

Employment Experiences for Women Transitioning from Incarceration Back Home to Durham, NC

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Background and Significance

Every year an average of 700 formerly incarcerated residents return to Durham with women representing an approximately 8% of these residents. Many formerly incarcerated women seek employment opportunities after release with financial obligations both to their families as caregivers and to the justice system, including fees for probation, lawyers, and restoration. Gainful employment improves the reentry experience, reduces the likelihood of recidivism, and for some women is vital to their identities during this period of adjustment. The intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and other identities may exacerbate gender inequality for justice involved women, thereby impairing their employment possibilities. Consequently, it is imperative to understand the services and programs that offer employment-related support for justice-involved women in Durham because gainful employment reduces recidivism and positively contributes to community safety and economic growth.

Research Methods

This research identified programs assisting justice-involved Durham county residents with employment opportunities via referrals from community reentry events. Inclusion criteria for program review required explicit mention of services for justice-involved individuals in the program's mission statement or purpose. Four programs met this inclusion criteria; Durham Criminal Justice Resource Center, Durham Local Reentry Council, The City of Durham Transitional Jobs Program, and STEP Up Durham. The researcher examined existing program information, such as annual reports, and conducted site visits to identify key program characteristics, such as program type, program goals, employment services provided, and any specific program components addressing employment for justice-involved women. An additional literature review was conducted to understand the employment-related experiences of and barriers for women recently released.



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Findings

The research found existing programs for justice-involved individuals in Durham are actively engaged in increasing employment among residents recently released from incarceration, with several initiatives established within the past two years. Employment services and resources include employment readiness programs, job placement, childcare, and transportation. Moreover, some of these programs work with justice-involved individuals prior to their release in preparation for their return. Despite the plethora of employment services that I have identified, none targeted or tailored their services to women. Also, the research found that despite gender inclusive language, some initiatives provided employment opportunities in male dominated labor markets. Based on the literature review conducted to understand the employment-related barriers for justice involved women, gender inequalities in the work force, educational opportunities, and the intersection of race and gender present barriers to justice involved women's prospects for gainful employment.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve employment opportunities for justice-involved women in Durham, NC:

1. Include intersectional and gender-specific interventions for justice-involved women to address their unique experiences and barriers to seeking employment to increase employability in industries that have been traditionally male dominated and/or that offer full-time hours and higher pay within the Criminal Justice Resource Center
2. Expand educational opportunities for incarcerated women in the Durham County Detention Facility to include feasible coursework in collaboration with Durham Technical Community College for postsecondary education credits.

