

The Nature and Effects of Messages that Women Receive from Probation and Parole Agents in Conversations about Employment

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Reason for the Research

Courts and parole boards often require women offenders to find and maintain employment as a condition of supervision, but women with a criminal history have exceptional difficulty finding a job. Supervision agents are tasked with both exerting control over clients to ensure and verify compliance with this regulation, in addition to assisting clients in locating and maintaining work. Because supervision agents can act as sources of social support, and are also responsible for ensuring their clients meet parole and probation requirements, the supportive communication that supervision agents provide is instrumental in aiding and encouraging female clients in their search for work.

Types of Supportive Communication that Help

Information: “My agent goes online and searches for jobs, or she made calls to different places for me.”

Emotional support: “Keep up the good work.” “Something will come along.”

Esteem support: “She just told me that she was glad to see that I have stable employment and let me know that that’s actually kind of rare, and that she was impressed with that.”

Tangible support: “I guess they start off with, ‘I’m going to give you the leads, and you see how far you can go with it.’...But if I come back and say, ‘probably won’t take me. Can you call?’ I think she can help. I see her doing that.

Research Questions

What forms of supportive communication do supervision agents provide to their female clients when they talk about employment? Do these forms of supportive communication consider

women's exceptional needs in finding and keeping employment? What are the effects of supportive communication from agents to the women they supervise?

Our Study

355 women reported receiving messages from their agents about employment. The majority were White (63.66%), with the remaining women identifying as Black (35.77%) or Native American (0.56%). Participants ages ranged from 18-60 and the average age was approximately 34.

Clients were asked whether, since starting supervision, they and their agents discussed "finding a job, having a job you like, or keeping a job." Follow up questions were, "What did the agent do or say?" "Did she or he refer you to any programs or services?" "Did the agent help you get in or get the services?" "Did this make things better for you? How?" and "Did this make things worse for you? How?"

Findings

- The most frequent type of supportive communication was informational support, most often in the form of referrals to employment services. Usually this type of support had positive effects, but not always.
- Following informational support, emotional support, esteem support, and tangible assistance were the most prevalent types of supportive communication. No women reported receiving network support that would provide them with a group of people who shared their concerns about work.
- Many women reported instances in which messages about employment addressed a holistic range of needs, including human capital accumulation, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and childcare. These messages had exclusively positive effects.
- Women also reported instance in which messages about employment were insensitive to their multiple needs. These messages had negative effects.

Practical Application

- Agents should be trained to provide support related to women's needs in the areas of human capital accumulation, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and childcare.
- Training for agents can be strengthened by providing them with examples of what they could say to provide emotional, esteem, and tangible support to clients who are seeking jobs or striving to improve their employment situation.

- The cooperation and collaboration of multiple agencies, including potential employers, with supervision departments would be helpful to provide agents with resources to help their clients gain employment.