

Although theoretical perspectives often suggest that a criminal background produces stigmatization, offenders in this study anticipated minimal stigmatization when they reintegrated back into society after serving their sentence.

Contrary to what labelling theorists postulate, the majority of young men, in this study, do not fear being denounced in society because of their criminal background. They expressed high expectations of being reintegrated with family, friends, and society as a whole with few challenges.

Historically, criminologists have assumed that formal punishment creates stigmatization, which in return generates feelings of anger and hopelessness within the offender. These feelings of hopelessness often increase their risk of reoffending because of their perceived sense of limited options. These perceptions are fueled by the negative labels often used within society to describe people with a criminal history (i.e. convict, untrustworthy).

The researchers sought to determine the validity of labelling theory. Data was collected from 1,031 young men (17-26 years old) that were court ordered to take part in a boot camp program in Texas, United States. Property offences were the most commonly committed crime amongst the men (51%), followed by drug related offences (29%), and violent offences (20%). Offenders answered questions related to expected stigmatization and the rejection by family, friends, and society, following their release. There were also a series of questions asked about reintegration to reveal the level of support and acceptance that offenders expected to receive following their release.

The young men, in this study, reported a positive perception of how others will view them despite their criminal history and feel it is unlikely they will be stigmatized after release. Only 12.3% feel as though their families have abandoned them, although it is unknown if the abandonment is a result of their criminal involvement. The

researchers did not survey the families and friends in this study, so it is unknown if criminal behaviour is widely accepted which might account for the unexpected results. Furthermore, a small portion (21.8%) of the men anticipate they will have trouble securing employment upon release. These results are more consistent with the literature but still more positive than expected. Interestingly, Benson et al. found that in this particular study, the offenders were more optimistic and displayed fewer concerns about stigmatization when asked questions about their future. However, when asked questions about the present, such as “the whole world being against me”, percentages were much higher (33.5%). These findings, may be attributed to the environmental context of the mandated boot camp program they were situated within at the time of the study. The offenders’ experiences in the boot camp may be more negative than they perceive living in the community again will be. It is important to note the majority have not previously been incarcerated in an institution, and may not fully understand the implications that their criminal conviction and period of custody will present, upon release.

Conclusion: Traditionally, theorists, researchers and professionals have supported the premise that offenders face many stigmatization and reintegration issues following their release. To test this claim, a large number of criminally involved men were asked about their expectations of

community re-entry following their release. Surprisingly, the offenders had a positive view about their supports for reintegration and did not feel they would be stigmatized. These results may help us understand why some are not ready upon release to address issues that brought them in conflict with the law, as they are not aware of the challenges they are about to face. These results suggest that more needs to be done to help prepare offenders for reality they will face upon release. Community workers, knowing this information can adjust their supervision/counselling strategies to help support them through the discovery process, that not everything will as positive as expected while at the same time working to instill and reinforce thoughts of hope and success.

Reference: Benson, M. L., Alarid, L. F., Burton, V. S., & Cullen, F. T. (2011). Reintegration or stigmatization? Offenders’ expectations of community re-entry. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39(5), 385-393.

This review was completed by Jessica Robinson and Dr. Jeanine Webber from Humber Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning.