

Behavioral interventions to improve educational and employment outcomes for recently incarcerated individuals

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Scope of the problem

More than 700,000 youth and adults leave the U.S. juvenile and criminal justice systems each year. Correctional populations have lower levels of educational attainment on average than the general U.S. population, and many recently incarcerated individuals encounter difficulties continuing their education after being released. The Department of Education's Second Chance Pell Program, which expands financial aid eligibility for incarcerated individuals, is one recent federal policy response aimed at addressing educational disparities and improving re-entry outcomes. Improving educational access and success among this population is important for several reasons:

- One-third to one-half of incarcerated youth are re-arrested within 12 months of release, and 40 percent of incarcerated adults are re-arrested within 3 years (RAND Corporation, 2014).
- Education during incarceration may improve adults' employment opportunities and is associated with lower rates of recidivism (RAND Corporation, 2014).
- Individuals in the criminal justice system are disproportionately boys and young men of color; improving educational outcomes among this population can help reduce broader racial/ethnic educational disparities (Carson & Golinelli, 2013; RAND Corporation, 2014)

There is little rigorous evidence on how to improve re-entry outcomes for incarcerated individuals, despite tremendous public interest in helping this population. Our project will provide evidence on the efficacy of a scalable, cost-effective, technology-based strategy to improve re-entry outcomes.

Intervention design

In partnership with Edovo, an education technology firm, we will implement and evaluate an innovative, highly-scalable, personalized re-entry module to strengthen inmates' transition back into society. Edovo currently provides tablet-based online educational opportunities to inmates in prisons and jails across the country. Their platform provides educational content, and rewards the completion of modules with time toward online entertainment (music, TV shows, movies).

We will leverage this incentive structure to encourage inmates to engage in a personalized, interactive re-entry module that supports them to plan a course of action for education or stable employment upon their release. The module will ask inmates questions about their education and employment background and goals, and will additionally provide customized content and resources to address priority concerns for each individual (e.g. finding housing).

Through the incentivized module we will also collect contact information for inmates after release and will provide ongoing content and nudges to keep them on track after they transition into their communities. We will reach out to recently released individuals via text message to encourage them to make use of specific community-based resources that offer support in education, employment, and other areas inmates identified in the transition module. The text messages will provide information about where students can seek assistance completing a G.E.D. or applying for college and financial aid in their community. We will also send information

about local employment opportunities that are customized based on an individual's background, experience, and conviction.

Our approach – leveraging technology and behavioral science insights to connect people to resources and opportunities – has proven successful in other contexts, particularly for postsecondary educational access and success. A growing body of research demonstrates that informational campaigns, behavioral nudges, and psychological interventions can reduce barriers that students face in the college and financial aid process (Bettinger et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2015, 2016; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2011). For instance, sending text message reminders to first-year community college students about financial aid renewal increases persistence (Castleman & Page, 2015). Similarly, social-belonging interventions that help students re-frame daily hassles and challenges of college life as common and temporary lead to improved college persistence (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Our project will apply similar insights and strategies to the context of prisoner re-entry with the aim of improving re-entry educational and employment outcomes, and in so doing reduce recidivism rates.

Evaluation

We will implement this intervention as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to rigorously measure its effects on outcomes of interest: educational attainment, employment, and recidivism. We will obtain data from the National Student Clearinghouse on individuals' postsecondary education participation and attainment and are exploring the possibility of obtaining data from state education departments on G.E.D. completion. Through state workforce commissions we will work to obtain employment records, and from the criminal justice systems we will obtain records of whether individuals re-enter the criminal justice system via arrest or conviction.

Scalability

Our partnership with Edovo, which has a growing set of relationships with prisons and jails, provides a smooth route to scale this intervention to additional locations throughout the U.S., pending successful results of our study. We will develop the infrastructure over the course of the study necessary to support a large-scale, technology-driven intervention aimed at improving re-entry outcomes for incarcerated individuals, including a tablet-based re-entry module and series of behaviorally-informed text messages. We will also disseminate results to researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers via reports, publications, presentations, and social media.