Impact of Employing Justice-Involved Individuals

The Problem

Mississippi has the third highest rate of incarceration in the country. As a result, more than 10.55% of Mississippians - over 235,152 - have a felony conviction. The unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is over 27% — nearly five times higher than the standard U.S. unemployment rate, and higher than unemployment during the Great Depression. The lack of employment opportunities impacts not only individuals with a criminal history but also their families and especially children. Even modest reductions in family income can impact children’s educational, health and employment outcomes.

Additionally, reduced employment opportunities impacts the economy by reducing the number of people contributing to the workforce. Across the United States, the unemployment of justice-involved individuals creates a loss of about $78 to $87 billion in the GDP annually. Lastly, research indicates that individuals with a criminal record who lack employment are significantly more likely to reoffend than those who are employed. Today, 35.9% of those released from prison in Mississippi end up returning within three years.

Employing formerly incarcerated people could help upwards of 13,713 families.

By the numbers:

- As of 2020, more than 235,152 people in Mississippi have felony convictions
- Mississippi prison populations are 7.2% women, so 16,930 of those with convictions are female
- Studies show 81% of women in prison are mothers, so 13,713 of those with convictions are mothers
- Incarcerated mothers are frequently the primary caretakers of their families

Employment opportunities could also generate $12.3M in state operating cost avoidance per year due to reduced recidivism.

By the numbers:

- Each individual in prison costs Mississippi $18,479.95 per year (as of 2019)
- Mississippi’s 1-year reincarceration rate is 17.6%
- If reincarceration rates drop comparably to other states, the 1-year reincarceration rate could drop by 8.27%
- 8,049 individuals are released from prison annually in Mississippi
- 665 fewer reincarcerations at $18,479.95 per person yield $12.3M in total operating cost for the state each year

The Opportunity

Employment provides economic stability after release, while also reducing recidivism and associated state costs. A study conducted in Ohio, Illinois, and Texas showed that the more wages an individual earned two months after their release, the lower their likelihood of reoffending. The predicted probabilities of reincarceration dropped by 47% (from 23% to 12%) for people who had a job that paid between $7 and $10 per hour.

An expansion of employment opportunities is also likely to benefit employers. Studies have shown that employees with criminal records were promoted more quickly and to higher ranks than others. Moreover, the attrition rates due to poor performance were comparable regardless of criminal background.