

Issue BRIEF

Moving Justice-Involved Individuals into Employment: Michigan's M-CAM Experience



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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The lessons in this brief are drawn from Social Policy Research Associates' (SPR's) evaluation of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) TAACCCT grant. M-CAM is a coalition of eight community colleges in Michigan that used grant funds to strengthen four career pathways—Welding/Fabrication, Production, Multi-Skilled/Mechatronics, and CNC Machining.



ABOUT THE TAACCCT GRANTS

The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. TAACCCT funding assists community colleges in expanding and improving training programs that can be completed in two years or less for high-demand, high-skilled occupations.

"I went to prison and I did 11 years, and so coming home from that I had a [hard time], trying to find jobs every which way ... with what I've been through I have to strive that much harder to prove [myself], to go above and beyond." —Paulⁱ

At the end of 2015, approximately 6.74 million individuals were under supervision by the U.S. adult correctional system, representing 1 in 37 adults in the United States; furthermore, each year there are 2.5 million entries to parole or probation.ⁱⁱ One of the most pressing issues facing the United States is how to successfully transition these individuals into work and society. Many people like Paul find that, even if they are successful in securing work, the stigma of their criminal record keeps them trapped in low-paying jobs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Evidence shows that, although employment alone doesn't necessarily reduce recidivism, programs that provide high-quality training and case management can make a difference for these individuals.^{iv} This was true for Paul, who received training as a multi-skilled technician under a program supported by the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM). In addition to having his training paid for, he received career coaching and job placement assistance that helped him transition from a third-shift job (working 11 p.m.–8 a.m.) making \$13.85 an hour, to a day-shift job earning \$25 an hour.

Paul's story is one of many we documented as part of our multi-year evaluation of M-CAM. This brief highlights some of the obstacles that students with criminal records faced and how the colleges sought to address these challenges. We focus specifically on the experiences of students and program staff in two colleges: Macomb Community College in Warren and Kellogg Community College in Battle Creek.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Justice-involved students enrolled in M-CAM completed their programs and earned credentials at a higher rate than the average for all M-CAM students enrolled in their programs.
- These students were less likely to be employed on program entry, but were placed into employment at rates similar to that of other students. If employed at program entry, they were just as likely as other M-CAM students to obtain a wage increase.
- Justice-involved students cited the provision of career counseling, coaching, and employer engagement—especially on issues unique to their circumstances—as vital to their success.

Characteristics and Outcomes of Justice-Involved Students

Most of the eight colleges in our study did not systematically track whether students were transitioning from incarceration or whether they had a felony on their records. Thus, our analysis is limited to data from Macomb and Kellogg Community Colleges, both of which did record this information in their grant-funded data systems. Even at these colleges, however, staff did not always know whether students had criminal records, so the information is at best incomplete. Of the 1,855 students served at these two colleges, we have information on 190 students who were transitioning out of incarceration or had criminal records. They made up at least 10 percent of those served by these two colleges. We also drew on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with three justice-involved students, as well as interviews with college staff and a corrections officer.

The justice-involved individuals (for whom we had data) differed from the population who did not report justice involvement in significant ways: they were more than twice as likely to be African American (52 percent compared to 20 percent), more likely to be male (94 percent compared to 87 percent), and much less likely to be employed at program entry (21 percent compared to 56 percent).

The outcomes achieved by justice-involved individuals enrolled in M-CAM were more positive or similar to that of other enrolled students. Justice-involved students were significantly more likely than other students to complete their programs (86 percent compared to 60 percent) and earn a credential (87 percent compared to 67 percent).^y Despite lower rates of employment at program entry, justice-involved individuals who completed an M-CAM program had similar rates of employment by the quarter after program completion; 85 percent of justice-involved individuals were employed compared to 84 percent of students without reported justice involvement.

Employment Obstacles Facing Justice-Involved Individuals

Justice-involved individuals face unique challenges as they seek to build skills and find permanent employment. For many, both the stigma associated with their criminal record and their sensitivity to it can make it difficult to establish goals that are aspirational but also attainable. Other challenges faced by this population include low educational attainment and limited work experience.^{vi} Although manufacturing employers can be more open than other employers to hiring those with a criminal record, career coaches at the colleges said that employers are reluctant to hire anyone with a violent felony on their record, and that employers' interpretation of what constitutes a "violent crime" varies. Also, because those working in advanced manufacturing are often expected to travel extensively, employers often will not hire anyone with a driving under the influence (DUI) violation. People with felonies are restricted from taking any job requiring travel to Canada because Canadian law prevents those with felonies or DUIs on their records from entering the country.

In addition to the hiring restrictions of employers, the justice-involved students we spoke with were often very anxious about how employers would respond to their criminal record. This anxiety was an obstacle to them finding employment and asking for higher wages. One student who had only a misdemeanor on his record said, "Even starting this program, I was really stressing on the [job] interview. It was always coming up: 'Have you ever been convicted of a felony?' I could say no. But, then it's like a lot of people were asking about misdemeanors. I'm like, 'Oh my gosh.'" This student, who was first arrested late in his life, was extremely embarrassed by his arrest history, so much so that it made him reluctant to apply for positions. It turned out that his fears were unfounded. He said, "I was just so grateful when the interviews start coming, it's just not an issue, as long as you weren't involved in a felony and ... the drug screen was good. It was just a lot of stress on me, and come to find out it just wasn't warranted."

Recruitment of Justice-Involved Individuals

Formerly incarcerated and justice-involved individuals were not an explicit target population for the M-CAM program. But because of a growing economy and parallel decline in community college enrollment, colleges had to be more proactive in their efforts to recruit students than they had anticipated. Over the course of the program, the colleges strengthened their relationships with organizations that serve justice-involved individuals, many of which in turn acted as key referral sources for students.

For example, the career coach at Kellogg Community College began participating in recruitment events at the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) and attending meetings focused on helping those transitioning from jail. At these meetings, the career coach would tell parolees about the opportunity to secure training in advanced manufacturing, with the support of a case manager. One student recalled, “[The career coach] said it was a good program. They’re turning out a lot of good guys with my type of background especially, and finding jobs.” This student said that the opportunity was exciting and helped him envision a new future. He said, “To get out and do something in the community, and especially going to school ... that made me feel good.”

“Our department, we would like to start helping our citizens stay out of prison.... My hope is... that my office and department can strengthen our relationship with [the college]. I think, like my mom used to say, that education is something no one can take away from you, so the more we can do to help the ex-offender population the better because it will help them see a future and a pathway out of crime.”

- Department of Corrections staff member

Approaches for Placing Justice-Involved Individuals into Jobs

As indicated in the previous section, the colleges placed justice-involved students into jobs at a rate comparable to that of other students. This is notable given the obstacles to employment faced by these students. Our interviews suggest that the career coaches and job placement staff at the colleges were vital to making this happen. Below, we describe the approaches that these staff used to assist students.

- **Caring relationships.** A recurring theme in our interviews with justice-involved students was the value they placed on the caring relationships they established with college staff. These relationships helped to boost their confidence and to put them on the path to success. These students spoke at length about how career coaches had gone “above and beyond” to make them feel welcome and supported. One student said, “[The career coach] encouraged me all the time. With a friendly smile and just letting me know that she’s there for me. Coming out of prison, you have this stigma. With that stigma on you, you feel like everybody is [looking] down on you ... but [the career coach] welcomed, not just me, but everybody.”
- **Job search and placement assistance.** All of the students that we interviewed talked about the value of the job search and placement assistance they received from their career coaches, citing support with resume development, preparation of cover letters, thank-you letters, pre-interview research, and mock interviews. One student said the practice interviews were helpful because they helped him figure out how to “sell” himself and “shook the bugs out, because you think you’re prepared, but then you get put on the spot. ... [They remind you] to just keep eye contact and not to fidget much.” Another student credited the program

“The [career coach] helped me with my cover letter ... and she showed me how to fill a resume out. ... They showed me how to do the interview and pretty much sell myself. ... They really took time out to work with us hands on. That touched me. ... I didn’t have my birth certificate. I never had one. [The career coach] took the time out to really do research to help me get my birth certificate, which I have today. ... They really care about us and want us to move forward.”

- Justice-involved individual and student

with helping him learn “communication skills, how to conduct [oneself] and talk to people.” Finally, all of the students we interviewed credited the program with their ability to find good-paying work with benefits.

- **Employer outreach and education.** The job placement staff emphasized the importance of educating employers about the value of hiring justice-involved individuals. The students we spoke with said that the employers who interviewed them knew about their histories ahead of time and assured them that “prison or whatever you went in for has nothing to do with how we operate here.” The corrections officer we interviewed was confident that the colleges’ success in job placement was due to their engagement with employers. He said: “*My gut feeling is that [the college], through its [M-CAM] program, has developed very solid relationships with employers and has helped employers see value in parolees and ex-offenders. I know [the college] is also meeting the needs of those manufacturers by providing a service for them.*”

Implications

- Community colleges, particularly skill-based industry programs, can boost the skills and confidence of justice-involved students, helping them plan and prepare for a fresh start in the labor market.
- Community colleges can play important roles as intermediaries between justice-involved individuals and employers—helping employers to see the benefits of hiring these students and vetting employers to make sure they are prepared to interview and hire returning citizens, despite their criminal records.
- Intensive career coaching and support can help justice-involved individuals to overcome the unique employer-related challenges they face, such as understanding current job search protocols and talking with employers about their personal and professional backgrounds.

About This Series

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ⁱ Paul is a pseudonym.

ⁱⁱ Danielle Kaeble and Lauren Glaze, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2015.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2016, NCJ 250374; Danielle Kaeble and Thomas Bonczar, “Probation and Parole in the United States, 2015.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2016, NCJ 250230.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Devah Pager, “The Mark of a Criminal Record,” *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 5 (March 2003): 937–75; Steven Raphael, *The New Scarlet Letter? Negotiating the U.S. Labor Market with a Criminal Record* (Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2014).

^{iv} For research on employment and recidivism see Doris MacKenzie, “Reentry: Examining What Works in Corrections,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Community Corrections Association, St. Louis, October 2008. For research on the influence of skill development and intrusive case management see Alan Drury, *Offender Reentry and Employment* (Ames: Iowa State University, 2013) and Francis Cullen and Paul Gendreau, “Assessing Correctional Rehabilitation: Policy, Practice, and Prospects,” in *Criminal Justice 2000: Policies, Process, and Decisions in the Criminal Justice System*, edited by J. Horney (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2000), 109–75.

^v Statistically significant at $p < 0.00001$.

^{vi} See Raphael, *The New Scarlet Letter?*

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