most often apply for seasonal work in agriculture, as manual workers.

5) Frequency of employment in non-detention periods

Recidivists looking for a job in non-detention periods admitted that despite having the required qualifications, they often experienced a refusal to employ them (45.7%). The smaller the town the respondent comes from, the more common his/her failure in his/her efforts to find a job ($p = 0.035$). On the other hand, the number of repeated offenses, age, level of education and type of prison do not differentiate the distribution of responses in the discussed scope. In-depth analyses of employers' attitudes towards former convicts will be presented in the subsequent article.

It is more difficult for people from medium-sized cities to find a job than for people from other categories of place of residence ($p = 0.031$). Perhaps this is due to the fact that the inhabitants of rural areas and small towns are employed in field works as manual workers or work on their own farms, while in large cities job opportunities are numerous and more varied than in medium-sized towns. It is similar in the case of the number of repeated offenses – employment problems are indicated more often by one-time than multiple recidivists ($p < 0.001$). The lower the level of education, the higher the frequency of employment of former convicts ($p = 0.009$). Ex-convicts with primary and lower secondary education levels find job most often, employed seasonally on short-term contracts as manual workers. The age and type of prison, on the other hand, do not differentiate between the distribution of responses in relation to the frequency of employment.

At the final stage of the study, respondents were asked to give their opinion on the position of former convicts in the labour market. It turned out that regardless of the criterion used (age, living environment, type of prison, number of repeated offenses, or level of education), more than a half of the surveyed recidivists (57.0%) expressed a clear opinion on the necessity of privileging the position of former convicts on the labour market.

The results of the presented study constitute the basis for the following conclusions:

- 1) In addition to the professional qualifications of former convicts, job placement should also take into account socio-demographic profiles and the situation of their families of origin or started by them, as these elements are closely linked to the motives behind their search for employment. A good job offer, adjusted to the expectations of both the potential employee – a former convict – and the employer, gives the effect of professional “rootedness”. Matching personal and environmental needs and abilities significantly increases the chances of taking up and maintaining a job, and thus leads to positive and sustainable social adaptation. It would be helpful in this process to encourage employers to make targeted offers to labour offices aimed at recruiting former convicts, especially in the construction sector, in which former convicts look for a job most often. The aim is to provide them with access to offers matched to their qualifications and the opportunity to take up trainings and specialist courses, with a guarantee of employment after they have been completed.

- 2) It is equally important to work with a family affected by a penal problem, especially with regard to coping with the psychosocial stigma of crime and treating communication and relational disorders. This is because the majority of families are dysfunctional, often with multiple problems, and their members have low levels of ability to cope in everyday life (Nowak, 2011). What is more, this type of family is characterised by generational unemployment. Having no social models of looking for and keeping a job, their members do not value it (Nowak, 2017a; Woźniakowska, 2006). It is therefore reasonable to organise competence training for the families of former convicts based on a thorough diagnosis of their deficits, needs and resources, both individual and group ones. A well-functioning family, dealing constructively with development crises and positive adaptation to changing economic as well as socio-economic conditions, is a real support group, a kind of “resistance” plane to unfavourable environmental influences.
- 3) Special support in the area of occupational development is required for older former convicts (over 50 years of age) with primary education and low or inadequate vocational qualifications, as well as for former convicts living in rural areas and small towns, poorly educated and having insufficient professional background. This may be achieved by organising supplementary or skills-improving trainings and qualification courses, flexibly adapted to employers’ offers, as well as competence training in computer and Internet use and job search.
- 4) The actions of local governments are crucial for the positive re-adaptation and social re-integration of former convicts. However, they are currently rather ineffective, although there is no shortage of good practice examples. However, these actions are most often undertaken by public benefit organizations, various associations, foundations and volunteer centres. In this context, it is particularly important for the relevant local government bodies to take, as part of their statutory tasks in the field of social prevention, initiatives to counteract discriminatory behaviours among employers, to raise the problem of disadvantage and discrimination against prisoners on the labour market and to present successful re-adaptation successes and constructive actions of former convicts for the benefit of local communities.

Final conclusions

The real threat of former convicts' return to crime resulting from their experience of re-adaptation difficulties, the most serious of which include the sphere of employment, indicates that the current Polish model of organisation of post-penitentiary assistance is inefficient and ineffective (Nowak, 2015). Thus, it requires undertaking modernisation actions, based on the results of reliable empirical research on the personal and environmental causes of the re-adaptation failure. An eclectic (interdisciplinary and multi-faceted) perception of social support for prisoners can serve as a source of key data in this respect. This approach is based on the networked and systemic concept of social (re)integration of marginalised and excluded people, based on the concept of adapting the idea of the cluster theory to the organisation of re-adaptation and re-integration activities (Nowak, 2016). This procedure consists mainly in structural reorganisation of the post-penitentiary assistance system at the level of counties or districts, i.e. local communities, to which the convicts return most often after serving a prison sentence. It is the activity based on the cluster system, the key element of which is an animator – an institution whose task is to diagnose potential areas of cooperation, needs and expectations as well as readiness for cooperation of entities declaring their accession to the network, as well as to coordinate activities aimed at achieving a common goal, adopted by all participants of the cluster. Cluster structure of the network is characterised by high efficiency and effectiveness, which is reflected in saving time and effort, optimisation of methods and forms of operation and accuracy of assistance offer. Institutions and organisations belonging to the local re-integration cluster would operate within the framework of their own statutory tasks, using both their own resources and the human and social capital of other entities (e.g. knowledge, skills, specialist, technical, IT resources, etc.). Individualised re-integration pathways, based on a database containing information on the possibilities for convicts and their families to receive real, local readmission support and effective community animation, would significantly improve the chances of ex-convicts for sustainable moral and conflict-free improvement, and a dignified life in local communities.

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