

Carceral Chicago: Making the Ex-offender Employability Crisis

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Abstract

This article explores the urban labor market consequences of large-scale incarceration, a policy with massively detrimental implications for communities of color. Case study evidence from Chicago suggests that the prison system has come to assume the role of a significant (urban) labor market institution, the regulatory outcomes of which are revealed in the social production of systemic unemployability across a criminalized class of African-American males, the hypertrophied economic and social decline of those 'receiving communities' to which thousands of ex-convicts return, and the remorseless rise of recidivism rates. Notwithstanding the significant social costs, the churning of the prison population through the lower reaches of the labor market is associated with the further degradation of contingent and informal-economy jobs, the hardening of patterns of radical segregation, and the long-term erosion of employment prospects within the growing ex-offender population, for whom social stigma, institutional marginalization and economic disenfranchisement assume the status of an extended form of incarceration.

Introduction: labor market lockdown

The Illinois Department of Corrections provides 'gate money' of up to \$50 and a bus ticket home to released inmates who are without savings. This policy works with the grain of a powerful set of social processes that draw former prisoners directly back into the communities from whence they came. In this context, 'going home' very often means returning to impoverished, central-city neighborhoods, many of which are practically devoid of living-wage jobs. For those individuals with what is euphemistically termed 'a background,' the prospects of entering or reentering employment are distant. Most will have entered the prison system with little in the way of educational qualifications and, at best, a sporadic work history. They leave bearing the mark of a criminal record, which itself dramatically erodes job prospects (Pager, 2003), having had few opportunities to participate in education and training programs within the corrections system: following a round of cuts, the overall capacity of education and vocational training programs within the Illinois prison system was reduced to just 2,500 places (Festen with Fischer, 2002). In 2005, the state's prison population stood at 46,103; an additional 35,385 individuals were on parole.¹

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¹ Illinois Department of Corrections data, 30 June 2005, accessed at <http://www.idoc.state.il.us/>.

Table 1 Flows through the Illinois correctional system, 1999–2005

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Prison population (adults + juveniles; 000s)	46.5	46.9	47.6	44.8	44.8	45.9	46.1
Admissions (adults + juveniles; 000s)	29.7	30.7	35.4	38.0	37.5	43.1	42.2
Exits (adults + juveniles; 000s)	27.3	30.5	34.5	40.8	37.5	39.8	42.1
Average sentence (on admission, adults; years)	5.0	4.6	4.5	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.1
Average stay (on exit, adults; years)	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.0
Recidivism rate (% within 3 years)							
Adult	40.4	43.7	44.1	48.3	54.4	54.6	51.8
Juvenile	32.7	35.8	35.8	40.0	43.1	46.6	48.0

Source: Illinois Department of Corrections

Contrary to the popular image of the prison system as a vast holding tank, a warehouse for miscreants whose well-deserved fate is to be separated from society — both spatially and socially — on a semi-permanent basis, the reality is that the flows both into and out of prisons are continuous and large in scale, while the average length of incarceration is typically short. Nationally, while the headcount of prisoners recently reached a historic high of more than 2 million, around one-third of the prison population is released every year, an annual outflow of approximately 600,000 individuals (Freeman, 2003; Harrison and Beck, 2006). Data for the state of Illinois are more striking: the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) released 39,226 adults and 2,834 juveniles in the fiscal year to June 2005, which is equivalent to more than four-fifths of the prison population. Reflecting a perverse sort of equilibrium, the annual intake to Illinois correctional facilities roughly equals the flow out of the gates, while year-over-year increases in the recidivism rate (the rate of returns to Illinois correctional facilities within three years) mean that it is very often the same individuals who are entering and exiting the system (Table 1). Many prisoners, on making it to their scheduled ‘out date’, anticipate no more than a short and difficult period of time on the outside, prior to a return to the system, within three years, for more than half of those released. As a recently released inmate interviewed for this study explained:

The captain is saying how you’ll be back in [prison in] 30 days. ‘We’ll hold a spot for you.’ They give you \$10, that’s all that you get, gate money, and then you got to find a support system . . . But if you don’t have these kinds of support systems, what are you’re going to do? Are you going to eat that \$10? You go to [fast-food restaurant] and you broke! . . . [A]fter a while, you get out of working — so what do you do? You go back to your old habits and your old ways.

In the age of large-scale incarceration, this is not an isolated experience. The dramatically transformed function of the Illinois prison system is underlined by the fact that 25 years ago, in 1983, the annual number of releasees was 11,715 (IDOC, 1999; see also La Vigne *et al.*, 2004), less than one-third of the current annual outflow. The Illinois prison population more than doubled between 1973 and 1982, only to double again by 1991; it then rose by a further 55%, from this historically high base, by the end of the decade, since which time it has ‘stabilized’ (IDOC, 2005). Although the state of Illinois has been building, on average, one new prison per year since the early 1980s, most of which are scattered across the state’s exurban hinterland, not since 1987 have the annual increases in capacity kept pace with the rapid growth of the prison population (see Figure 1). In recent years the inmate population has exceeded prison capacity by around

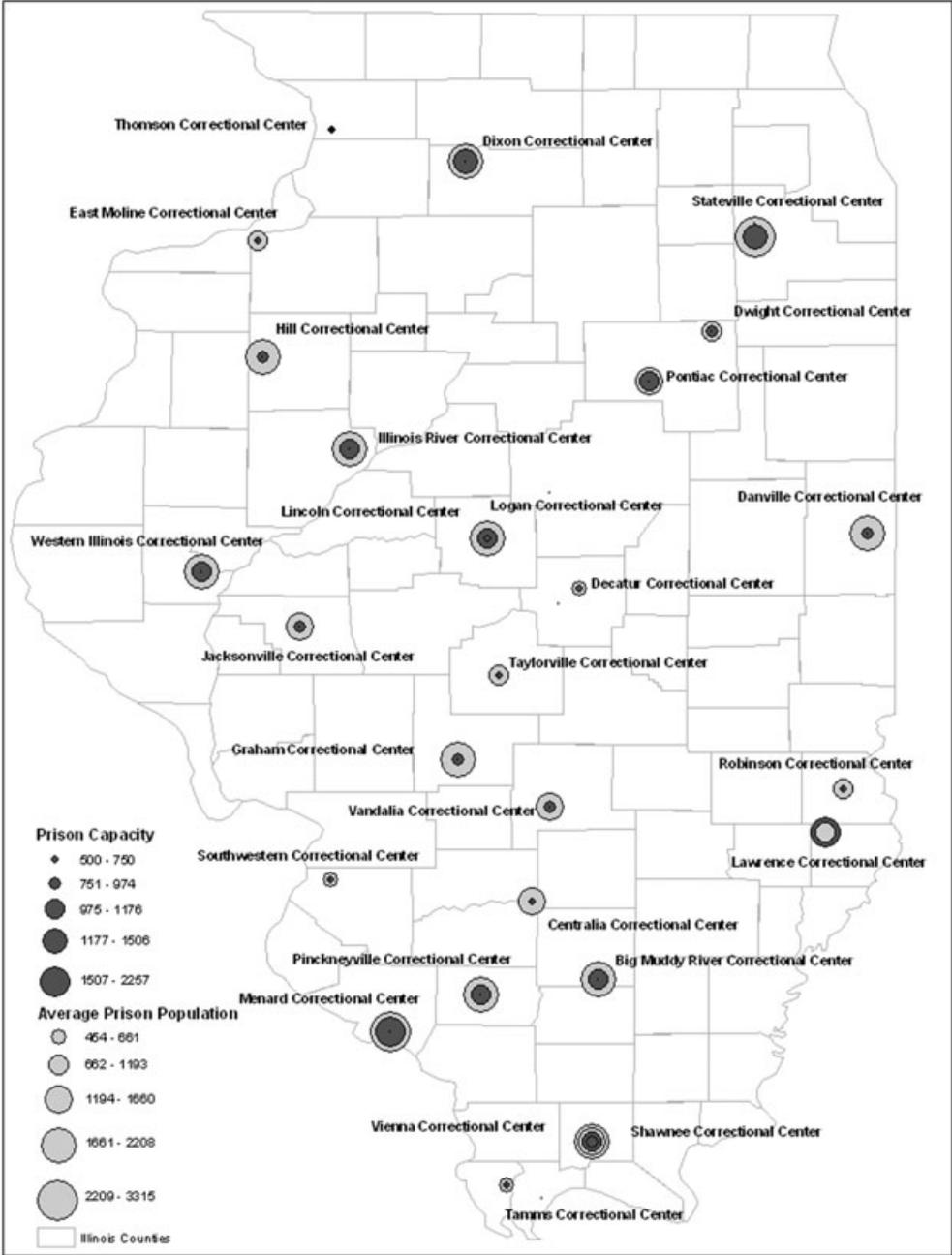


Figure 1 Correctional facilities, Illinois 2003 (source: IDOC)

40%. The state of Illinois currently spends \$1.2 billion per year on corrections services; the average annual cost of incarceration runs at \$22,627 per person (IDOC, 2003).

The social composition of the more recent release cohorts for Illinois demonstrates, unambiguously, around whom this regime of chronic incarceration has been constructed: the large majority are male (90%) and African-American (68%); most are relatively young (48% are aged under 31) and unmarried, while 46% have one or more children;

40% had been incarcerated for drug offenses and a further 28% for property crimes (robbery, theft, burglary); more than one-quarter had been returned to prison due to 'technical' violations of parole; the average number of arrests prior to the most recent sentencing was 12, one-third of which were for drug-law violations (La Vigne *et al.*, 2004). Amongst those released to Chicago, the destination for the vast majority of state releasees, the skewed socioeconomic composition of the circulating population of ex-convicts reaches extreme levels: nine out of 10 are African-Americans; 61% had served time for drug offenses; 92% of drug offenders were black; and 55% returned to majority (70% plus) African-American neighborhoods (Street, 2002).

Cook County, the jurisdiction that includes Chicago, has the dubious distinction of being ranked second in the country (after Los Angeles County) for the number of prison releasees. The top 10 counties for prison releasees — all of which are located in California, Illinois, New York, and Texas — accounted for 20% of national releasees in 2001,² well in excess of their combined 11.5% share of the civilian population. In fact, the rise of mass incarceration has been accompanied by a marked urbanization, or more pointedly, ghettoization of the convict population. In 1984, major metropolitan areas accounted for 50% of prison releases (when approximately 110,000 former inmates were released to locations within large cities); by 1996, this figure had risen to 66%, or around 330,000 former inmates, while recidivism rates also rose at a significantly disproportionate rate amongst these central-city populations, most of whom were convicted for drug and (nonviolent) property crimes (Lynch and Sabol, 2001). Some analysts have provocatively portrayed these intensifying relations in terms of a racialized regime of social control (Garland, 2001a; Wacquant, 2001a; 2008; Gilmore, 2007), within which a recursive and deeply regressive relationship has been established between the prison system on the one hand and African-American ghetto neighborhoods on the other:

The black ghetto, converted into an instrument of naked exclusion by the concurrent retrenchment of wage labor and social protection, and further destabilized by the increasing penetration of the penal arm of the state, [has become] bound to the jail and prison system by a triple relationship of functional equivalency, structural homology, and cultural syncretism, such that they now constitute a single *carceral continuum* which entraps a redundant population of younger black men (and increasingly women) who circulate in closed circuit between its two poles in a self-perpetuating cycle of social and legal marginality with devastating personal and social consequences (Wacquant, 2000: 384).

Repeatedly at the receiving end of this spiraling relationship are the tragically categorized 'receiving communities' that account for an increasingly large share of the intermittently incarcerated population. These are the neighborhoods that account for a massively disproportionate share of arrests and parole violations; these are the places that the buses are returning to from the penitentiary stop.

Take the case of North Lawndale, a low-income, predominantly African-American neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. It is estimated that more than 70% of the male population aged 18–45 living in North Lawndale has a criminal record; one in seven of the adult male population in the neighborhood is incarcerated; and zip code 60624 is ranked highest in the state for the number of returning prisoners (Street, 2002; La Vigne *et al.*, 2004). This is how the Illinois Department of Corrections portrayed the neighborhood in its bid for federal funding for a targeted prison reentry program:

Once a middle class community, North Lawndale's population has declined steadily from its 1960 peak of 125,000 residents to roughly 41,768 today, 95% of whom are African American... Now an economically depressed community, North Lawndale has high unemployment (27%) and under-employment (38% of families have annual incomes less than

2 Bureau of Justice Statistics National Correctional Reporting Program data, accessible at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>.

\$10,000, 65.6% less than \$20,000), and low educational attainment (51% of adults over 18 have less than a high school diploma). Single mothers head 60% of North Lawndale families. The North Lawndale Employment Network estimates that over 70% of all North Lawndale men between the ages of 18 and 45 have a criminal record. North Lawndale straddles two police districts, 10 and 11. The Chicago Police Department reports that in 2000 there were 15,927 arrests in nine of the 12 beats within these two districts. Five major crime categories made up 75% of all arrests: Narcotics, Battery, Theft, Criminal Damage to Property, and Assault. Violent crimes made up slightly more than one-third (5,566) of all crimes in the area (IDOC, 2002a: 10–11).

This neighborhood, together with adjacent West Side communities like East and West Garfield Park and Austin, defines the epicenter of the incarceration crisis in Illinois, not least because the dimensions of the problem are such as to practically overwhelm the extant repertoire of public-policy responses. Setting aside for the moment the challenges of overcoming the mark of a criminal record from an individual or supply-side point of view, which would be formidable even in the context of favorable job-market conditions, these parts of the West Side of Chicago have been economically devastated by successive waves of deindustrialization, disinvestment and decentralization. This part of the city has been hemorrhaging manufacturing jobs for decades now. In 1972, when the West Side was known as 'the best side', the factory economy maintained a combined workforce of 59,000 (IDOL, 1973). In 2006, this workforce had shrunk to just 10,600. Even during the 'boom' of the 1990s, the area was still shedding manufacturing jobs at an alarming rate, with one quarter of the remaining factory jobs base disappearing between 1993 and 2000. Some of the adverse local multiplier effects of these job losses are revealed in the fact that retail employment on the West Side also collapsed — falling from 35,000 to just 5,200 over the three decades of accelerated employment restructuring between 1972 and 2006 (IDES, 2007). One outcome of these processes is that the *official* unemployment rate amongst African-American men on the West Side currently exceeds 30%.³

These circumstances have led the (rarely hyperbolic) Illinois Workforce Investment Board (WIB) to declare an 'ex-offender employability crisis' in Chicago (EETF, 2004: 3). The Illinois WIB is one of many government authorities that are beginning to focus on 'receiving communities' like North Lawndale in a belated effort to develop a meaningful public-policy response. A \$2 million federal grant to the Illinois Department of Corrections for the 'Going Home' prisoner reentry initiative has provided recent impetus, releasing pilot funds for demonstration projects aimed at high-risk groups like juvenile offenders and young adults (Dighton, 2002; IDOC, 2002a; Kiernan, 2007). It is increasingly being recognized, however, that conventional labor market policy measures focused on 'removing barriers' for targeted individuals can only address some of the symptoms of what is a deep-seated, *systemic* problem. Formerly incarcerated individuals, notwithstanding the serious impediments associated with their own biographies, are released into a social and economic environment that borders on the perverse: they are denied full access to public (and affordable) housing, food stamps, welfare, student financial assistance and Supplemental Security Income; they are effectively prohibited, either by legal exclusion or by virtue of personnel policies, from holding a wide array of jobs, including those of barber, cosmetologist, postal worker, butcher, and even most positions in the Chicago Park District; they often confront backdated child support obligations, failure to comply with which can result in reincarceration; they experience severely restricted access to educational and vocational training services, both inside and outside the prison system; and they are often discharged without the documentation and identification materials necessary to obtain either employment or access to services (see Matthews, 2002; Matthews and Casarjian, 2002; EETF, 2004). Such is the range and reach of these deterrents, disincentives and diversions, they almost seemed designed to perpetuate socioeconomic exclusion and to

3 Authors' calculations from CAGIS.

drive up rates of recidivism. Initially a moniker reserved for a small minority of incorrigible criminals, the *recidivist* population exploded during the 1990s, in the wake of the war on drugs. The state's official recidivism rate surged to 40% in 1999, plateauing at over 50% since 2003 (Table 1). Once recidivism was established as a *majority* condition, the slowly accelerating rate of circulation between the prison system and the inner city became the diagnostic indicator of a mutually reinforcing social, employability and fiscal crisis.

This article explores some of the urban labor market ramifications and repercussions of this crisis, tracking the flows from Illinois prisons into the Chicago metropolitan area, and particularly into the primary 'receiving communities' to which a disproportionate share of ex-offenders return. From this vantage point, deleterious consequences for both the supply and the demand side of the labor market are evident, as what is in effect an institutionally induced crowding of the low-wage job market results in the accelerating deterioration of ex-convict employment prospects, the stigmatization of a racialized segment of the labor supply, and sharp increases in both economic segregation and workforce exploitation. In mapping some of the localized and racialized consequences of mass incarceration, the article concludes that this inverted form of social policy is yielding transformative effects on the functioning of Chicago's inner-urban neighborhoods and labor markets.

In developing these arguments, we draw on a program of interviews conducted by the authors between September 2003 and February 2007 with ex-offenders, corrections policymakers, prisoner advocates, job placement agencies and social service providers. These interviews were then supplemented by an analysis of secondary labor market and corrections data for Chicago. Our interviews were conducted as part of a larger project examining forms of employment that lie beyond the reach of government regulation and where violations of labor laws are commonplace. In all, more than 150 interviews were conducted. In this article, we concentrate on the component of this project pertaining to the job market for formerly incarcerated individuals, up to the highly balkanized interface with the fast-growing temporary labor market in the city, the focus of a complementary article (Peck and Theodore, 2001). As such, it contributes to a wider project concerned with exploring and explaining the restructuring of urban labor markets from the bottom up (Peck, 1996; Peck and Theodore, 2008), with particular reference to the institutionalization of new forms of segmentation and (re)regulation. In this context, 'boundary institutions' like the prisons and welfare/workfare regimes, together with street-level intermediaries like temp agencies and social service organizations, are acquiring radically new roles and functions, with consequences — for the nature and sociospatial distribution of work — that are far reaching. As we will show, relying on a combination of interview evidence and a contextual analysis of the Chicago labor market, the outcome for African-American ex-offenders, more than a generation in the making, might be described as a form of socioeconomic 'lockdown'.

In the shadow of the prison

Each year around 100,000 people are 'processed' through Cook County Jail, the 10,000 average daily inmate population making it the third largest local jail in the country.⁴ In addition, approximately 30,000 individuals from the Chicago metropolitan

4 The average daily population of Cook County Jail doubled between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s, as did the incarceration rate, which rose from around 100 per 100,000 in the 1983–6 period to over 200 per 100,000 in the period after 1994. Much of this increase was driven by a sharp and sustained rise in the rate of drug arrests in Cook County, which surged from 400 per 100,000 in 1983 to 800 per 100,000 in 1988 and nearly 1,400 per 100,000 by 1998 (ICJIA, 2000).



Figure 2 Average annual number of prison releases, City of Chicago 2000-2004 (source: IDOC, unpublished data)

area are sentenced to state prison terms each year. The social backwash from these localized processes of mass incarceration results in return flows of the same magnitude: between 25,000 and 35,000 former inmates reenter the Chicago metropolitan area every year, roughly half of whom return to just a handful of 'receiving communities' on the West and South Sides of Chicago (see Figure 2). These flows, while self-evidently overwhelming in scale for those West and South Side communities concerned, are also of substantial magnitude relative to the Chicago labor market as a whole. By way of comparison, the annual number of high-school graduates from the Chicago Public School system is 15,000, while statewide the average annual flow out of the welfare system peaked at around 17,500 several years ago (IDHS, 2004; ISBE, 2004). Even taking into account historically unprecedented rates of recidivism, and the recycling through the prison system that this entails, the size of the ex-felon population is very large, and it is growing. It has been estimated that this class of formerly incarcerated individuals is six to seven times the size of the currently imprisoned population (Uggen and Manza, 2002; Freeman, 2003), which in the Chicago metropolitan area translates into an ex-offender population equivalent to 16% of the adult male workforce, perhaps rising as high as 80% amongst African-American men (Uggen *et al.*, 2001; Street, 2002).

It is by no means an exaggeration, therefore, to conceive of a criminalized *class* as a structurally salient, racialized labor market category in cities like Chicago. The deep entanglement of racially uneven arrest, sentencing, and incarceration rates, much of

which has been fuelled by the war on drugs,⁵ together with the collapsing employment rates of African–American men in the Chicago labor market, implies a close-to-systemic process of social and economic exclusion. The propensity of Chicago-area employers to indulge in various forms of direct and indirect discrimination — rooted, in particular, in the presumption of dysfunctional work habits, weak labor-force attachment, and endemic criminality among African–American men — is well established (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1991; Wilson, 1996; Holzer and Stoll, 2001; Peck and Theodore, 2001), as is the more general finding that hiring decisions are powerfully shaped by race and by the presence of a criminal record, both independently and in combination (Pager, 2003; Holzer *et al.*, 2004). If something like three-quarters of African–American men in some parts of the Chicago labor market now have a criminal record, what might have begun as a form of statistical discrimination, based on race, has subsequently morphed into a self-perpetuating cycle of economic exclusion, criminality, incarceration, followed by institutional branding and even higher rates of — now ostensibly ‘justified’, if not officially sanctioned — economic exclusion. As a result, there is, in the words of one West Side employment counselor, ‘almost no connection’ between the black ex-offender population and the kind of manufacturing job opportunities that were once a staple of the local economy.

These circumstances call attention to the role of the prison system as a *labor market institution* (Western and Beckett, 1999). Figure 3 charts the long transition to what Wacquant (2001b) characterizes as a penal mode of social regulation. Between 1985 and 2005, the share of Illinois state spending committed to social welfare provision slumped from 7.9 to 0.4%, a decline of 95%. Meanwhile, corrections spending rose from 2.3% to 3.1% of total state expenditures over the same period. In the mid-1980s, welfare spending exceeded prison spending by a ratio of more than three to one. As recently as 1997, the state’s welfare and corrections expenditure lines were equal in size. But today, for every dollar spent on social welfare programming, Illinois now ‘invests’ \$9 in prisons. And the human flows through these institutions tell an even more disturbing story: in 1988, there were 10 times more people on welfare than behind bars in the state of Illinois; since this time, the number of families receiving welfare has fallen by 81% (even though the poverty rate has increased by 38%), while the incarcerated population has more than doubled, growing by 119%. In 2003, the state’s prison population surpassed its welfare population for the first time.

Far-reaching transformations in the labor market have been both causes and consequences of these trends. On the one hand, the long-run shift from a manufacturing-oriented to a services-based economy has been associated with dramatic social and spatial changes in the composition of the labor force, trends that have been particularly intense at the metropolitan scale (Wilson, 1996; Bobo *et al.*, 2000; Moberg, 2006). As a result, working-class women have been drawn in increasing numbers into the lower reaches of a burgeoning service economy, while job opportunities for working-class men — and particularly men of color — have sharply receded, along with the fortunes of the urban manufacturing economy. The collapse of employment opportunities for African–American men began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s (Wilson, 1996; Venkatesh, 2006). There is at the very least strongly circumstantial evidence, then, that ‘the collapse of the job market for less skilled men contributed to their increased involvement in crime’ (Freeman, 1996: 40) and, moreover, that a racialized and retributive turn in crime policy since the 1980s precipitated the turn to mass incarceration (Garland, 2001b). In effect, an economic crisis has been met by what is, in all but name, a socially regressive and racially targeted urban policy. In a trend that has become intergenerational in scope, young black men have been increasingly separated from the labor market, a disconnection that was subsequently ‘institutionalized’ in all senses of the word. Offner and Holzer (2002) report that the labor-force participation rate

5 The state of Illinois has the nation’s highest rate of African–American prison admissions for drug offenses, at 1,146 per 100,000, 57 times the rate for whites (HRW, 2000; Lurigio, 2004).

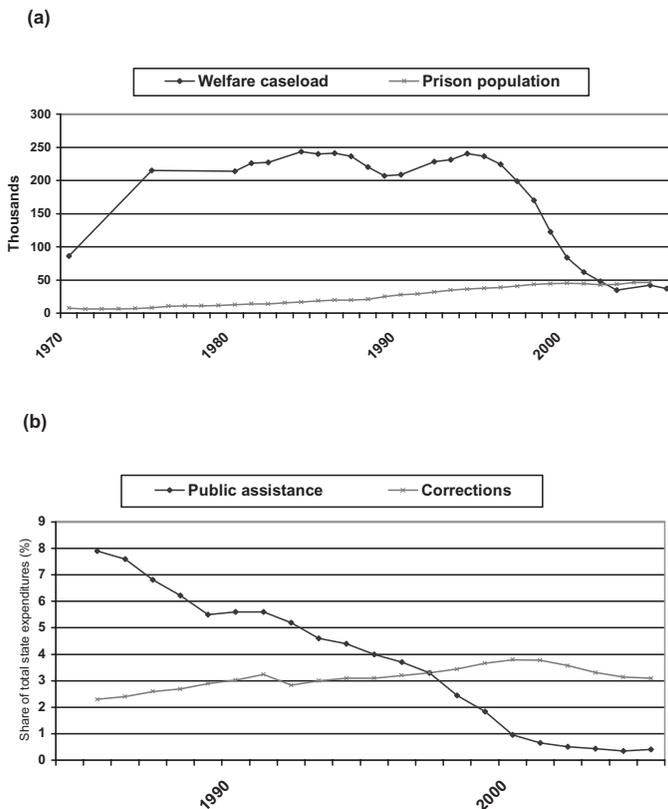


Figure 3 Social vs. penal policy, Illinois. (a) Prison and welfare populations, Illinois 1970-2006 (source: *prison population*, number of inmates in state correctional facilities: IDOC, 2002b; *welfare population*: AFDC/TANF families, monthly average; Committee on Ways and Means, US House of Representatives, various years; Assistant Secretary for Planning & Education, Department of Health and Human Services, 1998; Center on Law and Social Policy; Illinois Department of Human Services). (b) Prison and welfare expenditures, Illinois 1987-2005 (source: National Association of State Budget Officers, various years)

for young, less-educated black men living in central-city areas fell from 76% in 1989 to 65% in 1999/2000, while this group’s rate of employment dropped from 56% to 47%. Moreover, amongst the nation’s largest 50 metropolitan areas, Chicago ranks second to the bottom (after Buffalo, NY) on Offner and Holzer’s measure of the relative weakness of urban labor markets for young, less-educated blacks over the past two decades, this group experiencing a 12.2% employment-rate penalty in Chicago, in comparison with equivalent workers in non-metropolitan areas across the country. And this, of course, is precisely the same social group that has become disproportionately ensnared in the criminal justice system in the period since the early 1980s (Lurigio, 2004).

The forces that have established this fateful conjuncture between collapsing inner-city labor markets, sociospatial and racial exclusion, and endemic incarceration are variegated and complex, but amongst the most evident proximate causes are the following: the intensification of residential segregation, particularly by race but also by class; the deepening crises in the public school system and the public housing system; a profound shift in the gender division of low-paid work that has accompanied a proliferation in various forms of contingent employment; the acceleration of working-class immigration, particularly from Latin America, though also from parts of Asia and Eastern Europe; and the continuing erosion of social safety nets, social insurance

programs, and systems of social redistribution, including the abolition of General Assistance for single adults and the transition to work-oriented and residualized welfare (Wilson, 1996; Koval *et al.*, 2006; Peck and Theodore, 2008). Each of these forces has shaped the composition of low-wage labor markets in Chicago, as well as the nature of competition for jobs at the lower end of the occupational spectrum.

Communities like North Lawndale, and others on the West and South Sides of Chicago, must contend with the most intensely localized manifestations of these regressive developments. And they do so, in the view of analysts like Loïc Wacquant, in the context of an increasingly symbiotic relationship with the prison system: 'the hyperghetto now serves the negative economic function of storage of a surplus population devoid of market utility, in which respect it . . . increasingly resembles the prison system' (2001a: 92). In the vacuum created by the decimation of the local manufacturing jobs base, a cash-and-crime economy has emerged. This economy of the streets creates a persistent pull for young, working-class black men in particular, whose opportunities for gainful employment in the 'mainstream' economy have practically dissolved in the past two decades (Venkatesh, 2006). And for those who have already served time, subsequently to return to the neighborhood from which they were committed, staying out of trouble represents a daily challenge. The omnipresence of the drugs economy provides a stark contrast with the almost complete absence of regular jobs in the vicinity. 'Looking for a job for a lot of folks in this neighborhood', a West Side job developer explained, 'means walking around. [But] close to home, there's nothing available. So, they'll knock on the liquor store, the little shoe-repair place that has three employees . . . They're not going to find anything'. Those fortunate enough to secure legitimate employment in these neighborhoods must self-consciously insulate themselves from the (dominant) illicit local economy. According to one ex-offender:

The streets don't change . . . You can't avoid it. When I come out of my house . . . they is selling drugs. It was so tough, the violence, people trying to take over that spot. They put the police there to keep that from going on. Soon as the police leave, here they come, right back out there . . . There's no way I can avoid it. If I . . . walk down to the store on the next corner, same thing. Down where I go to do laundry at, they're selling rocks and blow. It's practically on every other corner . . . They just set up shop anywhere . . . They have a new law . . . you're not supposed to associate with a known criminal, someone who's a felon. Now, since they have these sweeps, in a neighborhood, you don't actually have to be doing anything wrong. You could just happen to be walking out there to the store at the wrong time . . . One bag is all it takes, you know.

In this context, crime may in fact be one of the few remaining local occupations that *does* pay, and many of the paths of least resistance head in this direction. Subsequent spells in prison represent a routinized occupational hazard in this now disproportionately large, parallel labor market. Thus, the prison system operates less as an apparatus of crime control *per se*, more as a perverse substitute for a functioning (local) labor market.

Spells in prison, and usually repeated spells, have become a typical life experience for many of the 83.5% of African-American men in the city who lack college degrees. Across the country as a whole, data for 1999 reveal that some 30% of this group had gone to prison by their mid 30s, while amongst black male high-school dropouts, the incarceration rate rises to 60% (Pettit and Western, 2004). Significantly, these rates are in the region of three times those registered 20 years previously. The implication is that '[c]onvict status inheres now, not in individual offenders, but in entire demographic categories' (Pettit and Western, 2004: 165). This has important consequences for the size and composition of the labor supply. Western and Beckett (1999) calculate that the scale of incarceration was such, by the mid-1990s, to remove fully two percentage points from the US male unemployment rate, and seven percentage points from the black male unemployment rate. In fact, if the effect of large-scale incarceration is taken into account in concealing a certain proportion of the

'real' unemployment rate, the jobless rate for African-American males stays almost the same — at around 40% — between the high point in the official unemployment count in the early 1980s and the booming economy of the mid-1990s. Our best estimate of the jobless rate for African-American men in Chicago, taking into account both the official count and the population of 'discouraged workers', is 28%, rising to 40% in majority-black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides, where the discouraged worker effect, something of an understated term in this context, tends to be strongest (see Theodore, 1997; IDES, 2007).

These, however, must be understood as some of the *short-term* effects of incarceration. In the longer run, Western and Beckett (1999: 1031) argue, 'incarceration generate[s] a sizeable, nonmarket reallocation of labor, overshadowing state intervention through social policy', with two particularly deleterious consequences — a sustained deepening of social inequality and a long-term reduction in employability amongst ex-convicts. So, while the prison system might in many ways be considered to be a significant labor market institution, it is associated with a range of socio-economic and regulatory consequences quite different, say, to welfare systems. While both welfare and prison systems can be seen to reduce the labor supply (and therefore unemployment) in the short run, in the long run their functions diverge. Whereas welfare systems seek to ameliorate social inequalities through transfer payments, the prison system has a disproportionately negative impact on those already at a disadvantage in the labor market, especially racial minorities and individuals with low educational achievement, suppressing on a sustained basis the employment and earnings potential of the formerly incarcerated class, as cohort studies have begun to confirm (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999; Pettit and Western, 2004). It follows that, while incarceration may conceal (or 'relocate') a certain amount of unemployment in the short run by virtue simply of taking unemployed individuals 'off the streets', the lifetime employment prospects of all those affected are seriously impeded. What felons possess in the way of educational qualifications, marketable job skills, and labor market contacts prior to entering the system for the first time — which, almost by definition, is not much — is significantly eroded by both the immediate experience and the enduring stigma of incarceration. The poor employment prospects of ex-convicts, then, translate into rising recidivism rates, with the result that the only way to sustain the unemployment-absorbing effect of the prison system is to further accelerate the rate of incarceration.⁶ Although this may have been the pattern in the United States during the 1990s, it is difficult to see how this could be either socially or fiscally sustainable: in some respects like its welfare-state 'predecessor', the prison system is ultimately incapable of absorbing the costs of unemployment on a continuing basis (see Offe, 1984; 1985; Western and Beckett, 1999; Peck, 2003).

The uneven transition to what Beckett and Western (2001: 46–7) characterize as an 'alternative mode of governance [based on] a more exclusionary and punitive approach to the regulation of social marginality' should not be interpreted as a process of state withdrawal or deregulation. Large-scale incarceration strategies are hyper-interventionist and extremely costly (in both social and fiscal terms), and they are being pursued most vigorously, Beckett and Western demonstrate, by those states that have in turn taken the boldest steps to dismantle social welfare programs for the poor, a governmental transformation that has been most sharply focused on urban, African-American populations. The full costs, consequences, and contradictions of this regressive strategy are yet to be fully realized — indeed, some will likely be intergenerational in scope —

6 As Western and Beckett (1999: 1053) describe this accelerator effect: 'High incarceration rates lower conventional unemployment statistics by hiding joblessness but create pressure for rising unemployment once inmates are released. Sustained low unemployment depends, in part, not just on a large [state] intervention through incarceration but on a continuous increase in the magnitude of this intervention'.

though the experience of cities like Chicago provides some unambiguous signals. There is already growing evidence that the direct costs of corrections systems themselves are beginning to place serious strains on already-overburdened state budgets around the country, which has led some states to introduce expedited release programs (see Falk, 2003; Peck, 2003). Such fiscally induced responses leave unaddressed, of course, the systemic employability problem confronting both ex-offenders and the communities they enter, together with the social costs that these entail. In the absence of some kind of sea change in the prevailing patterns of social, penal and labor market policy, it is 'receiving communities' like North Lawndale that find themselves on the frontline of the ex-offender employability crisis, their 'local' problems being an intense geographical manifestation of what is increasingly recognized as a dysfunctional macropolicy orientation. At the local level, a splintered network of social service agencies is responding to this situation in what can only be described, in the present political and fiscal context, as a piecemeal fashion. In so doing, they are engaging with what amounts to a historically distinctive set of 'local' policy challenges, in a context in which many of the rules and norms of the labor market have been transformed by the arrival of mass incarceration. One of the most demanding occupations in social service agencies on the South and West Sides involves the identification of appropriate employment openings for ex-offenders, the title of which barely hints at the chronic supply-and-demand imbalances that define these labor markets — 'job developer'.

Back on the street

For released prisoners, 'going home' has mixed and often conflicting connotations. The IDOC policy of returning ex-offenders to the 'committing county', and therefore typically to the same neighborhood and 'the same milieu where the trouble started' (King, 2002: 12), is the initial trigger for a series of reentry challenges. Since most ex-convicts are lacking any kind of financial resources, finding affordable accommodation is the first hurdle. Barred from public housing by Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) rules, ex-offenders will sometimes be taken in temporarily by family members or friends, as long as they are not themselves in CHA housing, though in practice prison time tends to strain or break such relationships. Many will find accommodation in an emergency shelter or recovery home, though such stays are usually time limited. Almost immediately, the need to earn income of some kind is a pressing one, but the prospects of doing so legitimately are extraordinarily restricted. Under these circumstances, many will promptly take the first steps toward recidivism. Ironically, the younger inmates — most of whom will have served a relatively short sentence, typically for a drugs offense — seem to be the most inclined to return to the street economy. As a counselor explained: 'To be honest with you, the majority of the people who go in, if they have a short time, they really are just coming back out there to get back into the flow, or whatever they were doing before they went in'. A local job developer concurred that this group is often the most difficult to reach, despite the self-evident individual and social costs of failing to break the cycle of criminality and incarceration for those with most of their lives ahead of them:

If you are 25, you've given the state three years, chances are you didn't graduate from high school and they cut a lot of the programs, so many of them can't get their GED [certificate of general educational development] on the inside. So it is really tough. It is hard to sell it to an employer that this person is stable, this person has learned their lesson . . . they're willing to change. The younger population is extremely tough, I'd say from 18 to 24, *the* toughest. Unless you're talking fast food. [But] livable wage, that's not going to happen. The chances [of] getting a 20 year-old with a company that's going to give him room to grow, send him to school? No, that's not going to happen. And, if they have drug cases, there is no financial assistance for them . . . Look ahead: it's 20 years of crime for this kid.

Those releasees who make use of employment counseling and placement services — including many for whom this is a condition of parole — tend to quickly get a sense of the long odds that confront them in the search for legitimate work. They are confronted by a chronic and institutionally intensified form of demand deficiency, creating long queues for even the least desirable of ‘regular’ jobs. Even the induction procedures of some ex-offender programs, which otherwise focus conscientiously on a positive-but-realistic employment message, can inadvertently invoke images of a crowded, if not futile, labor market. Many social service organizations can barely accommodate, literally, the unrelenting flows from prison. ‘We run a program that begins with orientations every other Friday’, a West Side job developer explained, ‘[But] it’s getting crazy because now we are getting upwards of 70 people at orientation, *way* more than what we can handle’.

If there is to be a transition to sustained, legitimate work, many ex-convicts quickly realize, it is to be a long one, punctuated by a series of institutional obstacles and labor market challenges. And this entrenched climate of discouragement is perversely front loaded, such that the stiffest tests of resolve and resources come in the immediate aftermath of release, when ex-offenders are confronted by a tangled knot of institutional exclusions and negative incentives. A job developer speaks to this issue, followed by some of his ‘clients’:

If a lot of doors are closing on a guy, [his] self-esteem is really low. Got a lot of responsibilities . . . If they were in public housing, they can’t live there any more. So now they are forced to live somewhere where the rent is higher and people are putting more pressure on them. So you tell them, ‘Let’s get something [a job]; let’s stop the bleeding’. [But] it can be extremely tough to get them placed (job developer, nonprofit agency).

They send you to a job, knowing you don’t meet the criteria. Bad mistake. It’s demeaning for you to get fired off the job, when people just come tell you that they can’t use you. You’re going in there with expectations . . . You work three weeks. What did you do? [The employer conducted] background checks, then they tell you pick up your paycheck [and leave]. Well, *what did I do?* Then you get this mindset that I’m not even going to try no more. I knew it, I shouldn’t have tried — I’m mad at the employment consultant, I’m mad at the world (ex-offender #4).

You try to be a different person and then you get trampled on when you come home . . . You think you’ve paid your debt to society, but they’re shutting all the doors on you. You know you’ve changed as a person . . . but this person doing the interview is looking at the paperwork . . . You meet this resistance when you come out. You’re prepared for everything else, but you haven’t prepared for that resistance . . . Then . . . here comes your buddy. He says, ‘Man I can get you with this here, you ain’t got to do nothing for me’. If you ain’t strong, there you go [after] that easy money (ex-offender #2).

Ex-convicts are confronted by a profoundly inhospitable labor market. The majority of Chicago-area employers report that they would ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ not knowingly hire an individual with a criminal conviction (Holzer and Stoll, 2001). The law generally prohibits ‘blanket’ bars on recruitment of ex-offenders, though it is permissible to consider the relationship between the criminal record and the particular job in question (Mukamal, 2001). It is very common in application processes to inquire whether candidates have a criminal record, or to undertake background checks on applicants. In this context, *de facto* blanket discrimination is also commonplace, as indeed is statistical discrimination based on race and/or residential location. As a program manager at an ex-offender placement service who deals daily with employers observed of these blanket-discriminatory behaviors: ‘They do it. They’re not supposed to, but they do it’. Shifting the odds, in this context, often involves the construction of long-term relationships between social service agencies and a small number of more accommodating employers. One bad experience, however, can break these fragile connections.

Many ex-offenders report that they are treated in effect, as a criminal ‘class’ in the labor market, with little or no allowance being made for the wide range of circumstances that resulted in their incarceration, or for the equally wide range of motivations, skills and aptitudes within this heterogeneous population (see Festen with Fischer, 2002).

The way society sees it, one background is the same for all backgrounds. So no matter what your felony conviction is for, you’re looked at as the same as a mass murderer; simply because you have a felony. Society looks at that felony as a felony, and that’s it. They don’t do it case by case; it’s a felony. So it is very tough . . . Most jobs do background checks. From [fast-food chain] to [home-improvement center], everyone does background checks . . . What we’ve tried to do is get them jobs in factories. But anything else, like banks or hospitals, it’s not going to happen (job developer, community-based organization).

Ex-offenders experience statistical discrimination, then, in a tangible, almost visceral, sense — as an institutionalized process of near-blanket exclusion from most areas of ‘mainstream’ employment. This experience is further intensified for African–American jobseekers, particularly those from majority-black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides of Chicago, who repeatedly bear witness to the effects of race and ‘background’ being woven together into a disabling negative stereotype and applied to entire communities and racial groups (see Pager, 2003). Speaking of the self-fulfilling nature of such stereotypes, a local job developer, himself an ex-offender, described the exclusion from employment and the slide back into criminality and incarceration as a ‘vicious revolving door’, resulting in a kind of ‘extended time’ being served in the labor market: ‘Society fears a person who has been in prison . . . And there is so much stigma that goes along with being a black man and being in prison’. In many cases, West or South Side zip codes like 60624 or 60653 are enough to invoke such images.

In response to these pervasive and entrenched experiences of labeling, a typical strategy amongst job placement agencies that work with ex-offender populations is to valorize subtle distinctions that might ‘re-individualize’ their clients. As a job developer explained, ‘what we try to do is to get [employers] to look at them case by case, not as a felon, [but] each person individually’. A placement secured under such circumstances then provides an opportunity to ‘re-educate’ an employer, and perhaps to hold open the possibility of future placements. Successful job developers deploy a mix of creativity, cunning and sheer doggedness to secure such (rare) openings, opportunities that for understandable reasons they tend to reserve for ‘model’ clients. Special efforts are directed at cultivating and sustaining relationships with personnel managers and supervisors with responsibility for hiring,⁷ often tenuous contacts that job developers will fiercely protect. In the hope of securing an interview, one agency went as far as to suggest that their clients substitute the descriptor, ‘State of Illinois, Industrial Services’ for their period of incarceration, or to respond to pro-forma work history questions with statements like ‘Will discuss at interview’. Other job developers dismissed such efforts as stunts, and stunts that might bring negative consequences for both the individual and the placement program, even as they acknowledged that the adverse odds of securing positive outcomes for clients — and decent placement rates for the program — generated continuous incentives to ‘try anything’. And all those involved in the challenging work of ex-offender placement emphasized that accounting for prison time is an often-insurmountable obstacle in employment applications and interviews:

Some of the trainers are instructing them to say really strange things to answer [questions about criminal records]. Have you ever been convicted of a crime? ‘Will discuss in an interview’.

7 ‘What it takes for a job developer to assist that clientele is to have an outstanding relationship with that HR [human resources] person or that person who is in a position to make that employment decision’ (job developer, nonprofit agency). Another job developer described how he covered for one of his ex-offender clients on a weekend shift in order to maintain his employment, to secure a ‘positive outcome’ for his service, and to prolong good relations with the employer.

Now, if you have skills and you have a wonderful resume, 'Will discuss in an interview' could be quite powerful . . . But you have a resume that's nothing and you 'Want to discuss [at the interview]' — you're wasting my time (job developer, nonprofit agency).

What I tell my people — [say] someone that robbed someone — tell me what you would say at an interview when I say to you, 'What were you in jail for?' 'Well, I made some bad choices, I was doing some bad things at the time, but since that time, I've gone away to the penitentiary and while I was in the penitentiary I was a model inmate . . . I no longer do those things and now that I'm out, I'm looking for employment to ensure that I don't go that way again'. Never, *ever* discuss your crime, because now you're just letting them feed into it. I have heard horror stories about the things that employers ask them. They are so desperate for a job that they tell them. And then that's the end of that (manager, ex-offender placement service).

Isolated successes, where an ex-offender is able to secure and then 'stick at' a steady job, are rhetorically celebrated by job developers as evidence that it is occasionally possible to 'slide one in under the radar', because there are situations when all an individual will need is one chance: 'Many times you get an ex-offender, someone who had brushes with the law, once they find jobs after having so many doors slammed in their face, they stick. Many of them stick. They may be [poorly] paying jobs, but *they stick*' (job developer, nonprofit agency).

Sporadic successes like these sustain against-the-odds optimism in some, just as they breed fatalism in others. Both reactions underscore the chronic nature of the challenges faced in the labor market for ex-offenders, where almost the entire range of experience is encompassed by the narrow spectrum between insecure employment and persistent unemployment. Those ex-offenders who manage to secure some kind of employment are often barely 'hanging in there', at the very bottom of a degrading urban job market:

I have a friend here now. About a month ago he was going through some struggles and he was like, 'Man, you know I've been trying to find a job'. And I said, 'Man, you've got to hold on, you just can't give up'. And sure enough, about two weeks after that we had the little talk, things started to pick up for him. Now he's working . . . he's like a swing man, fill-in work. He doesn't have a regular job yet, but he's working . . . They called him for the last two weeks. He's been working. You just gotta hang in there (counselor, recovery home).

The *official* unemployment rate is [over 30%], so the unofficial is huge. Those who are working are all going outside the community in unstable, service-sector jobs. Some places that aren't very ethical companies. Others are contract firms like janitorial firms, inventory firms . . . firms that service other manufacturers; they don't have a big cushion. Depending on their demand they need to gain and shed a workforce like that [snaps his fingers] (manager, community-based organization).

Job developers describe a situation in which there are large numbers of ex-offenders striving to establish a toehold in a labor market almost devoid of points of entry. Strictly speaking, the 'legitimate' economy is not an option for the majority of ex-offenders entering Chicago's high-unemployment neighborhoods: even amongst those who have been able to avoid returning to criminal activities, the employment opportunities that are available tend to be located on the very fringes of the 'mainstream' economy. Informal, cash-in-hand employment is extremely common, as are day-labor and temp jobs. In the labor market for ex-offenders there does not seem to be a 'floor' in the conventional sense — established by reservation wages, minimal expectations concerning workplace conditions, legal safeguards — though there does seem to be a ceiling. 'Almost everything is under \$7 [an hour]', a job developer explained. The jobs most commonly entered by ex-offenders in Chicago, which are detailed in Table 2, include cleaning, janitorial work, general laboring, and routine assembly work. Most have little or nothing in the way of formal skill requirements and

Table 2 Unregulated jobs held by ex-offenders

Industries	Segment(s)	Occupations	Employment status of ex-offenders
Construction	Residential rehab Residential construction	General laborer •Demolition •Material moving and clean up	Few opportunities, largely displaced
Landscaping	Construction Maintenance	Operating engineer Gardener	Previously held, now displaced
Food retail	Convenience stores Small-scale neighborhood retail	Receiving •Stocking •Bagging •Cleaning	Direct hire, late-shift jobs
Nonfood retail	Street vending	Vendor	Self-employment
Restaurants and food services	Fast food franchises Family-style independent	Food preparation •Bussing •Dishwashing	Direct hire
Manufacturing	Food Plastics Recycling Consumer goods	Machine operators Assembly Packing	Employed by low-end subcontractors or through day-labor agencies
Warehousing and logistics	Warehouses	•Loading/unloading •Light assembly •Packaging •Moving •Shipping •Truck driving	Employed largely through day-labor agencies
Building maintenance and security	Residential Industrial	Janitors •Security guards •Cleaners	Direct hire (janitors), hired through contract companies (security guards, cleaners)
For-hire urban transportation	Patient transport vans Car rental return	Drivers	Hired through contract companies (patient transport), direct hire (car rental)
Auto services	Car wash	Attendants	Direct hire

Source: Center for Urban Economic Development, University of Illinois at Chicago

there is rarely more than a tangential relationship with the specific qualifications and work experiences of former inmates, who instead tend to enter the labor market as a *homogenously* stigmatized labor supply.⁸

In communities like North Lawndale, the universe of labor market opportunities for ex-offenders scarcely extends beyond this very limited list, with those who succeed in staying 'out of trouble' typically doing so by packaging together an income from a range of unreliable sources. As the manager of one nonprofit agency explained: 'The major sources of employment are day labor, informal work for family members, neighbors, churches; some seasonal work. It's very low wage and unstable. . . . Everything is paid in cash'. And those who are able to 'make it' in this way, most local observers insist, are but a small minority, whose tenacity must have been met by a significant measure of good fortune. As one of those most closely involved described the situation: 'Out of those 20,000 people who come out [of prison, there] probably will be 1,000 people that might have a job, where they can make day-labor money, or what we call "hustle" money. You tap into someone who has a building or something and you find out where you can do odd jobs, even like mechanic shops if you know automobiles. . . . If you don't have jobs [though], you can't make it' (counselor, recovery home).

Expectations in this sphere of the labor market are not just low, they are in many respects actively negative. Rejected *by* the job market, many ex-offenders practice reciprocal acts of rejection *of* the labor market. In this universe of limited opportunity, temporary staffing services and day labor are viewed with particular contempt, just as they provide, paradoxically, some of the few, fragile bridges into the labor market for former inmates.⁹ For-profit intermediaries are castigated, especially in the African-American community, for operating what is often characterized as a 'slave' system. Amongst some placement agencies, and many individual job developers, avoiding any kind of reliance on temporary staffing services is held up as a badge of honor, a modest mark of distinction in what is by any measure a general environment of chronic labor market exclusion and contingency. There is widespread resentment concerning the mark-up charged by temporary services, the size of which is routinely exaggerated.¹⁰ Moreover, the use of temporary services as a means of meeting placement targets within the ex-offender service community is a staple complaint amongst job developers, many of whom accuse one another of such practices.¹¹ At the same time as there is widespread resistance to temping, it is also now recognized that temporary employment has become the institutionalized mode of entry to many manual occupations in the city (Peck and

8 Even the work that is available in the prison system itself, courtesy of Illinois Correctional Industries, is geared to supplying what IDOC and other state agencies need, and 'not necessarily what the Chicago labor market demands' (Butcher, 2002: 29). It includes soap and sign making, meat processing, furniture making and finishing, milk processing, and the largest single activity, garment making, which employs 359 individuals in the prison system. To put this figure in perspective, the garment industry now employs only 157 workers on the West Side of Chicago, and just 2,616 workers citywide (IDES, 2007).

9 'About 75% [of ex-convicts] have to at least venture into temporary [employment] services to keep their work history decent. It is not so much to sustain [themselves], but so they won't have such big gaps in their work history' (manager, community-based organization).

10 'A temporary agency will take anybody. They'll take anybody and just slave labor them like you would not believe. [The agencies are paid] \$16 an hour in some jobs' (manager, ex-offender placement service). On temporary staffing agency business practices, see Peck and Theodore (2007).

11 One job developer put it this way: 'That employment specialist got all that placement money and all that retention money, but whose back did he get it on? . . . We [have got] to combat this temporary agency stuff' (ex-offender placement service). A colleague at a community-based organization also insisted that: 'We do not refer clients to day labor. To me it is degrading, it doesn't help a person grow. And it is really only benefiting the employer'. A community advocate observed that: 'There's one [agency] that's notorious for giving people temp jobs. During one guy's application process, they said to him, "I hate to cut this short, but I can get you to a place *now*"'.

Theodore, 2001; Theodore, 2003). Since ex-offenders are practically excluded from many service sector jobs, especially those requiring direct contact with customers or cash, the rump of the manufacturing and warehousing economies contain some of the few remaining employment opportunities. But not only are these sectors shrinking in size, their prevailing recruitment practices work to exclude ex-offenders. In most cases, routine job operations, like hand packing or loading, are outsourced to temp agencies; in others, temporaries are employed on an extended basis as a means of screening for permanent employees. Reflecting the labor market reality that temp agencies have become the primary points of entry into work in many of Chicago's low-income communities, many ex-convicts will reluctantly make use of this 'service'. It is widely understood, however, that this is unlikely to deliver adequate income in the short term, let alone permanent employment in the longer term. Irregular, minimum wage work will rarely cover even the accommodation costs of ex-offenders, for whom the lure of 'easy money' may become irresistible.

Some lower-level manufacturing operations will take ex-offenders [but] the only way you can get in is through a temporary service or day labor. [The manufacturers] won't even consider hiring them [directly]. Most of the [staffing agencies] are really terrible services and they are paying them little to nothing. And the companies are making big bucks on the bottom line . . . They don't have to hire anybody, so here you are, you have a guy with a C-number [inmates previously committed to long, indeterminate sentences], he's probably done 15 to 20 years, he's taking an opportunity, getting \$6.50, bills are rising. So here are the choices. Is this guy going to maintain employment? It is going to be terrible (job developer, nonprofit agency).

When they are released from the penitentiary, if they go to a . . . a recovery home . . . you have to pay rent [of] \$400–\$450 [per month]. So what are the minimum-wage jobs going to do for them? And at the temporary agency, once you take out for t-shirts and transportation, he's not even going to bring home \$100 a week. That's not going cover the rent, so no matter how much he wants to stay clean, he's going to use again, or he's going to start selling again, just so that he can have a roof over his head. That's unacceptable . . . Now they're going to go to another day-labor [agency] and work two days, just long enough to get a hit and say 'OK, I can make it through now'. Next thing, they're right back where they started from and everybody says 'Well, he went back to his old ways!'. Well *why*? If you've got people making you work slave labor at \$5.15 an hour, and I mean *work*, then you come home with a \$25 check, that's not even feasible (manager, ex-offender placement service).

To send someone to a [fast-food restaurant] working 20 hours a week is a no-no. To send them to a day labor and expect them to make it off of a minimum wage is a no-no. I mean, after a while, they're going to go back, they'll go back to doing what they were doing in the first place, because they need to survive. They need to survive (job developer, employment placement service).

Negative views of temporary agencies, both within the social service sector and among ex-offenders, are, however, largely borne of experience. There is a widespread feeling that African-Americans in general, and black ex-offenders in particular, are located at the very back of the temp agencies' recruitment queue.¹² This mutual ambivalence is reflected in the locational behavior of day-labor agencies, the 'low end' of the temp business, which conspicuously avoid majority-black neighborhoods in favor of largely Latino, though still low-income, parts of the city (Peck and Theodore, 2001). As Figure 4 shows, day-labor agencies collectively shun the predominantly black neighborhoods on Chicago's South and West Sides, opting instead to target a different segment of the 'flexibilized' urban labor supply, in port-of-entry immigrant communities.

I have had people actually sitting in front of [the ex-offender placement service], when I got there in the morning, and these are grown men and women, in tears because they had sat in a

12 Community organizer, workers' rights organization.

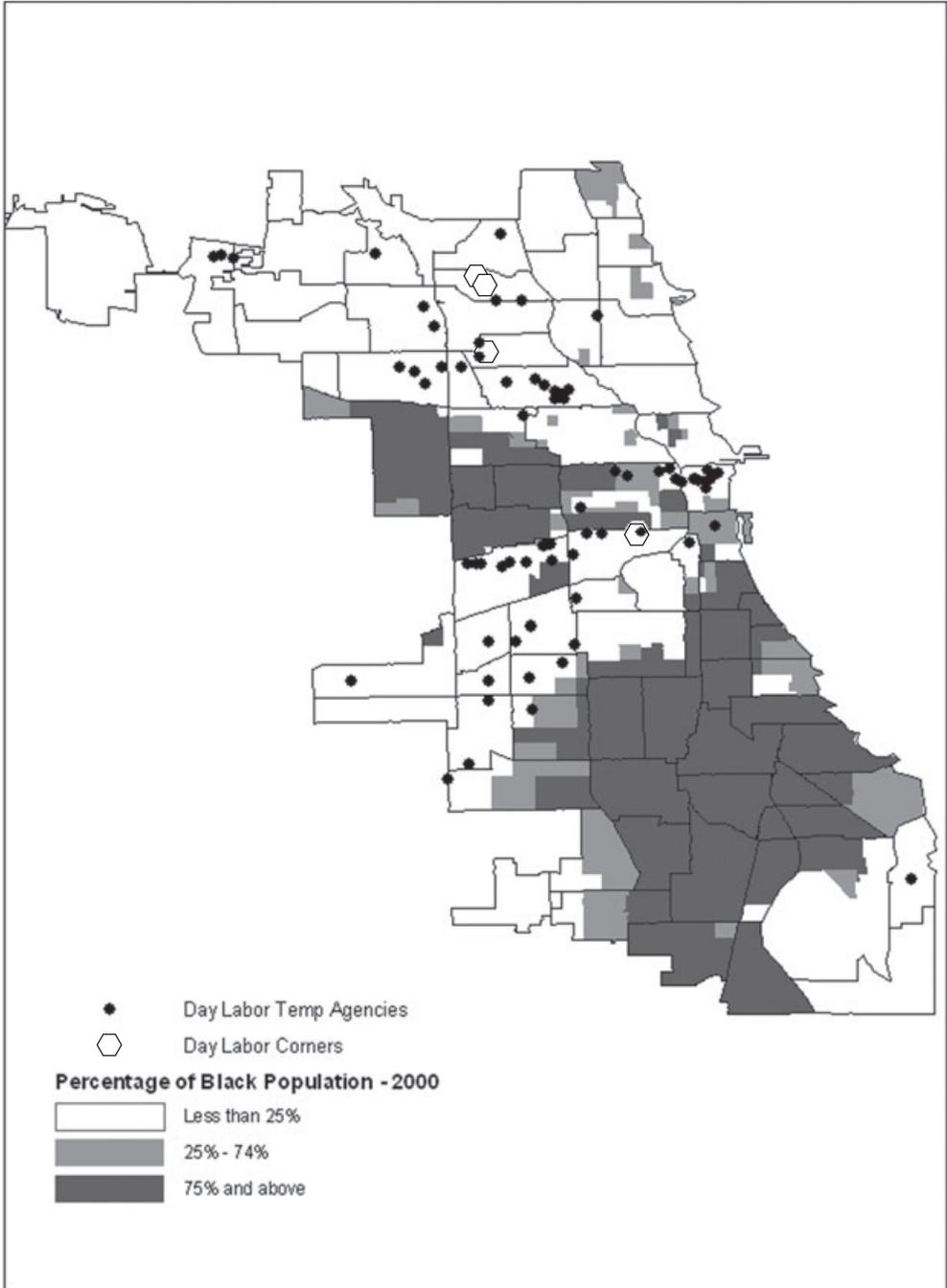


Figure 4 Day labor agencies and labor corners, Chicago, 2007 (source: US Census Bureau, 2003; IDOL, 2007)

day-labor office from 5:00 am. I get to work at 8:30, but they had already been up at 4:00 to be out there and not be called because they weren't 'hooked up'. I said, 'What do you mean, hooked up? Hooked up with who?'. Well you know, they have their favorites . . . So you almost have to do something for the dispatcher in order for them to allow them to work. [But if] they

turn down the day-labor [they can't] pay rent in the recovery home; they've got to go. Now what are they? They're homeless (manager, ex-offender placement service).

Many ex-offenders, then, have only a tenuous connection with the day-labor economy too, thanks to the temp agencies' *de facto* redlining strategies, though these sporadic and somewhat resented 'opportunities' remain vital to their circumscribed earnings capacity. 'Everybody hates [day labor]', the manager of a West Side placement program explained, 'They're just looking for something they can count on'. A job developer at a neighboring agency emphasized that: 'Day labor keeps people in the same situation that they always have been in. It's a quick dollar, just to get you some money, but it doesn't give you the opportunity to advance yourself'. Worse than this, some employment counselors felt that what one called the 'day-labor mindset' — weak attachment to the workplace; irregularity of routines; an insecure, hand-to-mouth existence; a low-trust environment, characterized by exploitative, if not predatory, behavior — was dangerously similar to the mode of existence that had led to incarceration in the first place.

Since the placement strategies of day-labor temporary agencies favor those workers who are 'reliably contingent' — who present themselves every day and who therefore can be returned to the same worksite, if required — then there is a self-perpetuating logic in the attendant recruitment outcomes (Parker, 1994; Oehlsen, 1997). Amongst the last hired and first fired, black ex-offenders are rarely able to demonstrate a consistent work record. Meanwhile, in what is a deeply racialized job market, Latino workers seem increasingly to constitute the preferred labor supply for many manual occupations, employer preferences that temp agencies vie amongst themselves to accommodate (Peck and Theodore, 2001). In the ex-offender placement sector, accounts of racially preferential recruitment are legion. Viewed from communities like North Lawndale, this looks like yet another form of labor market closure:

Even on the West Side, the preferred workforce is the Latino workforce. The companies that do hire from the neighborhood are either African-American owned or the work is so crappy that even immigrants won't take the jobs . . . It has been an uphill battle, because plant floors are completely dominated by Latino workers. [It's] really hard to get African-American workers in there. From the company perspective, it almost doesn't make sense to hire someone who doesn't speak Spanish, because they become the break in the communication. Once you get to a certain point, there's no going back. Employers don't raise language issues or talk about race, but it is a 'background' issue, that's the main thing — especially in this economy. There's plenty of people available that don't have a background. There are subtle underlying issues too, that this is a West Side [placement agency] and they already have their perceptions (manager, community-based organization).

A new [manager] came in [at a large local employer], he went straight to [day-labor agency]. Then he said, 'Oh, I don't need your people [ex-offenders], we've got a big enough work force . . . We're going to take people that come through [day-labor agency] and they have to be in a pool'. [Now, the company] is loaded with Hispanics. That was their way of weeding us out . . . Landscaping used to have blacks, now they are totally [Hispanic too]. Landscaping, all the manufacturing jobs. [They] go after the ones that don't have green cards . . . If we sent INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] out there, the plant would be empty! [It's] at least 80% Latino (manager, ex-offender placement service).

Even the factories that are still here [in North Lawndale] are hiring mostly immigrants. They're not hiring our population . . . Part of it is that if you hire an undocumented immigrant you don't have to pay as much money [or offer] benefits (job developer, community-based organization).

In a move that illustrates the lengths to which job developers will go to chisel out modest openings for ex-offenders in this racially fissured labor market, one West Side agency had started to provide computer-based instruction in elementary Spanish to its

exclusively African–American clientele. As the program’s manager combatively argued: ‘Now, we’re bilingual, we have all the experience [you] need. *Now* why won’t you hire us?’.

The reality, of course, is that black ex-offenders are excluded from job opportunities in fields like landscaping, construction and light manufacturing for reasons other than their lack of second-language skills. Faced with an excess labor supply for a wide range of less-skilled, manual job openings, employers are increasingly turning to low-road recruitment and employment practices. Perfunctory hiring and firing; arbitrary and unilateral supervision; violation of wage and hour, employment equity, and health and safety regulations; and deteriorating real wage levels have all become routine, if not systemic, features of the lower reaches of Chicago’s labor market. As one respondent with considerable experience on the ‘frontline’ of ex-offender placement put it, employers apparently will not or ‘can’t follow labor laws by the book, so they look to people that basically have no power and are forced to take it, whether it is an undocumented worker or somebody with a [criminal] background. And if there is a complaint, they’re gone, because there are 10 people in line behind them’ (manager, community-based organization). For those ex-offenders who are able to secure work, exploitative conditions and predatory employment practices are rife. Non-payment and under-payment of wages is commonplace; relationships with supervisors, and sometimes coworkers, are often contentious; workplace rules were apparently applied arbitrarily. The following accounts are typical of the workplace situations described by job developers and ex-offenders:

[Day-labor agencies and contract labor companies will] hire you and you have to be at the company at a certain time and then you wait; you may work, or may not. So somebody who really doesn’t have any money whatsoever, and has to pay the cost of transportation, [if] you don’t work that day, it’s very discouraging . . . A lot of the [companies] are really small start-ups. We’ve had some bad experiences with them — very shady practices . . . They want somebody to go there and clean when they say, may not pay on time . . . If there is a mistake on the job, they just automatically take it out of their pay check, things like that. [There’s] a company that got contracts to care for elderly and disabled people and run day programs, they were actually horrible. They would grab our clients out of programs and they’d go months without getting paid. A lot of shady things going on (manager, community-based organization).

[With janitorial work] they weren’t documenting their hours . . . There’s no sign in, they just tell you what your hours are [each day]. They pay people after they do ‘a quantity of work’ [and that’s] standard in the hotel industry [too]. The guys who work at [convention center], some of them have been working there 10 years, through a temp agency, doing crating services [earning between \$6.00 and \$7.10 an hour]. Unless they do something like steal something, they can always come back. [They] work alongside union guys, Teamster guys, who forklift the crates . . . There are also guys that do maintenance [and] cleanup, but it’s different from janitorial. [That’s] mostly Hispanic . . . They come mainly from temp agencies . . . They’re separated (counselor, community service and advocacy organization).

The channels into many such jobs for ex-offenders are often curiously institutionalized. There are various kinds of quasi-formalized relationships between local employers and some ex-offender programs, one-stop centers, homeless shelters, and recovery homes. Some programs regularly transport ex-offenders to large worksites on the understanding that any available work would come their way, or to provide a daily recruitment pool;¹³ and on at least one occasion ex-offenders were recruited to break

13 ‘Just a week ago [a labor broker] went to this shelter and said give me everybody who’s getting stamps, we’ve got a bunch of jobs for them out at the airport . . . Guys are trying to get into shelters where this is done, because they say, oh we got a connection to a job . . . They were told don’t worry about it [criminal background], just come on down and it will be cool . . . There’s a lot of that cropping up’ (counselor, community service and advocacy organization).

a strike. These somewhat formalized connections to jobs, many of which are themselves 'informal', are often brokered by community organizations, placement agencies or temp services. In contrast, ex-offenders tend to be less well connected to those word-of-mouth recruitment channels through which many of the most unregulated and exploitative day-labor positions are filled; these, according to local accounts, tend to be monopolized by undocumented immigrants.¹⁴ Informal day labor hiring sites function in a similar fashion, being dominated by Latin American and Eastern European immigrants, who accept daily assignments in the nonunion construction sector. Here wage and hour, and health and safety violations are routine aspects of the job, with workers having little recourse against abusive employers.¹⁵

In another striking example of the creative remaking of worker identities within this racially structured contingent economy, it was reported that some Latino ex-offenders would on occasion pass themselves off as undocumented workers, in order to gain access to the word-of-mouth recruitment channels and labor corners that have been organized around the undocumented population.¹⁶ The kind of work that can be accessed through these means tends to be extremely exploitative and often dangerous, but by the standards of the ex-offender labor market it is comparatively plentiful. Meanwhile, African-American ex-offenders are forced to rely on storefront temp agencies (often local chains, invariably located outside African-American neighborhoods), where they are typically amongst the last placed in jobs. Alternatively, they will make use of various quasi-institutionalized channels, many of which are also unreliable and exploitative. One formerly homeless day laborer described a program in which participants were required to 'work off' the costs of their shelter accommodation, in this case through an arrangement with a local manufacturing company:

You owe money [for rent] at the beginning. Of course, you don't have any money, because you're homeless. They say this is not a problem, because we will get you a job. And they did, they got me a job at [consumer-products manufacturer], so I get on the bus with all these people, don't worry about nothing, come down to this address, fill out this paper. We go there, I'm working, working, my wages is measured against my debt. You owe \$400, you made \$78. I was there 3 to 4 months, only once did I get any money, probably \$40.

Even at the peak of the economic cycle, the employment situation confronting ex-offenders was dismal. A survey of adults living in Chicago's homeless shelters, conducted in October 1999, revealed that 75% of residents had worked for day-labor agencies in the previous 12 months. The day-labor assignments received by these workers typically paid at or near the federal minimum wage and were extremely precarious. As a result, most day laborers, even those who reported to agencies on a regular basis, earned gross annual wages of less than \$9,000 (Theodore, 2000; 2003). As the economic boom gave way to recession and then a long, jobless recovery, direct hiring slowed (see Peck and Theodore, 2007); informal, street corner hiring sites (labor corners) have witnessed a reduction in drive-by recruiting, many of the day-labor temp services have closed their neighborhood offices, and low-road manufacturers have scaled back their precariously employed workforces. Across the low-wage economy, employers have been able to raise their recruitment requirements, while continuing to suppress wages and working conditions. Under these circumstances many ex-offenders have lost contact with the job market altogether:

14 'The underground [jobs], that's the more immigrant population, where they get the maximum abuse... The guys I talk to aren't so much involved [in that]' (counselor, community service and advocacy organization).

15 Community organizer, workers' rights organization; community organizer, nonprofit hiring hall. See also Theodore *et al.* (2006).

16 Community organizer, workers' rights organization.

The job market is not just tough, it is more competitive now. A lot of the opportunities that would normally have been available to ex-offenders are now being [given to] people with higher skills. Even something like [car rental detailing and returns, they] are looking for someone with customer service [experience] (job developer, nonprofit social-service agency).

I used to work at this particular [company] that would take anybody . . . These guys [ex-offenders] traditionally look for places like that. Fifteen hour [days], minimum wage, 5 minute break, that sort of thing. That ain't unusual. But they feel the most hurt. With the [economic] downturn, there is even less work for them. [There] used to be five or six people, at the big one, now maybe 20 guys — sitting around because they can't get any work. Used to be that a lot of people got discriminated against and was getting the smaller end of the work. [Now] those people are hardly getting *any* work, because the same system of creaming goes on. Because there's less work, now you have a whole bunch of people who don't even look to it anymore, because they spend a week going [to the job site] and don't get an assignment (counselor, community-based organization).

There is no need for an employer to deal with this [ex-offender] population at this point. If we were talking 7–8 years ago, when people were forced to look outside the box a little bit, it might have been easier. Right now, there are so many people looking for work, what's the incentive? . . . They have a [criminal] background, plus a lot of other issues on top of that. Why take the chance? (manager, community-based organization).

As hiring prospects have receded, the somewhat paradoxical response on the part of many ex-offender placement services has been to redouble their emphasis on disciplining client behavior, on the grounds that anything short of complete compliance is tantamount to self-administered unemployment.

It's not an easy struggle. I always tell people that the program exists, but it's up to them individually. If you want the program, it'll work for you . . . If they really work the program. It has a lot to do with self discipline too . . . You don't have a lot of people that believe in you once you served time (counselor, recovery home).

One of the things that I tell them initially is, 'Guess what, if you want to keep your braids, you can keep your braids, if that's what you choose. But you just cut off half of your opportunities; half of *nothing*! What's more important, feeding your family, or cutting your hair?' (job developer, nonprofit agency).

[If they don't] get there on time, or the people don't show up dressed properly, [or] they go wrong, they're going to hear it from *me*! (job developer, ex-offender placement service).

In this context, job developers typically find themselves talking up the minimum requirements for employability, while at the same time revising downward expectations about what the labor market might offer, all in the service of 'acclimatizing' ex-offenders to a hostile job market. As one job developer explained: 'There is really one question to ask: what is the *least* amount of money you are willing to work for?' A colleague at a neighboring agency commented that he encouraged his clients to consider openings at the local car wash, which pays minimum wage, plus tips, because under present circumstances this is 'not a bad transitional job'.

Such is the precarious nature of these transitional jobs, some of the movement will likely be back to criminal behavior, an ever-present alternative in 'receiving communities'. Even relatively secure employment can come to an abrupt end, for example, following a post-employment background check, if there are failures of reliability or anger management, or if ex-offenders are targeted following a theft at the workplace.¹⁷ The attrition rate for ex-convicts is very high: Chicago's largest placement

17 The number of background checks requested by Illinois employers reached a 20-year high in 2004, when some 707,544 checks were requested from the state police, which represented a 30% increase on 2003 (Loury, 2004). Employers' utilization of various online and private systems for background checking has also grown significantly (Holzer *et al.*, 2004), with online services charging

program achieves a 54% retention rate after the first month of employment, while half of the continuing employees fail to make it to the fifth month (Loury, 2004). Many ex-offenders describe situations in which the pull of the street economy is constant, even after several years of steady employment.

Some days I would work, some days I wouldn't work. If people had odd jobs I could do, see I can paint and do electrical work . . . I can do other things too. But the day labor at the time was something that I could use to help me pay a little rent. I was living with my sister at the time and that was helping me out on the rent. Then my brother-in-law, he was working at [convenience store], he introduced me to the boss. I explained to him that I had a [criminal] background. He seemed to accept it pretty good, unlike other places . . . I worked there for about two years, maybe. During the time, I was working at [convenience store], you always have to have something on the side, you know. I was doing work at my building with my landlord, doing cleaning up and things around the building to take money off the rent . . . I have a friend who wanted me to come over to what they call the 'Holy City' on 16th Street when I came home. He said, 'All you have to do is pick up money'. I said, 'No, I'm going over here to work at [convenience store]'. Because I know what comes with that money. He's telling me all I got to do is pick up money, but who's going to be watching me pick up the money? Police? Stick-up man? Feds? (ex-offender #2).

When you come back into North Lawndale, if you were selling drugs, then somebody else has moved into that slot that you used to have, so that means you have to stand out here with a pack. They'll give you a pack with \$120, so you sell \$120 worth of work, you get \$20. You got 10 or 15 guys out here, trying to make this hustle, so it'll probably take you a few hours to make \$100. But you can't do that everyday, so that means you're going to have to resort to something else to get some money. If you don't have any skills, you're not going to be trying to work, you're going to be trying to stick somebody up, or you're going to be trying to steal, and then you're going back into the system. If you have a family member that has ties with some church organization, or with the Alderman in that area, or that knows somebody who has a company or something, then you have a shot, because they might slide you in there making about \$6 or \$7 an hour . . . But the majority of the people, they're not conditioned to do that. If I'm making \$1,000 a week standing out there selling cocaine, or heroin, and then you put me in a job and I'm making \$450 a week and I got to work my butt off, and all I got to do is just pass this in here and get this money, I'm going to go for that \$1,000 a week (counselor, recovery home).

Confronted with a sluggish urban labor market, trending increasingly toward various forms of contingent and service employment, with racially structured recruitment queues that filter black ex-convicts to the very back, and with the daily challenges of living in socially and economically devastated local communities, one of the most telling 'labor market indicators' on the South and West Sides of Chicago is the annually climbing rate of recidivism. The scale and depth of this problem is such as to render the current repertoire of public policy responses woefully, if not structurally, inadequate.

as little as \$15. Following hiring, moreover, ex-offenders are easily scapegoated: 'The minute the [employer] says anything, they're immediately fired [often] on a trumped up charge. I believed the employers at first, but after a while, I'm like, they're telling me that *everybody* we're sending over there was stealing? They had me going for a while . . . If there are ever *any* incidents [ex-offenders tend to be targeted]. I had a guy, he had worked [with an employer for] 8 or 9 months, everything was fine, a good employee; solid. A guy cut him off one day [while driving] and so he ramm'd into a fire hydrant. Not very hard, it was just a little fender bender, like \$200 worth of damage. He was going to pay for it in cash himself, but with the liability insurance, they immediately let you go, even when it's not your fault . . . They use a lot of ex-offenders, which is interesting, I wonder how long it will last. A lot of employment was done in nursing homes, but there's been too many stories in the news, so that's drying up for ex-offenders — incidents of abuse. Even when those incidents aren't connected to ex-offenders, the ex-offenders are going to go. Reactionary policies will just cut them off. So someone steals from a plant, who wasn't an ex-offender, they start doing background checks on everybody. Somebody who's worked there for two years, they're out' (manager, community-based organization).

The sparse network of community-based organizations and neighborhood social service agencies in those parts of the city is underfunded and overwhelmed, celebrating little victories, but often being forced to triage, or skim the 'cream' from their desperately needy client group. Even state and federal efforts can smack of tokenism in the face of this systemic employability crisis, reliant as they have become upon task forces and pilot initiatives.¹⁸ If there is any 'logic' at all to this regime, it would seem to be one of institutional and spatial containment, dedicated to the futile and destructive task of circulating a supernumerary population between alternating states of institutional confinement — in the 'downstate' world of the prison system — and sociospatial confinement — in the slowly imploding 'receiving communities' of Chicago's South and West Sides. Buoyed by occasional successes, the community and nonprofit sector does its utmost to effect at least some sustainable transitions into employment, with the benefit of periodic injections of public funding, though privately even the most committed in this sector periodically rail against the institutional perversity of the 'system' in which they work. Even incremental reforms are difficult to implement in the face of such relentlessly high weekly flows into and out of the prison system. Many social service workers and job developers describe situations that would apparently justify a drift into fatalism and negativity, the very responses that they work so hard to alleviate amongst their ex-offender client group. Despite these unfavorable odds, the effort of course continues, even though for many it seems to be tinged by a sense of Canute-like futility. As one of the most experienced frontline workers in North Lawndale concluded, 'The reason these individuals are in the situation they're in is because of the condition of the economy in the community in the first place . . . The fact is that in this community [North Lawndale], 80% of all males have criminal backgrounds, which leads to more serious crimes. That's just the way it is' (job developer, community-based organization).

Conclusion: locked out

Chicago's 'ex-offender employability crisis', for all the faltering efforts at local containment and individualized remedies, has been several generations in the making. Two decades ago, at the cusp of Chicago's postindustrial phase, communities like North Lawndale were already being portrayed as welfare-dependent 'millstones' that had become disconnected from the mainstream economy:

North Lawndale [is] a community on the West Side where there are no jobs to speak of and where street crime is commonplace . . . Unemployment is so endemic that half the residents older than 16 have completely dropped out of the legitimate labor pool . . . In many respects, North Lawndale typifies what has happened to the black slums of urban America over the last two decades as jobs have left, the economy has soured, housing has crumbled and the ranks of those dependent on government handouts has soared (*Chicago Tribune*, 1986: 27–30).

If the neighborhood's prospects looked bleak at the time, two decades later and more than a decade into the postwelfare era, they look bleaker still. In a stark reapplication of the poor-relief principle of less eligibility — 'which holds that prisoners and ex-offenders should be least eligible for work opportunities when many others are unemployed' (McGarrell, 2002: 2) — a blanket policy of penal exclusion has been

18 For example, extending to the entire Chicago release cohort the integrated package of services that was recently delivered, on a pilot basis, to 200 North Lawndale residents under the auspices of the Illinois Going Home program would entail annual program costs in the region of \$250–330 million, which is equivalent to a 20–27% share of the state's corrections budget. For a vivid account of one of the most creative of the city's programs, based on the West Side, see the series of articles by Kiernan (2007).

applied to those deemed least deserving in a transformed urban labor market: African–American men. Having been redefined as surplus to economic requirements in the context of the roll-back in factory employment, African–American men were first locked out of the labor market, then locked up in what has become a retasked prison system. ‘If poor black men were attracted to the illegal drug trade in response to the collapse of low-skill labor markets’, Pettit and Western (2004: 154) observe, ‘the drug war raised the risks that they would be caught, convicted and incarcerated’. So ensnared, this criminalized class has been almost completely detached from the job market, the segmentations within which have calcified, just as the form of the accompanying regulatory institutions has ‘hardened’.

[The] shift from the maternalist (semi-)welfare state to the paternalist penal state, it must be stressed, does not target all Americans. It is trained primarily on the destitute, the disreputable and the dangerous, and all those who chafe, in the lower regions of social space, at the new economic and ethnoracial order being built over the rubble of the defunct Fordist-Keynesian compact and the dislocated black ghetto: namely, the colored subproletariat of the big cities, the unskilled and precarious fractions of the working class, and those who reject the ‘slave jobs’ and poverty wages of the deregulated service economy and turn instead to the informal commerce of the city streets and its leading sector, the drug trade (Wacquant, 2002: 382).

In the process, the prison system has become a labor market institution of considerable significance, like all such ‘boundary institutions’ (Offe, 1985) configuring prevailing definitions of employability, shaping the social distribution of work and wages, prefiguring the terms under which different segments of the contingent labor supply enter the job market, and shaping their relative bargaining power. In Chicago, as in many deindustrializing cities across the United States, the targeting, by the police and criminal justice system, of the ‘dangerous class’ of (already economically disenfranchised) young black men overdetermined the employability crisis that was to follow. The outcome is a socially produced, institutionally regulated, and in some respects officially sanctioned designation of the young black male population as a criminalized class, the employability deficits of which are made, understood, and acted upon as if they represented a *collective* condition. In labor market terms, this population has been institutionally remarginalized, having been shunted to the back of the postindustrial hiring queue. In its prior incarnation as a naturalized source of labor for ‘secondary’ employment during the Fordist era, this group experienced intermittent *employment* as a normalized life pattern. Since its redesignation as a criminal class, in the context of a ‘softening’ labor market oriented to service employment, intermittent *incarceration* has become the normalized life pattern. In the 1960s, the ghetto was redefined as a space for the circulation of secondary labor, the ‘street-corner’ lifestyles of which were seen as both a cause and a consequence of labor market marginalization (Doeringer and Piore, 1971: 175–7). Four decades later, a new set of articulations has evolved, as the ‘supernumerary population of younger back men, who either reject or are rejected by the deregulated low-wage labor market [have become ensnared] in a never-ending *circulus*’ (Wacquant, 2001a: 83–4) between the ghetto and the prison. The outcomes, for individuals, households, and neighborhoods, can be cruelly perverse: the annual cost of incarceration in Illinois is now approaching \$23,000 per person, yet more than 70% of *households* in North Lawndale subsist on less than that sum.

African–American ex-offenders have been reconstituted as the workforce of very last resort in Chicago’s postindustrial, postwelfare labor market. Here, a reorganized set of racialized and gendered hiring queues confer preferred status on undocumented immigrants for many contingent jobs. Ex-offenders and undocumented workers confront this degraded labor market from fundamentally different, yet mutually referential, institutional positions. They are not so much in ‘competition’ for contingent jobs, but are separately channeled into different segments of a hyper-segregated labor market through a process of recruitment by stereotype. In this less than zero-sum economy, the

institutional stratifications of the labor supply are echoed, exploited, and reproduced in the job market itself. Undocumented immigrants and ex-offenders are each ascribed a distinctive set of ostensibly universal and naturalized characteristics, which dialectically redefines their labor power in terms, respectively, of unquestioning hard work and dysfunctional unemployability. What is perceived as a perfectly substitutable mass of undocumented workers becomes, in effect, a no-questions-asked, *forced* labor supply for contingent and informal jobs, which in turn have become redesignated as 'Spanish-speaking jobs'. Meanwhile, ex-offenders bear the mark of a disabling negative stereotype, coupled with the reconstituted labor market 'disadvantage' that, as citizens, they continue to bear a limited set of residual employment rights. In the crowded labor markets of inner-city Chicago, in which large numbers of workers are *in principle* substitutable for many deskilled jobs, these markers of distinction carry a disproportionately amplified weight. Here, the mark of a criminal record is enough to render almost an entire socioracial group unemployable; accustomed to getting 'the small end of the work', many black male workers are increasingly likely to get nothing. Subject to a form of 'penal branding' (Combesse, 2002; Pager, 2003), ex-convicts carry with them almost indelible institutional markers that signal, at the same time, legitimized labor market exclusion and extreme vulnerability to reincarceration.

On the demand side, there is little or no incentive for employers to reach out to this population, unless they have to. In fact, most of the imperatives are pressing in the opposite direction: easy access to oversupplied segments of the urban labor pool, and to workers with little in the way of alternative opportunities or rights of recourse, creates continuing incentives to degrade and casualize jobs. This process is enabled by the burgeoning infrastructure of labor market intermediaries, which delivers to employers offsite solutions to the challenges of maintaining workplace discipline and minimizing unwanted turnover in very low paying jobs. As various forms of mediated contingent employment have proliferated in and around inner-city labor supplies, the sometimes wayward supply of labor for secondary jobs has been superceded by institutionally prestratified pipelines of flexibly commodified workers, the exaggerated substitutability and persistent oversupply of which effectively ensures workplace compliance. In this context, the institutional and ethnic marking of the labor supply assumes a heightened significance: the *absence* of employment papers defines the status of undocumented immigrants in the labor market, creating new forms of contingent employability and in effect erasing workers' 'backgrounds', while at the opposite end of this process, ex-offenders pay the price of having the wrong kind of documentation, a kind that inscribes unemployability. Racial stereotypes both harden and help naturalize these distinctions, as the gatekeepers of the contingent labor market increasingly read employability and 'background' through skin color.

The very low-wage labor markets of Chicago have become hypersegmented as a result of these forces, the imprint of boundary institutions like the prison and the immigrant labor regime having become even more deeply embedded (Peck and Theodore, 2008). Confronting these conditions, labor market intermediaries and contingent workers themselves work to manage and marginally shift the odds in their favor, to eke out little victories, in the context of sharply asymmetrical power relationships. Amongst the more curious reactions to this situation, Latino ex-offenders will occasionally pose as undocumented workers in order to access day-labor jobs, while middle-aged African-American men learn Spanish in the hope of a job with an all-Latino landscaping crew. Meanwhile, statistical discrimination against African-American workers, and employers' redlining of certain zip codes, is now sufficiently rife as to entrench its own reality, as institutionalized patterns of labor market exclusion facilitate more and more transitions into the parallel cash-and-crime economies of the ghetto. These are some of the manifestations of the new workforce hierarchies that are emerging in the context of far-reaching urban labor market transformations. The ex-offender employability crisis is an overdetermined part of this structural realignment. Conventional responses to the 'reentry problem' seek to repair individual employability deficits after the structural and

institutional damage has been done. Ultimately, there will have to be a response to the 'entry problem' too, one that also deals with the critical issues of jobs and livelihoods, though not simply for individualized workers but for marginalized *communities*. This calls for more attention to the structural conditions that have made the long-odds labor market through and under which ex-offenders periodically circulate. Meanwhile, at the local level and in the here and now, the pernicious questions concern if and how to play these odds.

This old lady used to ask me, she used to say, 'Son, I don't know why you waste your time with these people. Don't you know that if you hang around garbage long enough, you begin to smell like it?'. I really didn't understand what she was saying at the time, because I was getting high and I was into my thing, but when I sat down in that penitentiary, I got a chance to think about a lot of things that people said to me . . . That's the problem with our society. In the ghetto, people medicate because they can't do what they want to do, so they go get high. That's why them young guys on the corner and the older guys who got them out there, that's why they sell drugs. Like I say, I used to be a part of that, but I don't want to be a part of that no more. I know it's not going to stop, but I can distance myself from it, and try to help some people get away from it. That's what I believe my calling in life is.

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Résumé

La politique publique d'incarcération massive, aux implications largement préjudiciables aux communautés de couleur, affecte également le marché du travail des villes. Une étude de cas sur Chicago indique que le système pénitentiaire a fini par devenir une institution importante du marché du travail (urbain) dont les réglementations se traduisent à la fois par la production sociale d'une inemployabilité systémique pour une classe criminalisée de males afro-américains, par le déclin économique et social hypertrophié des 'communautés d'accueil' vers lesquelles retournent des milliers d'ex-prisonniers, et par l'accroissement impitoyable des taux de récidive. Malgré de forts coûts sociaux, le brassage de la population carcérale dans les niveaux inférieurs du marché du travail se combine à la dégradation accrue des postes occasionnels et offerts par l'économie parallèle, mais aussi au durcissement des types de ségrégation radicale et à une érosion durable des perspectives d'emploi au sein de la population grandissante des ex-délinquants pour lesquels stigmatisation sociale, marginalisation institutionnelle et non-reconnaissance économique revêtent une forme d'incarcération prolongée.