Barred from employment? A study of labor market prospects before and after imprisonment

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7 General discussion

7.1 Introduction

Issues of prisoner reentry are of central concern to criminologists, policy makers and society at large. The salience of these issues typically stems from the fact that recidivism rates are exceptionally high after release (Langan & Levin, 2002; Linckens & De Looff, 2013). Scholars and professionals as well as prisoners themselves, note that the path to a successful reentry depends critically on a transition to employment. Finding and holding down a good job not only provides a steady income but is associated with numerous factors that promote desistance, such as personal wellbeing, affective relationships, and housing (e.g., Bushway & Reuter, 2002; Graffam et al., 2008; Visher & Travis, 2011).

This study examined how prisoners fare in the labor market, with a focus on how the prison experience affects their labor market opportunities and how these prospects subsequently affect their risk of reoffending in the aftermath of imprisonment. As such, it shares similarities with existing lines of research that showed that imprisonment decreases ex-prisoners' employment prospects (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Waldfogel, 1994; Western, 2002), and that employment can foster desistance from crime (Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Uggen & Wakefield, 2008). As discussed in previous chapters, however, important differences between the current study and prior studies include a more in-depth investigation of pre-prison labor market experiences, the use of a Dutch rather than American sample of inmates, imprisonment lengths that average about four months rather than two years, the use of self-report and administrative data (instead of solely official data sources), and the availability of multiple employment measures as well as a broad array of covariates.

In addition, this thesis addressed several unexplored research questions, central to the dynamic paradigm of life course criminology. For instance, previous work focused primarily on employment likelihood and earnings, leaving open *which kind of jobs* ex-prisoners find, and how imprisonment might affect *job quality* and *stability*. Also, while prior work showed that imprisonment can have a collateral effect on employment outcomes, relatively little is known about the *mechanisms* underlying this effect and the role of *imprisonment length*. Moreover, studies on the work-crime relationship are based on community or general offender samples, measure employment on the basis of participation, and pay little attention to the theoretical mechanisms in which the protective effect of employment is linked to *job quality and stability*.

The general observation from this thesis is that imprisonment and employment can redirect employment-and criminal careers. This final chapter provides a summary of the main results (see also Table 7.1). After laying down the findings, a discussion of the study's theoretical implications is given. Thereafter, this thesis concludes with recommendations for future research and a reflection on criminal justice and labor market policies.

7.2 Summary of empirical findings

7.2.1 The selection of marginal workers into prison (chapter 2)

Chapter 2 described the labor market experiences of prisoners prior to imprisonment using data on the first wave of the Prison Project, and as such offered a baseline measurement of prisoners' employability. Do prisoners experience rapid deterioration in the months leading up to their prison spell – a time in which labor market activities are likely to be affected by the illegal activities that led to their imprisonment – or are their diminished prospects indicative of a longer-term trajectory that characterizes their entire employment history?

The results indicated that instability is a longstanding feature of prisoners' working lives. Starting with a low educational attainment, their subsequent employment career is characterized by long periods of unemployment, off-the-books employment, dismissals and job shifts. Those who were employed in the run-up to imprisonment worked in temporary, low-quality jobs. Especially prisoners with prior prison record(s), do not seem to succeed (or do not strive) to obtain a high quality job and stable work experience. Another notable finding was that many prisoners reported to be self-employed as independent contractors or owned small businesses. This is in line with previous work from other fields showing that entrepreneurship is preferred when the feasible employee-type arrangements do not pay a sufficiently high wage (Clark & Drinkwater, 2000; Parker, 2004).

Earlier studies failed to create insight into the magnitude of labor market disadvantage that prisoners already face prior to their imprisonment, because they lacked retrospective measures and a comparison group of non-incarcerated individuals. The comparison with the general labor force in *chapter 2* further emphasized that, even after controlling for sociodemographic differences in group composition (age, ethnicity and educational level), unemployment, low quality jobs and instability are longstanding features of prisoners' pre-prison employment careers. Notably, prison-recidivists reported a significantly higher wage in their pre-prison job than the general population. Perhaps prisoners are more driven by short-term profits instead of jobs that offer security and promotion in the long term. In line with this, Nagin and Waldfogel (1995) explained their finding that young convicted men earned relatively higher wages by pointing out that they are more often employed in "spot market" jobs instead of "career" jobs.

Overall, the findings showed that the individuals in this study face a human capital deficit even long before they enter prison.

7.2.2 *The effect of imprisonment on (time to) employment (chapter 3)*

Employing a quasi-experimental design with comparable groups *chapter 3* used administrative data from Statistics Netherlands on employment and imprisonment to examine whether imprisonment had "scarring" effects on formal job acquisition over and above regular unemployment. A group of *ex-prisoners* was compared in employment likelihood with a group of future prisoners who experienced a *regular time out* from the labor market. Ex-prisoners found a job more often and more quickly than unemployed future prisoners. Hence, imprisonment seemed, more than regular unemployment, to encourage the transition to the labor market. Within the follow-up period (maximum of two years), approximately 80 percent of the ex-prisoners were able to (re)connect to the labor market (for at least one month). Most of them found a job very quickly after release. This finding is in line with the conclusion of earlier administrative research in the United States that employment rates are relatively high in the immediate months after release (e.g., Pettit & Lyons, 2007; Sabol, 2007).

The higher employment rate among ex-prisoners might seem unexpected, as the majority of effect-studies found that their employment likelihood is worse than the employment likelihood of a non-incarcerated comparison group (e.g., Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Waldfogel, 1994; Western, 2002). It should be noted, however, that, in contrast to most previous work, the current study used a comparison sample of individuals who were truly *at risk* of imprisonment. Hence, the pernicious selection problem that complicates all effect-studies, was confronted by comparing the employment outcome of groups that experienced imprisonment, but at a *different point in time*. Moreover, individuals in both groups had recent work experience and were thus also in *the risk pool for employment*. The comparability between these two groups seems more suited for a comparison in employment outcomes, than studies that compare ex-prisoners with non-prisoners as the latter group of studies must impose heavier assumptions about this comparability. The difference between the current study and earlier (foremost American) work could also be attributable to the longer duration of spells considered in American studies. In order to further validate the findings, it is warranted to conduct further (Dutch) research using different control groups. An example is to examine the employment prospects after short-term imprisonment and community service (see Wermink et al., 2010).

7.2.3 *The effect of imprisonment length on employment prospects (chapter 4)*

The official data used in *chapter 3* fail to capture all economic activity (e.g., self-employment, off-the-books employment, out-of-state employment), especially for young men with a prior arrest record (Kornfeld & Bloom,

1999). Also, cause(s) of the quick transition to employment after release remain unknown. *Chapter 4* and *5* provided further insight into these issues.

Chapter 4 was concerned with identifying the relationship between imprisonment length and various employment outcomes in the first six months after release. Using Prison Project data, the comparability of groups was warranted by comparing groups with different confinement lengths. The main finding was that longer prison spells (>6 months) correspond with deterioration in short-term employment prospects. Less than one-third of the long-term prisoners were employed during the follow-up period, whereas more than 40 percent of the short- (< 6 weeks) and medium-term prisoners (between 2 and 6 months) found employment. This difference is quite pronounced in light of the comparatively short spells in this sample; half of the prisoners were confined for less than three months and the maximum confinement length was one year. Sensitivity analyses in which length of imprisonment was treated as a continuous measurement, seemed to confirm this pattern: beyond six months, longer imprisonment corresponds with incremental deterioration in employment prospects.

Time served did not affect the stability of employment (i.e., timing, number of jobs, work disruption, and time employed). With respect to job quality (i.e., earnings and occupational level), the results show that ex-prisoners return to, or start working in, uniformly low-quality jobs which differ little by imprisonment length. Another noteworthy finding was that, similar to the administrative data in *chapter 3*, the vast majority of employed ex-prisoners reported to have found this job quickly.

The findings support the idea that imprisonment can have unintended (collateral) effects. The negative effect of longer imprisonment on employment likelihood seemed to be driven by a combination of job stability (short-term prisoners are more likely to return to their pre-prison job) and job change (short-term prisoners are more likely to find new employment). Notably, skill erosion and increased criminal embeddedness among long-term prisoner could not explain the lower employment likelihood among this group. Instead, long-term prisoners had more opportunities to accumulate skills and reported a similar recidivism risk as short- and medium-term prisoners. A longer prison spell thus seems to *decrease employment chances, increase skill accumulation, but does not seem to reduce recidivism risks* (for the latter finding see also Wermink, 2014).

The negative effect of imprisonment length on employment rates is not in line with previous reports in which longer spells increased post-release employment chances in the short-term (Jung, 2011; Kling, 2004, 2006; Pettit & Lyons, 2007, 2009). A possible explanation for the contrast in findings can be that this chapter was based on self-reported employment data. Most studies are restricted to formal labor market participation, and cannot measure all economic activity (e.g., off-the-books employment). Also, the negative effect of longer imprisonment on employment rates may be conditional on serving a maximum sentence of one year. Previous work was based on American prisoners that serve an average prison sentence of two years on

average (Guerino et al., 2011). In finding that longer imprisonment does not affect recidivism outcomes, this thesis *does* connect to previous (American) research (e.g., Loughran et al., 2009).

7.2.4 Job return as potentially successful pathway to re-employment (chapter 5)

Despite their relatively weak labor market attachment, a substantial share of the prison population was employed at the time of their arrest (40%). *Chapter 5* used a subsample of the Prison Project data to examine whether previously employed prisoners (salary workers) returned to their former employer after release, and identified factors that facilitated or hindered this employment outcome.

The results revealed the general importance of (recent) work experience for employment success after release. Approximately twenty percent of the individuals who were jobless prior to imprisonment found employment after release, while more than half of the previously employed prisoners succeeded in this regard. Amongst them, 34 percent worked in their pre-prison job and 66 percent found a new job in the sixth month after release. Importantly, the data showed that these employers rehired their former employees while knowing about the prison spell.

This finding convincingly demonstrates the importance of both (*recent) work experience* and *pre-prison employment ties* for successful reintegration after release. Moreover, this finding aligns the expectation of various scholars who seemed to believe in the relevance of job return for successful labor market reentry but could not offer hard evidence (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Martin & Webster, 1971; Soothill, 1974; Visher et al., 2008).

Prisoners who were highly motivated to work, satisfied with their job and worked in a fixed employment arrangement were most likely to return to the pre-prison employer after release. In addition, skilled prisoners seemed relatively better equipped to overcome the stigma that is associated with a prison spell as they were more likely to find new employment than to return to their previous job.

The majority of returning prisoners were able to retain their job, at least during the first crucial half year after release. And, even though all post-release jobs were of relatively low quality compared to national figures, returners' jobs seemed to be of somewhat higher quality than new-found jobs. Job return can thus be a successful pathway to re-employment.

7.2.5 The effect of employment (qualities) on recidivism (chapter 6)

The sixth chapter moved a step further along the life course and assessed the effect of post-release employment qualities on reoffending, using both official and self-reported data on recidivism. A quick transition to employment is expected to play a crucial role in reintegration processes after release. Yet, after controlling for a wide range of pre- and post-release between-individual differences available in the Prison project data,

employed and non-employed ex-prisoners seemed to have a similar chance on being *registered* for a crime. And, employed ex-prisoners even *reported* a slightly higher crime-likelihood than their non-employed counterparts.

These findings do not correspond with the general observation of previous research on the effect of work on crime (Uggen & Wakefield, 2008; Lageson & Uggen, 2013). However, research among ex-prisoners is scarce and the handful of existing studies showed mixed results concerning the protective function of employment among this group. Also, further investigation of the work-crime relationship nuanced the null-finding, indicating that the protective effect of employment depends on the *kind of jobs* offenders find (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen & Wakefield, 2008; Uggen & Staff, 2001; Lageson & Uggen, 2013).

Several job characteristics, related to concepts of job quality and job stability, seemd to be associated with a lowered recidivism risk (occupational level, employee vs. self-employed, and job stability). After controlling for all job characteristics, only both indicators for job stability (returning to the pre-prison job and holding down a post-release job during the follow-up) led to an independent reduction in registered recidivism risk. A similar, though non-significant, pattern of findings was found with respect to self-reported recidivism.

In sum, even among a high-risk offender group, such as ex-prisoners, a quick transition to employment can reduce recidivism risks in the first crucial months after release. Job stability seems to be a relevant requirement to generate this protective effect.

7.3 Reflection on theoretical framework

This thesis set out to progress on earlier theoretical assessments in the field of life course criminology, that have been mostly tested on American data. The current work focused on the existence and direction of imprisonment and employment-effects, presented a first step towards disentangling the mechanisms underlying these effects, and used data from the Netherlands.

The findings of *chapter 3* and *chapter 4* confirm that a period of imprisonment can indeed impact employment careers. More specifically, this thesis indicates that it is not so much the *prison experience* but the *duration of confinement* that deteriorates post-release employment patterns. And, the findings of *chapter 6* show that certain employment qualities influence the development of criminal behavior. As such, this thesis provides empirical support for the dynamic perspective of life course criminology in which life events are seen as turning points that can redirect offenders' lives. The section below discusses how the empirical findings relate to the assumptions of the main theories that can be applied to the effect of imprisonment on employment and the effect of employment on criminal behavior.

7.3.1 Imprisonment and employment

The existing literature offers a wide range of theories applicable to the study of imprisonment-effects. This thesis used a prisoner-perspective and was therefore mainly based on supply-side explanations for the labor market behavior of prisoners: deterrence theory, learning theories, and human capital theory. In addition, theoretical notions of labeling theories, a demand-side explanation, were considered in order to include employers' role in employment outcomes.

Starting with deterrence theory, the expectation was that a prison experience can deter offenders and redirect them towards a conventional lifestyle (Beccaria, [1764] 1995). In line with this theory, c*hapter 3* showed that ex-prisoners found employment more often and sooner than a comparison group of unemployed future prisoners. In addition, the increased employment chances after release from prison, as found in *chapter 3* (and *4*), may be the result of (short-run) deterrence. Unfortunately, the administrative data did not allow a more direct test of this theory. In order to enhance theoretical insights, further research could replicate the study presented in *chapter 3* using both more detailed data on the theoretical concept "deterrence" as well as alternative comparison groups.

Following learning theories, such as the differential association theory of Sutherland et al. (1992), imprisonment reduces employment prospects because prisoners learn non-conventional values and norms as well as new criminal skills through their interaction with other prisoners. This can subsequently increase their involvement in criminal behavior (or criminal embeddedness) (Hagan, 1993; McCarthy et al., 2002). As such, longer imprisonment is expected to further deepen prisoners' criminal embeddedness. *Chapter 4* examined whether this criminal embeddedness could potentially explain the lower employment likelihood among long-term prisoners by looking at the recidivism rates of groups with different confinement lengths. In contrast to this expectation, similar levels of post-release recidivism were found across groups with different lengths of imprisonment. A deepened embeddedness in criminal behavior, as expected by learning theories, seemed therefore incapable of explaining the lower employment rates among long-term prisoners.

Human capital theory can be used to derive ambiguous hypotheses concerning the effect of imprisonment on employment. First, the restriction in skill accumulation and erosion of work-related skills during imprisonment are expected to cause the lower employment rates among (long-term) prisoners (Becker, 1964). *Chapter 4* showed that, while long-term prisoners were barred from employment for a longer period of time, they also had more opportunities to compensate for their time out of the labor force by following training and programs in prison. The lower employment likelihood among long-term prisoners was therefore less likely caused by an erosion of human capital. Second, guidance and skill accumulation in prison can increase employment opportunities after release. *Chapter 3* showed that ex-prisoners were more likely to find employment after release than unem-

ployed future prisoners. The latter group was less likely to receive assistance during their time out from the labor market than prisoners. This difference in guidance could potentially explain the different employment likelihood between groups. Unfortunately, the administrative data did not allow a more direct test of this human capital mechanism.

In addition, human capital indicators were used to predict ex-prisoners chances of finding employment after release and returning to the pre-prison employer. *Chapter 5* showed that recent work experience substantially increased the post-release employment likelihood. Moreover, prisoners who had worked for their pre-prison employer for a longer period of time were more likely to return to their previous job. This could be attributable to the amount of specific (on-the-job) human capital that is valuable for the pre-prison employer. Finally, higher skilled prisoners seem better equipped to overcome any stigma that is expected to be associated with a prison spell by labeling theories, as they might be less dependent on returning to their previous job for employment than their low-educated counterparts.

Labeling theories expect that imprisonment decreases employment prospects (and increases criminal behavior) because it generates labeling-mechanisms which close doors to norm-consistent behavior (Becker, 1963). In studying ex-prisoners' opportunities to return to their pre-prison employer, *chapter 5* provided insight into the validity of this demand-side explanation for the generally low employment likelihood among ex-prisoners. The finding that many former employers knowingly rehired ex-prisoners contrasts the hypothesis that a prison record leads to stigmatization and rejection in hiring situations. Instead, it seems to align a type of labeling theory that is often used by labor economists. This signaling theory states that the absence of perfect information about applicants' true productivity forces employers to translate applicants' information into positive and negative signals regarding that productivity (Spence, 1973). As such, signaling theory implies that the negative stereotyping associated with imprisonment might be conditional upon the access to positive information about the employee. Hence, former employers might be more likely to diverge from the negative stereotypes that are generally associated with a prison record because they have access to more (positive) information about the applicant than new employers.

7.3.2 Employment and criminal behavior

Economic theories, routine activity theory and social control theories connect employment to a reduced involvement in criminal behavior. The findings in *chapter 6* showed that a quick transition to employment does not necessarily reduce the risk of reoffending as expected by these various mainstream theories. Instead, the findings are in line with the expectation that the protective effect of employment relies on more than just the presence or absence of a job and is conditional on *the kind of job* offenders find (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993). The aforementioned theories were used to derive specific hypotheses about the effect of certain job characteristics on crime.

Following economic theories, the expectation was that especially jobs of a higher occupational level would reduce criminal behavior, as a higher income makes illegitimate behavior unnecessary. Routine activity theory points out the importance of looking into the role of work intensity and type of employment (self-employed, salary worker), because daily activities determine the opportunity structure to commit crimes. Finally, the age-graded informal social control theory of Sampson and Laub (1993) states that stable employment reduces criminal behavior through the conventional ties that accompany such employment.

Chapter 6 confirmed the assumptions of informal social control theory of Sampson and Laub (1993). The *ties to employment* are more important for a reduction in criminal involvement than merely being employed, occupational level, working as employee or being self-employed and work intensity. Hence, the findings do not confirm the underlying mechanisms of economic theories and routine activity theory.

7.3.3 Theory development

Theories are used to derive an hypothesis concerning the effect of a life event, but scholars rarely derive more specific hypotheses that would lead to the rejection or validation of a theory's underlying assumption. The current study falls within the first line of research that aims to disentangle the mechanisms that underlie the effect of imprisonment on employment, and the effect of employment on crime. An important task for future scholars is to further develop and validate the wide range of life course theories by ways of explanatory research. The increasing amount of detailed longitudinal data enables such research. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the processes underlying the effects of life events, such as imprisonment and employment, requires *qualitative* research. By way of example, scholars could aim to measure latent theoretical concepts, such as human capital erosion and criminal embeddedness, more precisely. A study of Trimbur (2009) offers an example of how ethnographic field work can help to understand how the decisions and identity transformation of reentering individuals are shaped by their experiences, as well as their own and external attitudes. Such data enable an examination of the validity of the aforementioned theoretical interpretations and create new insights for theory development.

7.4 Recommendations for future research

Using varied data sources and empirical methodologies, the chapters of this thesis examined how released prisoners fare in the labor market. This thesis advanced on previous work by revisiting questions concerning pre-prison labor market attachment (*chapter 2*). In addition, the effects of imprisonment and employment are examined using advanced statistical methods and rich longitudinal data from the Netherlands (*chapters 3-6*). Moreover, several

largely unexplored areas were addressed. *Chapter 3-6* explore a broad range of employment outcomes related to timing, quality and stability. *Chapter 4* examined whether, and through which mechanisms, imprisonment limits not only employment likelihood but also the kind of jobs that ex-prisoners find. *Chapter 5* is among the first to provide insight into a potentially successful pathway to labor market reintegration by focusing on the role of recent work experience. Moving one step further along the life course, *chapter 6* emphasized the role of job quality and job stability in the effect of employment on criminal behavior.

Besides these strengths, a number of limitations have to be addressed, and need to be considered when interpreting the findings. Moreover, below, specific attention is paid to important avenues for future research with respect to data, methodology and research questions.

7.4.1 Data

An important direction for future research is to study the labor market participation of (ex-)prisoners by combining administrative data with self-report data on employment and recidivism. The self-reports used in most chapters of this thesis include very detailed information. Yet a potential downside is that social desirability and memory loss invalidate responses, especially when surveying disadvantaged (low-educated) groups such as prisoners. A general recommendation is to pay attention to how different modes of self-administration vary in their effects on socially desirable responding (Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008) as well as on different (disadvantaged) groups of respondents. Throughout this thesis, potential biases were minimized in several ways. For example, the data used here mainly resulted from computer-assisted personal interviews which were held by trained interviewers. In addition, retrospective questions concerned recent events, both traditional as well as calendar-based questionnaires were used to measure labor market participation, and survey data were complemented with data from official data sources. Moreover, data from both sources led to some similar findings (e.g., the quick transition to employment in *chapter 3* and *4*, based on administrative and self-report data respectively). However, some differences in findings indicate that it is advisable to use data from multiple sources (e.g., the difference between registered and self-reported recidivism) (see Hindelange et al., 1979).

A second recommendation for future research is to examine whether this study's observations stand when a longer period of follow-up is used. A weakness of the data used in this study is the relatively short follow-up period (six months in *chapters 2*, *4-6* and maximum of two years in *chapter 3*). Although the first months after release represent an important period of time in ex-prisoners' lives – many of them are arrested for a new crime within this period – future research that examines to what extent ex-prisoners are able to find and hold down jobs over a longer period of time seems warranted. Third, future research on prisoner samples will have to show to

what extent the findings of this thesis can be generalized to the wider population of Dutch prisoners. Most chapters of this thesis merely focused on male prisoners, who were between 18 and 65 years old at the time of prison entry, were born in the Netherlands (including second-generation immigrants), started their confinement in pretrial detention and were confined for a maximum of one year. As Dutch prisons house mostly male prisoners (94,6%) and 80 percent of all confinements are shorter than six months, our findings speak to a large part of the total prison population. It should, however, be noted that pretrial detainees represent a group of relatively serious offenders within the prison population (49% of the population). Also, women, a small but rapidly growing segment of the prison population in the Netherlands, and many other Western countries, were excluded from participation. The same is true for the relatively large group of prisoners who are born outside the Netherlands (44%) (Linckens & De Looff, 2013). The latter two groups were excluded for practical reasons but warrant further research (see section 7.4.3).[1]

Some caution is also advised when generalizing the post-release findings (based on the interviews six months after release) to the original sample of 1,909 prisoners who participated in the first wave shortly after the start of retrial detention. For instance, because of the timing of the data collection and time frame of this thesis, short-term prisoners are modestly overrepresented in the current sample. Importantly, difference tests showed comparability between the post-release and initial sample across a wide range of baseline covariates (see *chapters 2, 4-6* for more information).

Finally, cross-national research on prisoner reentry is warranted. The data used in this study pertain to large samples of Dutch prisoners. As such, it offers a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on prisoner reentry that is currently dominated by American scholars and generally lacking in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has a relatively mild penal climate, restricted access to criminal history records, and a relatively generous social welfare regime (Becker, 2000; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lappi-Seppälä, 2011). The findings are therefore more likely to apply to Northern European countries than to the United States. Indeed, while most American studies found a negative effect of imprisonment on employment and a short-term positive effect of imprisonment length, we found opposite effects (*chapter 3-4*). Future comparative research is needed to investigate to what extent these difference in findings can be attributed to country differences. The difference in penal climate and confinement lengths are plausible candidates. Nonetheless, the importance of work experience for post-release success, the

1 In order to analyze data of female prisoners in a similar way as male prisoners, it would have been necessary to include almost all of them in the data collection. Moreover, nonresponse would have reduced the number of female prisoners and complicate quantitative analyses. Non-Dutch prisoners were excluded because of the complexity of a multi-language data collection. Moreover, their history outside the Netherlands limits the access to official data sources entailing, for instance, criminal records.

finding that imprisonment length does not impact recidivism outcomes, and the finding that employment rates are relatively high after release align a growing body of American research (*chapter 3-5*). In addition, following two influential American scholars, this thesis confirmed the relative importance of job stability for crime reduction and reintegration (Sampson & Laub, 1993) (*chapter 6*).

7.4.2 Methodology

A recommendation for future research is to confront the pernicious issue of selection bias by reporting on the advantages and disadvantages of the applied statistical methods and performing sensitivity analyses to confirm the robustness of the obtained effects. A methodological complication of this thesis is that none of the longitudinal research designs can perfectly approximate an experimental design, in which individuals are randomly sentenced to prison or an alternative sentence, to different lengths of confinement, or to employment or unemployment. Hence, the designs in this study are unable to estimate causal effects because they presumably cannot rule out all potential confounders of the relationships under investigation. Nonetheless, we are confident to have reduced selection biases severely by accounting for many potential confounders, using advanced statistical methods and comparable treatment and control groups. Moreover, sensitivity analyses confirmed the robustness of findings (*chapter 3*,*4* and *6*). Finally, the analyses were based on fine-grained (monthly) units of time and are therefore appropriate for a study of the temporal order of processes.

Both the regression analyses and the more advanced propensity score methodology account for observable and measured differences between groups. Hence, these methods only control for unobserved individual characteristics in the extent that they are associated with the observed characteristics included in the model. Fixed effect models overcome this problem by using individuals as their own controls. For instance, the post-prison employment likelihood of an individual is compared to the employment likelihood of that individual in the period prior to imprisonment. Such models seemed however less appropriate for the empirical chapters in the current study because of the relatively short follow-up period, especially since this technique excludes individuals that do not vary during the follow-up (e.g., remain unemployed).

To summarize, advanced statistical methods that can be applied to observational data all have their own drawbacks (this includes growth models, group-based trajectory modeling, etc.). Importantly, however, this does not mean that findings resulting from quasi-experimental designs are necessarily subordinate to those of experimental designs. The latter designs might be better suited for isolating a causal effect (high internal validity), but the small sample sizes and laboratorial settings make findings less suitable for generalization to the real outside world that ex-prisoners face (low external validity) (see Sampson, 2010).

7.4.3 Research questions

The findings of the current study address several important issues related to the labor market reentry of prisoners, but leave other issues underexplored. To start, an essential avenue for future research is to examine offenders' *willingness to work* in the formal labor market. The current study accounted for prisoners' motivation to work by including it as control variable in the analyses presented in *chapters 4-6*.[2] Based on this measurement prisoners seemed to be quite motivated to work and search for employment after release (see for instance Table 6.2) (see also Visher et al., 2008 for similar findings in the United States). Yet, half of the ex-prisoners were unemployed six months after release. Following subcultural theories prisoners' employment rates are low because peer groups disapprove of such conventional behavior and have different norms and values (Miller, 1958; Wilson, 1987). Moreover, illegal activities might be more attractive for these individuals as their low levels of human capital makes them merely eligible for low status jobs. In a report on the role of work in the lives of disadvantaged workers in the Netherlands, Van Echtelt (2010) stated that while the work motivation of unemployed individuals was similar to the motivation of their working counterparts, the aforementioned group put in little effort in actually finding a job. Apel and Sweeten (2010) found some evidence for non-participation (versus unemployment) among a sample of young American ex-prisoners. Future research is warranted to examine to what extent this is the case among Dutch ex-prisoners and look into the role of prisoners' expectations about work. Prang, Van Wingerden, and Timmer (2010) noted, for instance, that ex-prisoners have high expectations concerning the type of jobs for which they may successfully apply. Qualitative research methods seem more suited to acquire knowledge concerning both prisoners' (and employers') motives and attitudes in hiring procedures.

Such research efforts could also enhance the insight into possibilities to connect prisoners without recent work experiences to employment after release. In finding that recent work experience and returning to a pre-prison employer are important determinants of labor market success after release, this thesis indirectly suggests that finding work is particularly difficult for the group of prisoners without recent work experience.

A second recommendation is to enhance knowledge concerning the demand-side of the labor market: employers' attitudes towards hiring ex-prisoners. This study used the prisoner perspective in studying labor mar-

2 Motivation to work was based on the average score on a Likert-scale entailing nine items with answer categories ranging from 1 "totally disagree" to 5 "totally agree": I feel happiest when I work hard/ If you want to enjoy life, you should be prepared to work hard/ If you are able to obtain a better job you should always do so/ Everyone who can work, should work/ Doing what you love can only when you did your duties/ If you can get promoted, you always should/ Work should be a top-priority, even if it means less free time/ If I cannot make ends meet, society should help me/ Society should take care of my needs.

ket (re)entry processes. The finding that a substantial part of the previous employers knowingly rehired ex-prisoners after release seems to contrast previous work that found strong evidence for the stigma-hypothesis (e.g., Pager, 2003). Future (qualitative) research should examine the conditions under which employers are more or less likely to (re)hire individuals with a criminal record.

Third, future research could examine whether the effects of imprisonment and employment are homogenous. In all likelihood, transitions do not have the same effect on all prisoners. The current study paid some attention to this by distinguishing between individuals with different imprisonment lengths and employment qualities. Sampson and Laub (1993, 2005) have persuasively argued that the impact of life events can also depend on an *individual's stage in the life course*. From late adolescence to early adulthood individuals complete their educational training and accumulate valuable experiences and social contacts on the labor market. Hence, it is argued that a prison record during these formative years will certainly make it more difficult for individuals to form an enduring attachment to the labor market. Future work could examine whether the effect of the two life events under investigation here, are in fact dependent on prisoners' stage in the life course.

The effects of imprisonment and employment could also be dependent on the *gender* and *ethnic background* of prisoners. For instance, the consequences of imprisonment may differ between women and men because female inmates are often the primary caregiver prior to incarceration (Lalonde & Cho, 2008). Following the focal concerns theory of criminal sentencing (Steffensmeier et al., 1998), ethnic minorities could represent a different group of offenders because they are relatively more likely to receive a prison sentence than Dutch prisoners with a similar criminal history. In addition, research showed that employers are reluctant to hire ethnic minorities (Andriessen, Nievers, Dagevos, & Faulk, 2012), and that the negative effect of a criminal record is stronger for ethnic minorities (Pager, 2003). The current study addressed the influence of ethnicity to some extent by including second-generation immigrants. Yet, the role of ethnicity warrants more attention in prisoner reentry research.

In a similar vein, it is plausible that effects are dependent on the *context* to which prisoners return. For instance, it is easier to find employment in urban areas and in times of economic boom than in rural areas and times of economic recession. Arguably, this is especially the case for ex-prisoners, and other low-skilled groups, who are often employed in sectors, such as building and transportation, in which the demand for employment is driven by the economy. Moreover, de-industrialization and the growing service intensity of the economy have decreased the demand for low-skilled workers. These changes could have increased ex-prisoners' barriers to employment over time (Fletcher, 2008).

7.5 Relevance to policy

The general observation from this thesis is that imprisonment and employment can redirect employment-and criminal careers. While a short period of imprisonment does not *further* deteriorate employment prospects (*chapter 3-4)*, longer imprisonment can worsen these prospects (*chapter 4*). Those who find employment, find it soon after release (*chapter 3-4*), a substantial part of the ex-prisoners return to previous employers, and a transition to stable employment can help to reduce ex-prisoners' recidivism risk (*chapter 6*). The section below discusses how the findings of this thesis speak on possible avenues for general and specific policies pertaining to criminal justice, the labor market as well as prisoner reentry.

7.5.1 General policy suggestions

With respect to criminal policy, research, like the current study – which provides a fuller accounting of both the intended and unintended costs and benefits of imprisonment – points current debates in the direction of a less punitive legislation, and specifically, shorter prison spells. This recommendation contrasts the trend towards more punitive sentencing (e.g., Staatsblad, 2006, 11). Stricter penal policies are now often motivated as a crime-reduction strategy that deters offenders from crime. The findings of the current work show that while short-term imprisonment not necessarily worsens labor market participation, longer prison spells seem to deteriorate the employment likelihood of reentering men. Moreover, post-release recidivism rates are very high and seem uncorrelated with length of imprisonment. As such, this thesis adds to a growing body of knowledge showing that (longer) imprisonment does not seem to achieve two of its intended punishment goals: rehabilitation and specific deterrence (e.g., Loughran et al., 2009; Nagin et al., 2009; Nagin & Snodgrass, 2013; Wermink, et al., 2010). In accordance with the trend towards evidence-based policies, alternatives for imprisonment deserve more attention. It might for instance be worthwhile to replace the last part of a prison spell with a non-custodial intervention. Such alternatives seem furthermore warranted in light of the substantial increase in financial costs associated with the prison system (Molenaar, 2007).

Electronic detention towards the end of a sentence (as was proposed recently: Kamerstukken [Parliamentary documents] II 2013/14, 33 745, no. 3) could function as an effective alternative to longer imprisonment, but only when supplemented with professional reintegration assistance. Such assistance is warranted to enable these individuals to hold down a job and help them to make work (or education) a more prominent topic in their lives. Without such supervision, many of these individuals are not triggered enough to change their daily structure. Moreover, society misses out on the opportunity to push this high-risk offender group to change their behavioral patterns while residing in their own environment. Research indicates

that an intervention in the community (versus institutional settings) is likely to increase treatment effectiveness (Petersilia, 2004).

A labor market- and social policy recommendation worth pursuing is to invest in *preventative measures* that stimulate educational- and skill attainment. The baseline measurement of prisoners' employability in the current study unmistakably indicated that the majority of Dutch prisoners lack human capital long before they enter prison. This deficit hindered them to find (quality) employment before imprisonment and will continue to present a barrier after release. Hence, reentry policies might be too limited in reach and implemented too late in the life course (see also Petersilia, 2003). Steps have been taken to increase the human capital of offenders. By way of example, a recent bill proposes to enable judges to sentence young and adolescent offenders (younger than 23) to obtain a basic educational qualification, and oblige schools to take on these individuals (Kamerstukken [Parliamentary documents] II 2013/14, 31 839, no. 357). Such policies, as well as more general preventative measures (e.g., reduce school drop-out) seem required to decrease the number of individuals that enter prison, and better prepare those who will eventually experience a prison spell to reintegrate after release.

In addition to these general policies, the *(employment) assistance during and after confinement* should be increased and intensified in order to improve ex-prisoners' employment prospects. There are plans to downsize the number of prisoners that qualify for personalized assistance by selecting only well-behaving prisoners who are motivated to change (Kamerstukken [Parliamentary documents] II 2013/14, 33 745, no. 3). These plans likely lead to the exclusion of prisoners who need assistance. In addition to their socioeconomic disadvantage, many prisoners are intellectually challenged, cope with mental illnesses or have substance abuse problems (Dirkzwager et al., 2009). Assistance is therefore warranted. The relatively new policy initiative in which the different organizations that come in contact with ex-prisoners (e.g., penitentiaries, police, health services, employment insurance agencies) are encouraged to improve collaboration, represents a step in the right direction (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten [Association of Netherlands Municipalities], 2009). Yet, thus far, this approach has not resulted in a systematic and standardized approach to connect ex-prisoners to employment (Inspectie Social Zaken en Werkgelegenheid (SZW) [Inspection social affairs and employment], 2012). The aftercare program, in which ex-prisoners receive assistance on five relevant life domains, offers another example of how policies seem to improve circumstances but fail to address the complexity of problems that prisoners face after release (Noordhuizen & Weijters, 2013).

In order to increase ex-prisoners' chances on a successful reintegration and justify two important punishment goals – specific deterrence and rehabilitation – a suggested course of action is therefore to rethink the downsizing of reentry programming. Furthermore, because of the high costs associated with the prosecution of recidivating offenders, budget-cuts in reentry

programming might result in higher material (and immaterial) costs in the long-run. In the words of Western (2007): "If we measure prisoner reentry programs against the fiscal and social costs of incarceration and the ineffectiveness of imprisonment at reducing recidivism, even small (and cheap) program effects may be efficient" (p. 355) (see also McCollister, et al., 2003). Unfortunately, knowledge about the (cost-) effectiveness of interventions remains limited because of the high diversity in interventions. And, methodological rigorous study designs still remain an exception in this field of research (e.g., Wartna et al., 2013). Several countries, including the Netherlands, target this diversity in programs and aim to increase the (cost-) effectiveness of reentry programming by authorizing committees of experts to assess interventions before implementing them (Aarten et al., 2009). The Accreditation Committee for Behavioral Interventions assesses the potential effectiveness of behavioral interventions based on criteria derived from the "what works" literature. More research is warranted to help develop such evidence-based interventions.

7.5.2 Specific policy suggestions

Based on the findings of the current study, a few more specific policy suggestions are discussed below. These recommendations might increase the participation rate of ex-prisoners without necessitating much additional investment of public funds in prisoner reentry or harming the interests of employers.

One recommendation is that employment assistance in- and outside the prison walls should focus on connecting prisoners to a *stable job*. The findings emphasized the importance of job stability for a successful (re)connection to the labor market and lowered recidivism risks after release. Review studies on the effect of employment programs, in which offenders are assigned to jobs, consistently found few differences in employment (and rearrest) between program participants and non-participants (Visher et al., 2005). A drawback of such programs is that they often connect offenders to temporary and low-skilled employment. While their human capital deficit complicates the guidance to high-quality jobs, it might be possible to help place ex-prisoners in more sustainable employment. Given the beneficial effect of stable employment found in this study, this seems a goal worth pursuing.

Another recommendation would be to help ex-prisoners connect to *prior employers*. The current study showed that, besides holding down a job, returning to a pre-prison employer increased the chances of a successful reintegration after release. Prisoners should be stimulated and facilitated to maintain relationships with their pre-prison employers, or search contact with prior employers during their imprisonment.

In order to reduce employers' concerns about hiring ex-prisoners, it might prove beneficial to match the prisoner and employer to *a third party* who monitors the activities of the ex-prisoner. The finding that a substantial

part of the employers are willing to rehire ex-prisoners nuanced the common expectation that employers do not want to hire this group of stigmatized workers. Hence, it suggests that employers might be less adverse to hiring ex-prisoners when they are rightfully informed about the qualities of the job applicant. Pager (2006) mentioned that private labor market intermediaries are promising in facilitating employment among returning American prisoners. They make the first contact with employers, list the needs of both employers and potential applicants, vouch for the ex-offender and provide additional supervision to ensure the commitment of new employees. In addition, over time such labor market intermediaries establish long-term relationships and credibility with employers and are thus more (cost)effective in placing their clients in employment (Raphael, 2008). Such organizations also operate in the Netherlands, but on a small scale, mostly through regional initiatives, and they use different approaches (e.g., Inspectie SZW, 2012).

A final and more general recommendation is to share the knowledge about the employability of released prisoners. This could help to ease employers' concerns about hiring ex-offenders, and subsequently improve the employment chances of those with a criminal record. While further research is warranted, policies in which employers are given (financial) incentives upon hiring ex-prisoners (and other disadvantaged groups) might prove beneficial.

On a final note, boosting the employment rates of ex-prisoners will require changes on both the supply-and demand-side of the labor market. Supply-side incentives could focus on increasing the human capital of prisoners and demand-side efforts should be aimed at increasing employers' willingness to hire from, and facilitate contact with, this particular labor pool. This study addressed an important part of the problems faced by ex-prisoners, and provided insights into how policies and punishment can be targeted more effectively. Yet, it represents not the last word on the topic. In order to increase ex-prisoners' chances of a successful (re)integration, future research should be directed at better understanding the full costs as well as benefits of imprisonment, and effective ways to connect ex-prisoners to conventional society.

Table 7.1 Research questions, main findings and policy implications per empirical chapter

Chapter	Research question	Main findings	Policy recommendations
2	RQ 1. What does the employment history of prisoners look like? And, to what extent is the employment history of prisoners comparable to the employment history of the general labor force in the Netherlands?	• Prisoners face a severe human capital deficit even before imprisonment, especially when compared to the general labor force. • The majority of prisoners is low educated. • Less than half is employed in the run-up to imprisonment (40%), and those who were employed often worked in low-status, temporary jobs. • Job instability is a longstanding feature of prisoners' working lives (many different employers, long spells of unemployment, high frequency of dismissals and off-the-books employment). • Prison-recidivists score worse on a wide range of employment measures than first-time prisoners	• Invest in general preventative policies to improve educational attainment and work experiences. • Develop policies that stimulate ex-offenders to give employment a more prominent place in their daily lives.
3	RQ 2. To what extent do two types of labor market absence – imprisonment and unemployment – affect the time to employment?	• Ex-prisoners find a job more often and sooner than a comparison group of unemployed future prisoners. • Among disadvantaged workers with recent work experience, imprisonment seems to encourage a transition to the labor market more so than regular labor market absence. • Ex-prisoners who were able to reconnect to the labor market found a job quickly after release.	• Among disadvantaged workers with recent work experience, short to medium-term imprisonment can potentially encourage a transition towards employment.
4	RQ 3. To what extent does imprisonment length affect employment prospects?	• Imprisonment length is inversely related to employment probabilities; long-term prisoners (6-12 months) have a lower employment likelihood than prisoners who serve a shorter prison spell. • Imprisonment length does not affect the kind of jobs ex-prisoners find. • Employed ex-prisoners generally work in low-quality jobs, and the majority is able to hold on to the same job, at least during the first crucial half year after release from prison.	• Reconsider trends towards sending offenders to prison for a longer period of time. • Replace the last part of a prison spell with a non-custodial intervention.

Table 7.1 continued

Chapter	Research question	Main findings	Policy recommendations
5	RQ 4. To what extent are previously employed ex-prisoners able to return to their pre-prison job, find new employment or become non-employed?	• (Recent) prior work experience increases the likelihood of post-release employment substantially. • Over half of the previously employed ex-prisoners were employed in the sixth month after release. • One-third of this selection of employed ex-prisoners returned to the pre-prison job and two-thirds started working for a new employer. • Good (satisfactory) and steady employment bonds are more likely to be continued after release. • Higher educated prisoners are more likely to find new employment than to return to their pre-prison job.	• Help prisoners to maintain contact with pre-prison employer (or other previous employers) • Match the prisoner and employer to a third party (i.e., labor market intermediary) • Help to ease employers' concerns about hiring ex-offenders (by sharing knowledge about successful work relationships with ex-offenders) • Offer incentives to employers to hire disadvantaged workers

6	RQ 5. To what extent do post-release employment (characteristics) affect the risk of recidivism?	• A quick transition to employment does not necessarily reduce the recidivism risks among ex-prisoners.
		• The protective effect of employment is dependent on job characteristics
		• Job stability, especially, reduces the risk of recidivism among ex-prisoners
		  • Ex-prisoners who returned to their pre-prison employer were less likely to recidivate.
		  • Ex-prisoners who retained their post-release job during the follow-up period were less likely to recidivate.
			• Guide prisoners to stable employment