

“CHANGE” FRAMES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED JOB SEEKERS

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Abstract

When deciding whether to provide job-matching assistance to formerly incarcerated job seekers, which factors do individuals with job information and influence privilege? Drawing from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 126 ethn racially diverse jobholders at one large, public sector employer, I show that jobholders' assistance relied on the cultural frames for action they deployed. Two frames dominated discussion—the second chance frame and the signaling change frame. Through the former, jobholders argued that all individuals were capable of change and entitled to more chances to prove themselves. These jobholders were strongly inclined to help. Through the latter, jobholders either referenced the nature of offenses for which job seekers were punished, a proxy for their ability to change, or they referenced evidence that job seekers had changed, a proxy for former prisoners' commitment to do better. These jobholders tended to be noncommittal. Two frames were mentioned significantly less often—the rigid structures and the opportunities to assist frames. Neither implicated the former prisoners' essential attributes but instead identified factors outside of job seekers' control. A significant minority of jobholders also offered some combination of these four frames. Importantly, ethnoracial background, which informed the extent, nature and quality of jobholders' experiences with the formerly incarcerated, also shaped which frame or set of frames jobholders deployed.

Keywords: Social capital, prisoner reentry, cultural frames, race/ethnicity, job search and job-finding

INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature on prisoner reentry assumes that former prisoners' odds of successful job search is markedly improved by having greater access to personal contacts well-positioned to both inform them about job opportunities and, perhaps more

Du Bois Review, 15:2 (2018) 387–416.

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doi:10.1017/S1742058X18000280

importantly, to address employers' concerns about their trustworthiness. And the facts bear this out: among the formerly incarcerated who find work immediately post-release, personal contacts are often central to the job-matching process (Nelson et al., 1999; Visher and Kachnowski, 2007). From a social capital theoretical perspective, the corollary that researchers often then make is that former prisoners' difficulty finding work is primarily a consequence of their *lack of access* to job-relevant social capital. Their ties either erode during imprisonment or, because they were raised in troubled neighborhoods, they never had such ties (Lopoo and Western, 2005). Surely, however, if former prisoners had such access it would yield for them useful job information and greater advocacy, making the search for work feel much less like a Sisyphean task (Holzer et al., 2007; Pager 2003).

Or would it? A growing body of research indicates that potential job contacts are wary of providing job-matching assistance to job seekers of ill-repute, fearing what such referrals might do to their own reputations once hired (Smith, 2005; 2007; 2010). It stands to reason, then, that a class of job seekers marked by a criminal record would represent a kind of challenge to potential job contacts, causing them to pause before making a decision to offer the aid that marked job seekers need and sometimes seek. Given this, how do potential job contacts make sense of job seeking former prisoners' status as such, how do these interpretations inform their sense of their own role during the job-matching process, and what role does race and ethnicity play in shaping potential job contacts' orientation to assist? In this study I draw from data based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a small, nonrandom sample of 126 ethnoracially diverse jobholders employed at one large, public sector employer to investigate the various frames that potential job contacts deploy that shape their interpretations of former prisoners' efforts to find work and inform their own decisions about whether or not or to what extent to offer job-matching assistance.

SOCIAL CAPITAL MOBILIZATION DURING THE JOB-MATCHING PROCESS

Few doubt that competitive advantage comes with having personal contacts who can intervene in the job-matching process on job seekers' behalf. Searching for work through friends, relatives, and acquaintances appears to be the most efficient approach (Granovetter 1974 [1995]). Generally, it takes little effort, time, or money to inform our friends, relatives, and acquaintances that we are willing to consider new opportunities, and, in the process, to potentially mobilize them as important sources for job information and influence. Further, the benefits associated with this relatively "costless" search method can be huge, and they tend to lead to more successful searches. In part because personal contacts screen job seekers for "desirability," provide useful information about hiring to job seekers at optimal times, and vouch for job seekers' capabilities, their referrals are more likely than non-referrals to receive interview requests, to be offered employment, and to accept those offers (Blau and Robins, 1990; Fernandez and Galperin, 2014; Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997; Petersen et al., 2000; Wielgosz and Carpenter, 1987). Referrals' search duration also tends to be significantly shorter (Blau and Robins, 1990; Wielgosz and Carpenter, 1987), and finding work through personal contacts also increases the likelihood of *keeping* the job, since job contacts often help referrals to learn the job and to become acclimated to the work environment fairly quickly after being hired (Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997; Neckerman and Fernandez, 2003). Thus, there is little wonder why searching for work through one's network of personal relations is so pervasive, exceeding 80%

among some populations, including Latinos and the poor (see, for instance, Falcon and Melendez, 2001; Granovetter 1995; Green et al., 1999).

But access to personal contacts who can help does not guarantee that they will provide assistance when needed. Alexandra Marin's (2012) research is illustrative of this point. Among a sample of college-educated, entry-level, white collar workers at a Toronto call center, Marin reports that most opportunities to share job information—the most basic form of job-matching assistance—were left to wither. Personal contacts' reluctance was rooted in concerns about when and with whom it was appropriate to share unsolicited information and advice and to what extent they would be blamed if referrals were passed over. Consequently, when jobholders had knowledge of a job vacancy and knowledge of a suitable candidate, Marin reports that they provided information only 27% of the time. This figure was only slightly higher when her jobholders knew a suitable candidate for a job vacancy who was actually searching for work (31%). Thus, even under circumstances seemingly ripe for information sharing, social capital mobilization was far from guaranteed.

On the question of social capital mobilization, my own research has been central (2005, 2007, 2010). Drawing from in-depth interviews of 105 low-income Black women and men from one Midwestern city, (Smith 2005, 2007) I examined the job-matching process from respondents' perspectives as potential job contacts, with an eye toward better understanding why the Black poor were less likely to find work through networks despite the fact that the majority searched for work through family members, friends, and acquaintances. I found that those in a position to help overwhelmingly responded to requests for help with skepticism and distrust. Eighty percent of respondents expressed concern that job seekers in their networks were too unmotivated to follow through on the assistance they received, required great expenditures of time and emotional energy to find and keep work, or acted too irresponsibly on the job, thereby jeopardizing the jobholders' own reputations in the eyes of employers and weakening their already-tenuous labor market prospects. Consequently, they were strongly disinclined to provide the type of help—personal recommendation—that best facilitates job acquisition in low-wage labor markets where employers rely heavily on informal referrals for recruitment and screening. Thus, I argued, that the Black poor were less likely to find work through their networks of relations was not solely due to their lack of access to mainstream ties and institutions (Wilson 1989), to their exclusion from Whites' and Latinos' active job referral networks (Royster 2003; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003), nor to employers' attempts to circumvent Blacks' own job referral networks (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991). Instead, low-income Blacks' job referral networks also appeared relatively inefficacious because of job contacts' often strong reluctance to act on behalf of their job seeking friends, relatives and acquaintances, a reluctance rooted in pervasive distrust itself born from prior negative experiences largely understood through neoliberal discourses privileging individualistic accounts of persistent disadvantage. Thus, the inefficacy of low-income Blacks' job referral networks appeared as much a problem of social capital *mobilization* as it was a problem of social capital *access*. Although this research was perhaps the first study to systematically examine these dynamics of information flow and influence from the perspective of the job contact, earlier studies alluded to this as well (Newman 1999; Royster 2003). What this small but growing body of research indicates is that social capital mobilization is highly contingent, and the relevant contingencies have important implications for job-matching assistance on behalf of the formerly incarcerated.

MOBILIZATION CONTINGENCIES: FRAMES FOR ACTION

How contacts respond when faced with opportunities to assist the formerly incarcerated will likely depend on the frames for action they deploy. In sociology, the concept of frames has been used most extensively in research on social movements and collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000). More recently it has been embraced by scholars attempting to bring culture back to discussions of poverty without the stigma of once-dominant conceptions of culture (Small et al., 2010; Young 2010). Underlying its use in these disparate bodies of research is the notion that individuals are signifying agents whose actions are informed at least in part by the meanings they attribute to the situations and events unfolding around them (Benford and Snow, 2000; Young 2010). Goffman (1974) defined frames, or primary frameworks, in terms of “schemata of interpretation,” those informed by past experiences and related understandings, that individuals deploy to give meaning to—“to locate, perceive, identify, and label”—events or situations that would otherwise be meaningless (1974, p. 21). Because individuals’ unique experiences are brought to bear in making sense of any event or situation, different individuals can understand the same situation quite differently. Thus, variations in individuals’ interpretations of a given situation can be explained, at least in part, by noting the frames they deploy (Small et al., 2010).

Further, frames have consequences for individual and collective behavior (Benford and Snow 2000). Teenage pregnancy frames are predictive of sexual activity among adolescents (Harding 2007); frames about the “good job” matter for how low-income Black men prepare to acclimate in the working world (Young 2010); neighborhood-related frames have been linked to residents’ levels of participation in community activities (Small 2004); and racial injustice frames have been found to shape Blacks’ and Whites’ taste for punishment (Bobo and Johnson, 2004). What these studies and others reveal is the importance of frames for informing individuals’ actions within specific cultural contexts. In so doing they also point to the relevance of the frame concept for better understanding social capital mobilization, including the mobilization of social capital for formerly incarcerated job seekers.

FRAMES FOR ACTION, JOB SEEKING FORMER PRISONERS, AND RACE

The evidence seems compelling that access to networks of job contacts can make the difference between finding work immediately post-release and languishing in a state of joblessness to the point of discouragement (Cobbina 2009; Nelson et al., 1999; Visher and Kachnowski, 2007). Several studies have highlighted the central role that networks play in matching former prisoners to jobs post-release. Researchers from the Vera Institute of Justice, for instance, conducted a study of former prisoners’ reintegration experiences up to one-month post-incarceration (Nelson et al., 1999). Of the 49 former prisoners they followed, roughly one-third (eighteen) found work within the first month of release. Twelve of these quick transitioners had been hired even before release from prison—eight were rehired by their former employers and four found new jobs through the help of family members and friends. Finding work quickly seemed to hinge on having pre-release connections (see also Visher and Kachnowski, 2007).

Given results like these, the tendency is to imagine that the thirty-one men in the Vera Institute study who did not find work immediately post-release lacked access to those who could help. There is ample reason to suspect, however, that how potential job contacts perceive the justice-involved might as easily create barriers to job-search

related social capital activation and mobilization. A growing body of research has already established that most employers are disinclined to hire ex-offenders both because of fears of being found liable for negligent hiring if “marked” employees act criminally on the job, and because of a general distrust of a pool of applicants who have essentially been certified untrustworthy by the penal system (Albright and Denq, 1996; Decker et al., 2015; Eley 2007; Holzer 1996; Holzer et al., 2007; Lukies et al., 2011; Pager 2003, 2007; Pager and Quillian, 2005).¹ Referrals from trusted individuals, like current employees, go far in convincing employers to hire former prisoners (see also Fahey et al., 2006), but it is unclear under what circumstances current employees would act in this capacity for job seekers tainted by a criminal record. After all, the stigma that informs employers’ perceptions of former prisoners likely also shapes the way contacts perceive them. Indeed, public opinion about ex-offenders tends to be quite negative. A number of older studies indicate that because most contacts would be uncomfortable having former prisoners as co-workers, fearing their own safety and that of their coworkers, they would also be unwilling to aid them during the hiring process (Conklin 1975; Kutchinsky 1968; Simmons 1965). This is because diverse populations see offenders as outsiders, low-class, unattractive and prone to violence (Reed and Reed, 1973; Roberts 1992, 1997; Saladin et al., 1988; Shoemaker and South 1978; Simmons 1965). They also assume that those who have been convicted of crime have several priors and are very likely to commit new crimes in the future (Roberts 1997). In the minds of most, past is prologue.

Individuals’ perceptions of ex-offenders also affect their behaviors toward them. In general, while flexible and modifiable (Cullen et al., 1990; Flanagan and Caufield 1984; Sandys and McGarrell 1995), the American public’s attitudes about crime and punishment tend towards punitiveness. Despite some support for rehabilitative measures, including counseling and educational and vocational training programs for some types of offenders, the last four decades has witnessed a general tenor of harshness, with a clear focus on retribution, constant surveillance, and incapacitation (Garland 2001; McCorkle 1993). Still, levels of support for such punitive criminal justice policies and practices vary, and variations have been linked to cultural frames about punishment, deterrence, rehabilitation, and racial injustice (Bobo and Johnson, 2004; Bobo and Thompson, 2006; Cullen et al., 1990; McCorkle 1993). Thus, to varying degrees, concerns about former prisoners’ trustworthiness, and fears about their risk of reoffending, would likely animate the thoughts of many potential job contacts and affect their decisions to act as personal intermediaries.

Further, because ethnoracial background structures individuals’ lives and shapes their experiences, it also likely informs which frames they deploy and affects how willing they are to help. Although the American public has a strong orientation toward punitive treatment of the justice-involved, a noteworthy racial gap in support for harsh criminal justice policies exists. Relative to Whites, Blacks are significantly less punitive in their approaches to crime and punishment (Blumstein and Cohen, 1980; Bobo and Johnson, 2004; Bobo and Thompson, 2006; Miller et al., 1986; Secret and Johnson, 1989); they also show greater support for rehabilitative programs (Gerber and Engelhardt-Greer, 1996; McCorkle 1993). Black-white differences are in part rooted in Blacks’ greater sense of procedural and distributive injustices—in absolute terms and relative to the treatment that other ethnoracial groups receive, they are more likely to perceive that their criminal case processing is meted out unfairly and, consequently, that their outcomes are poorer (Hagan and Albonetti, 1982; Sampson and Bartusch, 1998; Tyler and Huo, 2002).² Thus, Blacks’ relative propensity toward more rehabilitative, less retributive justice is in good part attributable to their distrust of a racially biased and excessively punitive legal system,³ and that distrust will likely

also promote their willingness to assist the formerly incarcerated during job search, especially relative to Whites and other ethnoracial groups less beleaguered by the criminal justice system. For this reason, we can identify the factors that potential job contacts privilege when making decisions about referring formerly incarcerated job seekers by paying attention to the cultural frames they deploy and connecting these to the set of job-matching actions (or inactions) they take.

THE CASE STUDY

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a non-random sample of 148 ethnoracially diverse custodian, food service, and administrative staff workers at one large, public sector employer in the state of California, which I call CPSE (California Public Sector Employer). CPSE has a racially and ethnically diverse permanent and contingent workforce of about 9,000. At its worksite are approximately 1,000 facilities operations and maintenance workers (custodians), 250 food service workers, and over 2,700 administrative/clerical and related support staff (admin), among other occupational categories. Results presented here are based on responses from 126 jobholders.⁴

For participation in this study, jobholders were primarily recruited through two related strategies. Unit supervisors and managers were asked permission to describe the study to jobholders during staff meetings and to recruit those who expressed interest in participating. This recruitment strategy yielded approximately two-thirds of the interviews conducted since the study began in the spring of 2008. To maximize range and to ensure the recruitment of a diverse subset of workers (Weiss 1994), we asked each respondent to help recruit up to three additional CPSE custodians, food service workers, and administrative staff from their networks who fit the study criteria. It is through this process that we were able to recruit the remaining one-third of respondents who participated in this study.

Between 15 and 18% of CPSE's workforce has been contingent in recent years, but all of the jobholders interviewed for this study were "permanent." The decision to focus recruitment on permanent workers was deliberate. Previous research has suggested that job contacts' decisions to make referrals are in part informed by their own tenuous positions in the labor market. For instance, a number of my low-income Black respondents expressed fear that they might be fired if they made a bad match (Smith, 2005); and, indeed, a few had been fired for this reason. By interviewing respondents who are objectively under no threat of job loss at CPSE if a match they facilitate goes sour (although they may have been under such threat when employed by other employers about whom we also learn), we can look past this otherwise important constraint to providing job-finding assistance to identify the other factors that shape jobholders' decisions to help.

Organizations also play an important role in constraining or expanding opportunities for network-based recruitment (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). At CPSE, workers are given ample opportunity to intervene during the hiring process, if they so choose, for permanent and contingent hires. Once a unit has been given permission to hire, the manager or supervisor of the unit first posts the position internally. Current employees at CPSE have first rights to fill vacant positions and know to review these announcements if they wish to transfer to another department or if they want to get a heads-up on openings that will eventually become available to the public. If the posted position is not filled internally, staff at the Central Personnel Office publicize it by posting its details on online job sites, such as Monster.com and IMDiversity.com,

as well as CPSE's own website. The vacancy remains open for a specified period of time, usually two weeks, after which no applications are accepted. To aid their job seeking contacts through this part of the process, jobholders can inform them that applications are being accepted; point them to the online application system; provide them with the job number for the position or positions of interest; inform them about which hard and soft skills are being sought; explain how they might best showcase their skills and talents on their résumés; and they can also give applicants permission to list them as a reference. Many of these approaches have been found to advantage referrals over non-referrals during the hiring process (Fernandez et al., 2000; Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997). Once the application deadline has passed, jobholders can intervene again by approaching their managers or supervisors to advocate for their referrals, typically by asking them to "pull the application" for closer review. If referrals are called for an interview, jobholders can inform them about the types of questions they can expect to be asked and educate them about the best answers to provide.

At CPSE a criminal conviction does not automatically preclude an applicant from employment. Indeed, among the 126 jobholders examined for this study, one-fifth, or 19%, had been imprisoned before.⁵ To protect the institution and its assets, however, CPSE requires criminal background checks for positions requiring fiduciary responsibility. Those who have been convicted of theft, including identity theft, embezzlement, or fraud cannot be hired for these positions. Convicted sex offenders and child molesters cannot be hired for positions requiring unsupervised contact with specified others. Only convictions within the last seven years are considered by the review committee, and these policies do not apply retroactively; employees already in their positions when the policy took effect are unaffected. Thus, while CPSE jobholders can facilitate the job-matching process for job seekers who have been formerly incarcerated (and ex-offenders in general), there are limitations; some positions are simply off-limits. This almost certainly shapes job contacts' helping behaviors, but these institutional protections offer little reason to forsake formerly incarcerated job seekers altogether.

Still, jobs such as those at CPSE are not typical for former prisoners. The population from which a majority of former prisoners are drawn is poor and uneducated. Even before penal contact they struggle with unemployment (Western 2006), and when employed they garner low hourly wages, work relatively few weeks per year, and have annual earnings that place them below the poverty line (Western 2006). After penal contact their employment prospects dim further still. According to Visher and Kachnowski (2007), of the minority of former prisoners employed within eight months of release, the overwhelming majority worked in construction, manual labor, and maintenance and earned between \$720 and \$900 per month. Respondents for this study, on the other hand, who were almost evenly distributed in custodian (35%), foodservice (36%), and administrative staff positions (29%), had been employed at CPSE for a little over ten years, had benefits and retirement plans, and earned, on average, \$2,600 per month—ranging between \$1,991 for food service workers and \$3,375 for administrative staff; custodial workers averaged \$2,491 per month. (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of respondents in the study sample.) What this means is that even one of the lowest positions offered at CPSE—food service worker—offers far more in terms of wages, benefits, and employment stability than the typical former prisoner is able to secure.

Jobholders at CPSE can help job seekers with criminal records, and they have many opportunities and numerous ways to do so. Given this, I ask the following set of questions: What factors do potential job contacts privilege when making decisions

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents in Sample (N=126)

Characteristics		Std. Dev.
Mean age (years)	42.3	12.0
Percent female	56.3	0-1
Ethnoracial category		
Asian	8.1	0-1
Black/African American	45.5	0-1
Hispanic/Latino	25.2	0-1
Multiracial	8.9	0-1
White	12.2	0-1
Percent foreign born	27.8	0-1
Educational Attainment		
High school diploma/GED	6.0	0-1
Some college/vocational school	56.4	0-1
College degree or more	37.6	0-1
Mean Job Tenure (years)	9.4	8.3
Mean Monthly Salary (\$)	2,607	1,186
Occupation (%)		
Custodian	35	0-1
Administrative staff	29	0-1
Food service worker	36	0-1

about referring formerly incarcerated job seekers, and in what ways do these factors inform their decisions about whom to help, how to help, and when to do so?

To address these questions, respondents were asked the following:

- What would you think about helping someone who had been incarcerated? If your decision depends on the circumstances, under what circumstances would you help, and under what circumstances would you not help?
- Have you ever tried to help someone who had been incarcerated? If yes, can you tell me about that experience? Who was the person, and how is this person related to you? What kind of job was this? How did you decide whether or not to help this person? How did their being incarcerated play a role in your thinking?
- Have you ever decided against helping someone because they had been incarcerated? If yes, can you tell me about that experience? Who was this person, and how is this person related to you? What kind of job was this? How did you decide not to help this person? How did their being incarcerated play a role in your thinking?

Because we know relatively little about how individuals make decisions about providing job-matching assistance to formerly incarcerated job seekers, on this question I took an inductive approach to data coding and analysis, beginning the coding process with categories that jobholders had themselves identified as important and using the terms specific to their cultural contexts (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A close reading of each transcript revealed a set of major frames through which jobholders made sense of helping former prisoners with job search. By rereading transcripts with these initial set of cultural frames in mind, I sought to revise and refine them, unpacking the meanings associated with each. This second read also

offered opportunities to identify factors that might be related to the deployment of specific frames as well, including jobholders' own relationship to the criminal justice system, the extent to which the formerly incarcerated were embedded in jobholders' network of relations, the number of times jobholders had aided a former prisoner before and the quality of these prior experiences, and the extent to which jobholders had connections to community organizations whose mission it was to aid the reentry process. With these factors in mind, a third reading of the transcripts allowed for the solidification or confirmation of these categories. By analyzing how categories related to each other, I was able to identify the dominant frames deployed and how these informed jobholders' sense of their own role matching the formerly incarcerated to jobs. Central to decisions about mobilization were frames about the possibility of change.

FRAMES FOR (IN)ACTION

Over one-quarter of jobholders were near unequivocal in their support for aiding job seeking former prisoners, roughly two-thirds were noncommittal, and less than ten percent reported that they would likely not help under any circumstances (see Table 2). These responses were associated with four overarching cultural frames. Two dominated discussion—the second chances frame and the signaling change frame. Another two frames—the rigid structures frame and the opportunities to assist frame—were mentioned significantly less often. Neither implicated formerly incarcerated job seekers' attributes but instead identified factors outside of their control. A significant minority of jobholders also offered some combination of these four frames. In what follows I elaborate on each.

Table 2. Cultural Frames by Willingness to Provide Job-Matching Help to Former Prisoners (N=124)

	Second Chances	Signaling Change		Rigid Structures	Opportunities to Assist	Multiple Frames
		Ability: Nature of Offense	Commitment: Evidence of Change			
% of Sample	17.5%	25.4%	22.2%	7.9%	4.8%	22.2%
% Jobholders expressed strong willingness to help (28.1%)	95.5	0	14.8	30.0	0	14.8
% Jobholders were noncommittal (64.4%)	4.5	96.9	81.5	40.0	83.3	81.5
% Jobholders expressed strong reluctance to help (7.4%)	0	3.1	3.7	30.0	16.7	3.7
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: These categories are mutually exclusive.

Everyone Deserves a Second Chance

Twenty-two jobholders, roughly 18% of the sample, proposed that the formerly incarcerated deserved a second chance to realize their goals. Everyone makes mistakes, after all, and if given a chance, everyone is also capable of change, of leaving those mistakes in the past and doing better. Because change is possible for all, people are deserving of, and indeed entitled to, the chance to change and to have their new dispositions recognized and affirmed. As Nathan Simpson, a 38-year-old, Black custodian with just one year at CPSE, stated, “I don’t see any reason for not helping them. Because you did what you did, that don’t necessarily mean that’s the type of person you are now. You could be a different person now, now that you’ve been incarcerated. You might be a different person. I believe in second chances for anybody. Everybody deserves a chance to be able to prove themselves.” Not only did 36-year-old Michael Holder indicate that he was willing to help a former prisoner, the Black technician with ten years at CPSE also made plain that he was *more likely* to do so for marked job seekers. “Oh, that’s a plus. I really don’t have a problem helping nobody that’s been locked up, because that’s about reforming. You have a chance. You paid your dues for society. You’re out. Who’s to say you’re not entitled to a job? So really, just because you were in there doing time really don’t mean you’re not entitled to a job or a better living.” Kendra Kitchens, a 46-year-old, Black food service worker with 18 years at CPSE, offered this to explain why she helped her son’s friends: “I felt they just made a mistake in life. Just young and being irresponsible, doing the wrong thing. And felt this might help change their life.”

Second chancers were generally also willing to initiate job matches for former prisoners because they thought that too many institutional barriers to employment existed for those with a criminal record. The result of these barriers was not only that finding work in the formal economy had become too difficult, but also that the few jobs that were available offered wages that were so low that few former prisoners would be willing to accept them, thus eroding any real chance that former prisoners had to turn their lives around. When asked what kind of opportunities were available for former prisoners, for instance, 30-year-old Black, senior cook, Loreen Reynolds, stated flatly, “McDonald’s.” She explained, “I mean, because you come [to CPSE] and you’re a felon or you’ve got a misdemeanor. Hey, there’s a problem. So, it’s kind of hard, especially for minorities. It’s really hard after you’ve been to the penitentiary or Santa Rita or somewhere.” This was a situation Loreen had witnessed time and again. Many of her childhood friends had gone to jail or prison, and her fiancé had a number of friends as well who she described as “in and out of the penitentiary.” She recounted,

And every time they come by the house, I’m like, ‘Hey, you need to apply for a job. McDonald’s hiring, [another employer is] hiring, [another employer is] hiring.’ A lot of them say, ‘Oh, whatever, da da da da da. That’s no money.’ [*I: So the kinds of opportunities that are available don’t really occur to them as real opportunities?*] No, I don’t think so. For one, they’re limited. I mean, it’s only so many places you can go and apply. You can come [to CPSE] and apply; you’re a felon. Even though we have some here, but it’s really hard if you tell the truth.

In other words, because legal restrictions yielded low quantity and poor quality job opportunities, they actually discouraged desistance, diminishing the possibility of successful reentry, or any real chance to improve former prisoners’ lives. For this reason jobholders like Loreen were strongly in favor of helping them to find work. By providing help when needed, these personal intermediaries were, in essence, attempting to

make change possible. It was in part through the aid they offered that former prisoners had the opportunity to change their lives for the better. Not surprisingly, then, the overwhelming majority of second chancers, some 96%, expressed a strong desire to help. Less than 5% were noncommittal, and none expressed a strong reluctance.

Signaling Change

Almost half of the jobholders in the sample indicated that their help was contingent on the signals they received from former prisoners. They distinguished between two types. The first referenced the nature of offenses for which job seekers were punished to indicate job seekers' *ability* to change. The second referenced evidence that job seekers had changed to indicate job seekers' *commitment* to do so. Former prisoners' presumed ability and commitment to change—to give up “the life” they were assumed to be a part of and instead to embrace a worker identity in which only employment in the formal, wage economy mattered—was central to what role these jobholders saw themselves playing during the job-matching process. While contingents also argued for second chances, for the most part what they had to offer was the reward for having initiated change, not the means through which transformation would be achieved. Help came only after former prisoners proved their desire to transform or had provided evidence that they had been transformed.

What underlay contingents' concerns was the idea that change was not in fact possible for all. Some were incapable of change and so would not, should not, receive their assistance; here, knowledge about the nature of the offense(s) was critical. Among those for whom change was possible, change could not be assured; here, evidence of change was key. Ex-offenders were perceived as a very risky bunch, and so it was important that they provide strong signals that they could change, that they wanted to change, or that they had already been reformed. Only then would their risk of reoffending be assessed as negligible. Only then would contingents offer information and attempt to influence the process on their behalf.

The Nature of the Offense

For thirty two contingents (one-quarter of sample, but more than half of contingents), the nature and severity of the offense would drive decision making about whether and how to help. Before committing to a course of action, these jobholders wanted to know what former prisoners had done to warrant incarceration. What becomes clear is that, to some extent at least, the nature or severity of the offense was conflated with individuals' ability to change; some subset of crimes was indicative of an individual's deeply flawed character, one likely incapable of being redeemed, rehabilitated, and reintegrated.⁶ This, in fact, is what Barry Bishop reported. When asked under what circumstances he would be disinclined to help, the sixty two-year old, Black food service supervisor responded as follows:

If a person was incarcerated for crimes against people, like assault and violent stuff like that, because to me that shows a lack of control or restraint, and I think that those people that do that, it's a lifelong thing. You know, it's kind of the way they are. And I firmly believe that everybody is not a good person. I've seen some people that were ugly when they were little, they were ugly when they were teenagers, and they're dead now.

Irredeemables were typically those convicted of violent acts, like rape and murder.⁷ Most who raised concerns about the nature of offenses pointed to such acts. When

asked what he thought about helping someone who'd been incarcerated, for instance, twenty five-year-old Chuck Elway distinguished between drug users, who he would help, and some class of offenders that he would categorically exclude. "Yup," explained the White food service worker, "but it depends what you got incarcerated for. I don't think I'd help a rapist or a child molester or any of that. I would never help anyone. It depends on what you got incarcerated for." Similarly, fifty one-year-old Filipina, Joan Ramos, employed at CPSE for twenty two years, responded, "What did they do? They didn't kill anybody. I don't know about that. I probably won't do it either. It's kind of hard to put your trust in somebody who's like that. If he went to jail for rape or for killing somebody, how can you put your name on that? I probably won't. I know I won't. Not probably." Not only did such crimes say something about who the formerly incarcerated *had been*, they also said something about who they *continued to be* and likely always would be. Thus, being *capable* of violence, for all intents and purposes, was viewed as being *prone* to violence. Redemption, it seemed, was nearly impossible for those imprisoned for these reasons. The presumed high risk of reoffending would be ever present. Perhaps for this reason the overwhelming majority of jobholders who mentioned the nature of offenses were noncommittal (97%). None were strongly inclined to help, and only one jobholder was strongly disinclined toward doing so.

Evidence of Change

As a few contingents pointed out, most former prisoners were not violent offenders. Most were capable of changing their lives for the better and leaving "the life" behind. Even for this redeemable class of former prisoners, however, help was contingent on either signaling a readiness to change or signaling that they had already been reformed. Twenty-eight jobholders, or 22% of the sample, expressed this view exclusively. For instance, when asked what he would think about helping someone who'd been incarcerated, forty-year-old, Black administrator, Richard Ross, indicated the following:

Again, you are changed; your change has to be genuine. I'm not going to put you in a position that's going to help you fall or keep you stagnant to where you were before. If you're not looking to rise up, why should I help you? You have to help yourself in that aspect. You have to be willing to help yourself. You're not snowing me. You're not saying, 'Hey, man, can you help me get a job because I just got out of jail, and this, this, and this.' And you don't really want the change; you just want a steady job so you can still continue with your old habit. No. I just want a job because they said I had to get a job in order to stay out of jail. No. You're not looking to really be helped and benefit from the help that I'm giving you. There is no point in me doing it. So I wouldn't not help someone that wanted to be helped. And I would help someone that definitely wanted to be helped. But if you're not looking for help, no point.

For many contingents, however, an expressed commitment to change wasn't enough; they needed some sign that the former prisoner had been transformed. Gina Thomas drew from her own personal experience after criminal justice contact to consider the circumstances under which she would help. After spending time in reform school, detention centers, jail, and prison, the fifty-five-year old Black, food service worker with twenty one years at CPSE eventually desisted. Doing so, however, required her determination.⁸ She explained,

Well, I can use myself for an example. I know when I was ready to work and stop doing things that I was doing, the determination is always there. When you're trying to better yourself the first thing you see is determination. And for me, that would be it. Because if you want something bad enough you are going to do the right things to get it.

When encouraged to share what determination looked like, she went further,

Just the way they talk and their...they would constantly be doing whatever it is you ask them to do, to...well, did you go online? Yeah, I already did that. Have you heard anything? No, I haven't heard anything. Well, you would just have to wait until...but in the meantime they would be seeking other opportunities. You just don't sit and wait on one thing.

Thus, generalizing beyond herself to all former prisoners, Gina sought evidence for this fuel for change in the individuals she might help.

Kevin Allard, 32, shared a similar opinion. Over the past year the Black custodian with two years at CPSE had declined to help several job seekers, all "in the life," who approached him for assistance. His strong disinclination was rooted in his deep doubts about the extent to which the job seekers who approached him for help were, as he called it, "work ready." He did not believe that they were willing to undergo the transformation needed to become good workers in the formal wage economy, and he felt that he would know, having moved easily between these two worlds himself.⁹ Prior negative experiences as personal intermediary brought him to this conclusion. Although the criminally-engaged job seekers he knew often approached him for help to find work—he estimates to have been approached by between thirty and forty in the past year—rarely did they follow-up on the information he provided. Kevin had also been burned by a referral who had managed to convince him that he was work-ready (a difficult task, to be sure), only to quit, without notice, 1–2 weeks after taking the position. From these two types of experiences, Kevin had come to believe that the job seekers who sought his help were not really interested in working; they were "just talking." Not only did they lack the work ethic and worker identity needed to fully transition to work in the formal wage economy—they had not passed through important stages in the desistance process (see Baskin and Sommers, 1998; Fagan 1989; Shover 1986, 1995)—they were also unprepared for the substantial drop in income that would accompany retirement from the streets. This, too, would create a major barrier to transitioning out of the life. Consequently, Kevin most often refused to help. Only under the following circumstances would he even consider it:

The only reason why I would do that is if I felt that they were coming out to leave the street life alone. Then I would help them. If they really...that they're putting their freedom first. So if I know you're ready to sacrifice like that...just like we go out sacrificing freedom in our life, trying to get that. So if you're willing to sacrifice it to be without, yes. But if I knew that they kind of were undecided and might bounce back into that, no.

Indeed, it was only after seeing a great deal of evidence of transformation that he decided to help a friend and mentee from the life. According to Kevin,

The person I did recommend—like I said, he sacrificed before he got this job. He said to himself before he even...before the job even came up, he was willing

to stop doing whatever he was going to do no matter if he would be working somewhere else... 'I'm not going to do it no more; I'm cool.' And I thought he was playing or whatever. So he actually stayed without working or hustling for maybe like two or three months before I took him seriously. [I thought] 'You really trying to leave it alone,' so I recommended him for a job here because he was serious about it.

How did his friend, Travon, survive during this period of deprivation? "He just accepted being broke. He could accept living like he was a kid again, as far as I'm going to have to eat at my mom's house or... Basically, it's no more extras. It's just like going to school and coming home. That's why I say I didn't think he was going to be able to do it like that. But he really did. He just accepted it, not having no money. He was just willing not to take that route." Thus, to demonstrate that he had put the streets behind him and had committed to work, Travon refrained from any activity that might implicate him in the life. Given Travon's behavior, which was consistent and extended over a relatively long period of time, Kevin came to believe that he was sincere and work-ready, and so he willingly put his own name on the line and helped Travon get a job. Of the almost forty job seekers that Kevin reported approached him for job-finding help, Travon was only one of two for whom Kevin extended himself, and he did so in these cases because these job seekers provided evidence that they had become changed.

Among jobholders like Kevin who sought evidence of change, twenty two were noncommittal, four expressed a strong willingness to do so, and two were strongly disinclined. Each of the four who were strongly inclined to help had at least one prior, positive experience helping a former prisoner, and so contingent on some evidence of job seekers' rehabilitation, they were unfazed by the possibility of helping others. Jessica Rubio, a forty one-year-old administrative assistant with two and a half years at CPSE explained her willingness by describing the experience she had helping a formerly incarcerated co-worker and friend. "He didn't think he would ever really move beyond that, because of his record. And that's really hard, especially for African Americans, to get jobs and people trust them." Jessica, whose parents are Black and White, went on to explain that because he wanted to move on and make a name for himself, she offered her assistance, helping him to complete and submit paperwork and then acting as a reference. In time, her friend was recognized by the city and county for the work he was able to do in part because of the assistance she offered to him early on. When asked to explain how his criminal record played into her thinking, she explained, "I didn't care about that. That was something he dealt with. That is something he did. That had nothing to do with me." In this, too, Jessica was similar to the others who were strongly inclined to help in the face of evidence of change. With change, the criminal record mattered little; a second chance was all but guaranteed. As explained by Jacob Fine, a thirty nine-year-old, White chef with one and one half years at CPSE explained, "It wouldn't matter. It wouldn't affect me... It's where they stand now, what their mentality is now and how they feel about themselves and their future."

Fifty five-year-old Ronald Thatcher was one of two men, both Black, who were strongly disinclined to help. For both men disinclination was rooted in their sense that many among the formerly incarcerated required professional help to turn their lives around. Without this, both custodians felt the odds of rehabilitation were extremely low. When asked if he had ever helped, or would ever help, a former prisoner to find work, Ronald, who had worked at CPSE for twenty six years, exclaimed, "No, because nowadays there's too much water under the bridge and they need

some really professional help. I've watched it. I've counseled. And I've seen that there are some people that really need professional help, and it has to be put out there." As with other jobholders, the quality of Ronald's prior experiences and observations informed his orientation to assist. Although James Watts lacked Ronald's prior experiences helping and observing former prisoners, he nonetheless offered a similar analysis.

Structural Frames

To explain their position vis-a-vis former prisoners, some jobholders pointed to factors outside of job seekers' control. Roughly eight percent of jobholders discussed the rigid institutional structures that dominated decisions made about hiring the justice-involved. Almost five percent of jobholders pointed to their own opportunities and constraints. In what follows I describe these less dominant frames before explaining how they shaped the provision of job-matching assistance for formerly incarcerated job seekers.

Rigid Institutional Structures

For ten jobholders, or 8% of the sample, criminal justice contact represented such a rigid barrier to employment—employers would likely never hire former prisoners—that it affected how they engaged such job seekers around the possibility of providing job-matching assistance. As twenty eight-year old Arturo Herrera explained, "Once they see that you have a record, they won't give you a job here. It would be really hard to get a job here at the university." Thus, the Mexican immigrant who had been employed at CPSE as a custodian for ten years only considered helping justice-involved job seekers find work elsewhere. Jackie Riley, a nineteen-year-old, Black administrator with twenty one years at CPSE, shared this perspective as well, but she only came to this position after observing the effect that such barriers had on one formerly incarcerated job seeker's morale. Jackie's son-in-law had been incarcerated, and after release found work in a warehouse through a temporary employment agency. There he was led to believe that, despite his criminal record, his placement would transition to full time employment. According to Jackie,

And he was so proud and so happy. And he couldn't wait to go to work. He felt like he had a real job. He was earning and would be able to provide for his family. And he was going to work. He had his little waist belt things so you don't mess up your back. And he wears his little belt. [Laughs] And he would go to work. And the program was if you worked so many consistent days after...I say if you work consistent days—I'm just going to throw out a number; I can't remember what it was. For three months, after say sixty days you become permanent. And so he was up to fifty nine days and he just knew he had it. And on that last fifty-ninth day, they let him go.

Her son-in-law was devastated by being released. "He was so crushed. He really was crushed. And he has not been the same since. He just won't even try....So he has just been spiraling downward ever since. It's kind of sad." And Jackie can sympathize. "He's like, 'They're not going to hire me, man, because of my record. No one is going to hire me.' You keep trying to do the encouragement thing, but you know that he's pretty much right...No one will give him a chance." And because she now thinks that finding stable and secure work for an ex-offender is "almost impossible," she offers encouraging words, but no more. To do otherwise would be to set these job seekers up for major disappointment, a burden she could not bear to carry.

Jobholders who highlighted rigid institutional structures focused their attention not on job seekers' ability or commitment to change, but instead on the institution's formal and informal rules for hiring who have been marked. These rules informed their own sense of possibilities and their willingness to engage the process as personal intermediaries. While three jobholders were strongly inclined to do so, they were clear that their ability to influence the hiring process was severely limited. Despite this, they would help anyway, as one jobholder, Amanda Pico, explained. The eighteen-year-old food service worker stated, "If the hiring people or the managers decide to have them as a worker or not, it's on them... You know, it's not on me just because of his—that person's history, or whatever—like their record. [*I: So would you be reluctant to help someone like that?*] No, I would help them, but there would be so much I can do for them." Four jobholders, like Arturo, were noncommittal, explaining their hesitancy in various ways—the rigidity of the system, which generally disallowed such hires; their own discomfort with the idea of intervening on behalf of job seekers' who the institution had marked as undesirable; and their own ignorance about the exact nature of hiring rules regarding the justice-involved.

Three jobholders, like Jackie, were strongly disinclined toward helping. While Jackie's disinclination was rooted in her wish to save such job seekers from major disappointments associated with the legal and social stigmas that they faced, Lupe Ramirez was convinced that CPSE would not hire such job seekers under any circumstances, and so, she was adamant, help would do little to improve their chances; it was a waste of time. Waldo Burton offered another perspective. The forty seven-year-old, Black custodian with less than one year on the job was also self-employed; he owned his own janitorial services company, and he learned through his experience as an employer that helping probationers and parolees with work assignments often pulled him into costly bureaucratic hassles with the state. Because probation and parole officers required so much of his time to verify his employees' work status, he found it difficult to meet his own work targets and so decided that the costs associated with helping the formerly incarcerated, even some from his own family, were too high.

Opportunities to Assist

For six jobholders, criminal justice contact seemed to matter little. These jobholders focused instead on the extent and nature of their opportunities and/or resources to offer aid when needed. Five indicated that their assistance hinged on what type of work the formerly incarcerated job seeker sought, since their own knowledge about job vacancies was limited.¹⁰ As Angelo de la Cruz explained, for instance, "[Incarceration] wouldn't be an issue for me." The administrator continued, "Well, it would depend. It still would depend on the fit and the type of job, and what they were trying to go for." This was how Angelo, a Filipino-American, made decisions about non-offending job seekers as well. Similarly, Casey O'Connor, a multiracial food service worker, offered, "I'd do it. I don't know if I would be successful at helping them, because it depends on what kind of work they wanted to do and whether or not I knew of that kind of work being available." Two jobholders linked their ability to help to their own limited availability. For instance, one considered the likelihood of being able to offer help given her own general social isolation; for this reason she doubted she would ever come into contact with any job seeker, much less one who had been formerly incarcerated. If she did, however, she would be open to helping.

Bridging Multiple Frames

Twenty eight jobholders, or 22% of the sample, deployed two or more major frames when sharing thoughts about helping formerly incarcerated job seekers. The nature

of the offense frame dominated couplings, representing 80% of combined framings. When paired with other frames, the nature of offenses frame acted as a kind of filter, screening out undesirable job seekers. Bettina Bullock was one of six jobholders to deploy both the second chance and the nature of the offense frames. The former, however, clearly dominated her thoughts and actions. Bettina was offended by what she saw as a general lack proportionality and parsimony exercised by the criminal justice system, and because of this she was willing to sidestep formal and informal rules about hiring ex-offenders. The forty seven-year-old, Black food service manager theorized that it was the lack of jobs in the formal economy that fed labor supply into the informal and illegal economy. To respond to job shortages with policies that further restricted ex-offenders' access to decent jobs was both ironic and counterproductive, and it violated principles of justice we all presumably hold dear. According to Bettina, "And so if you've been in jail for drug selling and this and that, and you want a job—I'm all for that. I think that is...that totally relates to the drug selling; the lack of jobs. So it's just crazy to me. It really is just crazy to me. But of course no one cares about that. Initially. You've been convicted of a felony. They read that and you check "yes" and that's it. So it's very difficult."

But, Bettina continued, the criminal justice system didn't just thrive on the persecution of drug dealers. It seemed that any act could get one caught up in the system, and her sense that the net was widening to include ever-more people only infuriated her more. "Nowadays people go to jail for the craziest crap...I also know that especially for Black men—that could be anything; you could be in jail for anything." Consequently, when a friend approached her for help finding work for her daughter, a felon at nineteen, Bettina agreed. There was no question that the young woman had made a big mistake, but by paying the huge fine assessed against her, Bettina felt that her friend's daughter had also paid her dues to society. Given this, Bettina argued, she deserved a second chance to build a life, to grow and mature without justice system-related constraints. Because of the felony, however, employers refused to hire her. With this in mind, Bettina encouraged the daughter to apply for a job in her department. Importantly, she instructed the daughter to *not* "check the box" because doing so would significantly increase her odds of being disqualified. Furthermore, because Bettina herself held a supervisory position, she could control whether or not the daughter's criminal background was reviewed; she chose not to. According to Bettina, "She needed a job. She was out of school. But nobody would hire her because of her check in the felony thing. So I told her and her mom don't check it. Just don't check it. I do know about it. I'm the manager here and I do know about it, and let's just say they don't ask and we won't tell. And so I did that. And she turned out to be a great worker." For Bettina, the daughter was no threat to the institution's operations and assets, and so she helped her, using her own position to conceal evidence of the daughter's mark. By breaking the rules, she sought to gain justice.

Still, despite her strong inclination to help, Bettina struggled mightily with the idea that she would assist someone who had committed a violent act: "Incarcerated or not, I wouldn't want to work with anybody that's violent. I don't think I would like to work with someone with a violent history." Thus, the nature of the offense, with a focus on violence, appeared to be the one exception to Bettina's otherwise strong commitment to aiding those who had gotten caught in the system's dragnet. While Bettina's embrace of the second chances frame primarily drove how she saw and engaged with formerly incarcerated job seekers, that unqualified support for those needing help to change was limited to non-violent offenders. Others who deployed the nature of the offense and second chances frame also did so by including exceptions for those whose crimes were deemed too troubling; they were undeserving, it seems, of further consideration.

Four jobholders deployed both the nature of the offense and the evidence of change frames. Here again, once incorrigibles were excluded from consideration, jobholders claimed a willingness to assist. In this instance, however, that willingness was also contingent on evidence that job seekers had shown an inclination to change. Lisa Mitchell, a twenty three-year-old White administrative assistant, was one such jobholder. She reported on helping formerly incarcerated job seekers to find work: “It depends why, probably. Because I’m judgmental. Well, I guess it would depend a lot on the personal responsibility and what this person was trying to do and how they felt that was going. If someone was incarcerated for like stealing from their job, I’m not going to help them try and get a job. If someone was incarcerated because they were a pedophile, I’m not going to try and help them get a job. But there are situations in which someone could be incarcerated in which I would totally support them in their quest to get back on track with society. [*I: What situations might those be?*] I don’t know. It would have to be ... They would have to be wanting this and willing to do what they have to do if they get this job. They would have had to be in jail for a reason that I personally agree with, which sounds horrible. But like it needs to be something that I could understand why you would break the law for that for me to want to help you get a job.” Thirty-one year old Janice Barker shared a similar logic, as the following exchange indicates:

I think that’s kind of iffy. Because it depends on what they were incarcerated for. It could be something totally different than what you’re expecting, because sometimes everybody doesn’t go to jail for criminal acts or violent acts. It might be tickets. It could be any little minor thing. So I think you need to get more into the background of that person in order to know. [*I: Under what circumstances would you help?*] If maybe the person was rehabilitated; if they did do something that was outrageous, if they were rehabilitated and they proved that to you. Meaning that you’ve seen this person in more than once instance—more than two times or even three times—trying to do the right thing. I think people ... most of the time they have to prove themselves, either way it goes. [*I: Under what circumstances would you not help?*] That if someone gets out of jail—out of being incarcerated—and they’re doing the same things that they were doing in order to get in there. You went in for selling drugs and you’re going to go back for selling drugs. It’s like you haven’t changed at all; you don’t really want...you want to go to jail.

Thus, after limiting the pool to those who, because of the nature of their offenses, were redeemable, jobholders then identified those who showed a commitment to change.

While the overwhelming majority of jobholders who deployed multiple frames explained that their assistance was contingent, four jobholders were strongly inclined toward helping. Only one of these jobholders was disinclined toward doing so, explaining his strong reluctance primarily in terms of the incorrigibility of those with criminal records, especially those who sell drugs. Carl Bartlett was a forty nine-year-old, Black custodial worker who had been employed at CPSE for three years. He made sense of job-matching assistance to former prisoners through two frames. First, he wanted to know about the nature of job seekers’ offenses, in part because he assumed that many former prisoners were incorrigible. He also made note of the somewhat rigid structures that would likely block job seekers’ efforts. It was the combination of these two frames that informed his orientation to assist. When asked about what he thought of helping a formerly incarcerated job seeker, Carl explained,

It depends on what they went to jail for. I see what I can do, but I don't think so. I don't think CPSE wants you [here] and you dealing drugs. You think to come to CPSE and deal some drugs, you really going to jail. So, that's just one example of it. [I: *So generally if someone had gone to jail—especially for drugs—that would be automatically no?*] Automatic no. [I: *How frequently are you approached by someone you know who is looking for a job here?*] At least once a month. Most of them criminals. I can't bring criminals up here.

Among the four who were strongly inclined to help, three had assisted a former prisoner to find work in the past and described the experience in positive terms. Each of these jobholders also located job seekers' difficulties in unjust institutional barriers to reentry, despite the second chance that such job seekers deserved. Here again, the quality of prior experiences helping formerly incarcerated job seekers to find work appears to have shaped jobholders' orientation toward helping above and beyond the cultural frames they deployed.

FRAMES FOR ACTION, JOB SEEKING FORMER PRISONERS, AND RACE

Because ethnoracial background structures individuals' lives and shapes the extent, nature, and quality of their experiences, it also informs which frames for action they deploy, including the frames jobholders deployed when making decisions about making referrals for formerly incarcerated job seekers. While Black jobholders were disproportionately more likely to advocate for second chances and to seek evidence of change, Latinos were more likely to reference the nature of job seekers' offenses and the rigid structures that constrained their own efforts. Asian jobholders also pointed to the nature of offenses as well as opportunities to assist, and White jobholders stood out for bridging frames, filtering out problematic ex-offenders before seeking evidence of change. In what follows I elaborate on each and speculate about why ethnoracial background mattered.

A higher percentage of Blacks and Latinos advocated exclusively for second chances—23.2% and 19.4%, respectively. Only one in ten Asians and multiracials, and no Whites, did. Unlike Latino jobholders, however, Black jobholders were disproportionately represented among second chancers—they were 42% of respondents in the sample but 62% of jobholders advocating for former prisoners' right to a second chance.¹¹

Table 3. Cultural Frames by Jobholders' Ethnoracial Background (N=123)

	% of Asians	% of Blacks/African Americans	% of Hispanics/ Latinos	% of Multiracials	% of Whites
Second chances	10.0	23.2	19.4	9.1	0
Signaling change					
Nature of offense	60.0	12.5	38.7	18.2	26.7
Evidence of change	10.0	28.6	12.9	36.4	20.0
Rigid structures	0	8.9	12.9	9.1	0
Opportunities to assist	20.0	0	3.2	20.0	6.7
Multiple frames	0	26.8	12.9	18.2	46.7
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

A combination of factors likely accounts for Black jobholders' disproportionate representation. First, a higher percentage of Black jobholders had been incarcerated than their non-Black jobholding counterparts. Whereas one-third of these respondents reported spending some time in reform schools, detention centers, jails, and/or prisons, no more than 16% of any other ethnoracial group reported the same (see Table 4). Although neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for helping, jobholders' own prior contact with the criminal justice system gave these jobholders a better sense of how difficult successful reentry could be. Second, Black jobholders were far more likely to be embedded in networks with high concentrations of former prisoners. A much higher percentage reported having ties to one or more former prisoners—71% versus 42% or less of other ethnoracial groups of jobholders. Importantly, many of these Black jobholders described connections to “a lot” of former prisoners, connections that were often quite strong and that likely both normalized the existence and destigmatized the status of these men and women in their communities. Third and related, Black jobholders were more likely to understand Blacks' disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system, and related poor outcomes, as an issue of racial injustice. It was in part because Black former prisoners faced greater hurdles, rooted in institutional bias, that these jobholders argued for second chances. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, among those with ties to former prisoners, a majority had prior experiences helping former prisoners, and, by and large, they viewed such experiences as unproblematic. Consequently, they were strongly inclined toward helping in the future. These were not jobholders who promised to help but were unlikely to do so, as with Quillian and Pager's employers who did not “walk the talk” (2005). Instead, with a perspective rooted in social and racial justice, they had helped before and seemed likely to do so again if the opportunity presented itself.

Jobholders who sought evidence for change looked very similar to those who advocated for second chances. As with second chancers, they were disproportionately Black (and multiracial),¹² a significant minority had been incarcerated, and most had ties to at least one former prisoner. Further, among those with such ties, the overwhelming majority had helped at least one former prisoner before (see Table 5). Unlike second

Table 4. Jobholders' Experience with the Formerly Incarcerated, by Race (N=126)

	% of Asians	% of Blacks/African Americans	% of Hispanics/ Latinos	% of Multiracials	% of Whites
Formerly incarcerated jobholders	0	32.8	10.5	15.4	15.8
Jobholders know former prisoners	23.1	70.7	35.3	41.7	41.2
Among jobholders with former prisoner ties (N=68)					
Jobholders have helped former prisoners before	33.3	60.0	83.3	80.0	42.9
Jobholders strongly inclined toward helping former prisoners	33.3	36.6	41.7	80.0	14.3
Jobholders strongly disinclined toward helping former prisoners	0	9.8	0	0	0

Table 5. Cultural Frames and Experiences with Former Prisoners (N=126)

	Among Jobholders with FP Ties (N=64)			
	Jobholders have experienced incarceration	Jobholders know former prisoners	Jobholders have helped former prisoners	Jobholders are strongly inclined towards helping former prisoners
% Second Chances Signaling Change	27.3	63.6	71.4	100
% Nature of Offense	9.4	35.5	54.5	0
% Evidence of Change	28.6	64.0	81.3	23.5
% Rigid Structures	0	50.0	60.0	40.0
% Opportunities to Assist	0	20.0	100.0	0
% Multiple Frames	25.0	63.0	52.9	17.6

chances, however, those who desired evidence of change, like Kevin Allard, often described having disappointing prior experiences helping, or they raised concerns based on the negative experiences of those close to them. They complained about job seeking former prisoners who did not follow through or who failed to meet other expectations. Their direct and indirect experiences taught them to be wary of providing aid to such job seekers unless they had good reason to put their concerns to the side. Thus, second chancers, with positive experiences behind them, were strongly oriented toward helping, whereas those seeking evidence of change, with one or more troubling prior experiences, were much less enthusiastic about doing so. Among those with ties to former prisoners, all second chancers were willing to help, but less than one-quarter of those seeking evidence of change were. In this way second chancers and those who sought evidence of change were like different sides of the same coin, with the quality of their prior helping experiences the primary factor separating them.

Jobholders who were centrally concerned with the nature of job seekers' offenses were disproportionately Latino and Asian. When asked about helping former prisoners with job-matching assistance, 60% of Asians and almost 40% of Latinos deployed the nature of the offense frame exclusively. Asians and Latinos, who were disproportionately foreign born, were less likely than Black jobholders to have been incarcerated or to have ties to former prisoners (Rumbaut and Ewing 2007; Sampson 2008), and so relatively few had ever helped a former prisoner to find work. Their considerations, then, about how this status might play out in the labor market were more abstract and theoretical. Lacking network embeddedness and experience, even if indirect, they drew heavily on mainstream narratives about criminality, which encouraged a focus on the nature and severity of offenses for which former prisoners were punished.

Thirteen percent of Latinos and nine percent of Blacks and multiracials offered the rigid institutional structures frame exclusively (see Table 3). No Asians or Whites did. Jobholders who linked the possibility of job-matching aid to rigid structures were disproportionately Latino, however. Latinos were 26% of the sample but 40% of jobholders who highlighted how rigid structures blocked former prisoners' pathways to employment, especially at CPSE. Blacks, too, were more inclined to mention rigid structures, but not to the same extent.

What lay behind Latinos', and to a lesser extent Blacks', greater likelihood of deploying a rigid structures analysis differed (see Table 5). None of the four Latinos—two custodians and two food service workers—had been incarcerated before, and only one reported knowing a former prisoner. The jobholder in question, Amanda Pico, helped a friend who then failed to get a job offer. Because Amanda attributed her friend's failure to get hired to his criminal record, she came to believe that she could do to effectively aid marked job candidates in their job search. Three of four Latinos, however, mentioned no direct or indirect experiences with justice-involved job seekers and rigid institutional structures that would explain the frame they deployed, and so I speculate that they learned through their network of relations that such policies existed at CPSE without a specific incident or incidents to ground their understanding of the role these policies played during the job-matching process.

Black jobholders' embrace of the rigid institutional structures frame, however, was rooted in observations of friends and relatives' experiences. Four out of five of these jobholders, who were primarily employed as administrative staff workers and had never been incarcerated before, reported knowing a former prisoner; three-fifths reported watching as their friends and/or relatives struggled unsuccessfully to find work, struggles they attributed to legal or social barriers to the employment of justice-involved people; and two of the five had unsuccessfully helped at least one former prisoner in the past with job search. Thus, they either had first- or secondhand knowledge of a friend or close relative who failed to get hired, apparently because of a criminal record. Two of these jobholders recalled seeing questions pertaining to applicants' criminal background on the CPSE application, questions they assumed would disqualify applicants without further consideration.

In the deployment of multiple frames, Whites stood out. Whereas 27% of Blacks, 13% of Latinos, and 18% of multiracials offered multiple frames when asked about providing former prisoners with job-matching assistance, almost half of Whites did. Both Whites and Blacks, however, were disproportionately represented; Whites and Blacks were 12% and 42% of the sample but 25% and 53%, respectively, of those offering multiple frames.

Importantly, however, White and Black jobholders bridged different frames, which were undoubtedly rooted in difference experiences. White jobholders, who primarily sought evidence for change after incorrigibles were excluded from consideration, had never been incarcerated, were less likely to have ties to former prisoners, and had not helped a former prisoner with job search before. As with Bettina Bullock, Black jobholders offering multiple frames primarily pushed for job seekers' right to a second chance once incorrigibles were excluded. Almost half of these Black jobholders had been incarcerated before, most had ties to former prisoners, and a significant minority had helped at least one former prisoner with job search. Thus, to the extent that race and ethnicity shaped jobholders' experiences with the criminal justice system, impacted the composition of their network of relations, and affected the extent, nature, and quality of their opportunities to help former prisoners to find work, it also influenced which frame or set of frames would resonate with jobholders and what actions (hypothetical or real) they would take.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings advance debates in two bodies of research. For those interested in prisoner reentry, the findings reported here strongly suggest that from a social capital perspective, former prisoners have difficulty finding work (and possibly gaining access

to other key resources) not solely because they lack access to job-relevant social capital, as many almost certainly do, but also because those with social capital likely face hurdles to its mobilization for job-finding. No doubt because many researchers have assumed that formerly incarcerated job seekers simply lack job-relevant social capital (Lopoo and Western 2005; Western et al., 2004), few if any researchers have been attentive to this issue before now. Moving forward, this is an assumption that should be rigorously investigated, since its existence seems to be diverting research attention away from important interpersonal dynamics that almost certainly impact desistance processes.

Such inquiries, however, might also be broadened to include jobseekers who have had criminal justice contact *without* incarceration, a substantial percentage of the justice-involved (Kolher-Hausmann 2018). Given the focus of many jobholders in this sample on the nature of individuals' crimes, the findings from this study suggest that individuals with less severe offenses might be better able than the formerly incarcerated to mobilize social capital for job-finding. Future research should investigate the extent to which this is true as well as to delve deeper into the reasons behind such differential treatment.

In prior research, frames for action have been linked to sexual activity among adolescents (Harding 2007), orientations to work among low-income Black men (Young 2004), levels of participation in community organizations (Small 2004), and support for harsh criminal justice policies (Bobo and Johnson, 2004). By highlighting the role that frames for action play in decisions to act as a social resource for others, the findings reported here also have important implications for theories of social capital mobilization for job-finding. Drawing from my multilevel framework for understanding social capital mobilization, mobilization hinges in part on properties of the dyad, the job contacts' networks, the structural features of the neighborhood in which the potential contact resides, and, importantly, on job seekers' and job contacts' individual-level attributes (Smith, 2005, 2007). In particular, in prior research I found that job seekers' reputations, in the personal and professional realms, were paramount to determining the risk that job contacts faced of making a bad match. Poor reputations were likely to produce a disinclination to help; better than average reputations, a desire to aid where possible.

What the findings reported here reveal is that while individuals' poor reputations, as indicated by the criminal record, were not irrelevant, alone they did not shape potential job contacts' patterns of helping. What seemed to matter as well were the frames that job contacts deployed to make sense of individuals' criminal justice status', as this informed contacts' default response when presented with opportunities to help. Jobholders who thought that everyone was capable of change, and thus deserving of a second chance to make change happen, were generally very positively oriented toward providing assistance. Not so for jobholders who deployed other frames. I show that in some cases this was because of the nature and severity of the offenses for which individuals had been charged and made to serve time, a set of factors that certain jobholders used as a proxy for former prisoners' ability to change. In other cases it was because jobholders had not received adequate signals of former prisoners' commitment to desist, to move away from "the life" and to embrace nondeviant and noncriminal identities, networks, and routine activities. Prior research has noted the importance of such desistance signals for employers making hiring decisions (Bushway and Apel, 2012; Fahey et al., 2006). I show that for some subset of jobholders, desistance signals—a declaration of one's new identity, a new set of friends, and/or engagement in nondeviant and noncriminal activities—were critical as well if they were to be mobilized as a source of social capital. Future research should interrogate further the

role that frames play in facilitating (or blocking) the mobilization of social capital during job search with an eye toward better understanding when, how, why and for whom frames matter in the ways that they do.

Across frames, jobholders who were strongly in favor of helping had two things in common—they had prior experiences helping, and, importantly, they assessed these experiences positively; i.e., former prisoners sought and accepted their help and used the assistance they received to secure jobs that improved their lives in measurable, sometimes inspiring, ways. Indeed, the primary difference between those advocating for second chances and those seeking evidence of change was that the latter by and large called to mind experiences that they interpreted negatively, and these experiences fed both their wariness about job seekers' intentions and their own role in the job-matching process. The former tended to describe positive firsthand experiences, making the embrace of proactive assistance in the future more likely. This finding is consistent with some prior research; once employers have hired ex-offenders, they are more likely to hire other ex-offenders in the future, presumably because they worked out well (Haslewood-Pocsik et al., 2008). Thus, while frames were associated with jobholders' orientation to help former prisoners find work, the extent and nature of their prior experiences informed which frame or set of frames they deployed. More attention also needs to be paid to the conditions that make some frames more appealing than others. In this study I link favored frames to the quality of potential job contacts' experiences helping in the past, but one imagines that this is just one factor among many that affects which frames will resonate with contacts when presented with opportunities to help.

To the extent that ethnoracial background structured jobholders' own involvement with the criminal justice system, informed the composition of their network of relations (and thus the concentration of justice-involved among their relatives, friends, and acquaintances), and made more or less likely both opportunities to assist and the quality of experiences that might result, it also informed schemata of interpretation that gave meaning to events and situations they encountered. That Black jobholders, for instance, showed a far greater inclination to deploy the second chance frame makes sense in light of their own criminal justice contact, embeddedness in networks with high concentrations of the justice-involved, and propensity to view disproportionate criminal justice contact as a racial justice issue. Consistent with prior research that Blacks express greater support for less punitive and more rehabilitative criminal justice policies (Bobo and Johnson, 2004; Bobo and Thompson, 2006; McCorkle 1993), in this study Black jobholders' sense of greater procedural and distributive injustices fed a distrust of the criminal justice system that encouraged a greater willingness to offer job-matching help to formerly incarcerated friends and relatives. To the extent that their prior helping experiences were negative, however, Black jobholders were more likely to embrace a frame that highlighted evidence that job seekers had changed or to suggest no second chances whatsoever.

With much less criminal justice contact, fewer such contacts, and thus fewer prior experiences helping, positive or negative, Latino and Asian jobholders, who were predominantly foreign born, and White jobholders, who were by and large native, deployed a very different set of frames than Black jobholders, relying on information about the nature of the job seekers' offenses, either exclusively or in combination with other frames, to determine whether or not formerly incarcerated job seekers were deserving of the job-matching assistance they could offer. Fewer direct experiences with the criminal justice system and with relatives, friends and acquaintances who had criminal justice contact meant that when presented with the opportunity to assist,

these jobholders were much more attuned to the specter of the formerly incarcerated than they were to individuals coping with the mark of a criminal record, and these perspectives shaped their orientation to assist.

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NOTES

1. To increase their willingness to hire applicants with criminal records, employers would want assurances that marked jobseekers are no more likely than non-offenders to cause harm to the physical, financial, and/or reputational well-being of the workplace (Blumstein and Nakamura, 2009). Former prisoners do attempt, with some success, to present themselves in ways that would address employers' concerns, but there are limits to the effectiveness of such approaches (Harding 2003; Pager 2007).
2. They are generally correct in their assessment. Controlling for a whole host of factors, numerous studies do indeed find that Blacks and Latinos experience biased treatment, relative to Whites, at almost every stage of the penal process. Not only are they more likely to be stopped, searched, and treated forcibly by police (DOJ 2015), recent research indicates that they are also treated with less respect (Voigt et al., 2017). Further, they are also more likely than Whites to be detained, pretrial (Demuth 2003; Kutateladze et al., 2014; Schlesinger 2005), and among Latinos and Blacks who are offered a release option, release agreements are more likely to be attached to bail, and their bail amounts tend to be significantly higher than those set for Whites; this is especially so for Latinos (Demuth 2003). Furthermore, Blacks and Latinos are more likely than whites to be offered plea deals that include a stint of incarceration (Kutateladze et al., 2014; LaFree 1985; Petersilia 1983; Sutton 2013; Unnever 1982), and because they are less likely than whites to accept such offers, if found guilty they are more likely to be sentenced harshly (Sutton 2013; Kutateladze et al., 2014). Finally, recent research indicates that race and ethnicity shape the severity with which monetary sanctions (legal financial obligations) are meted out. Blacks, but especially Latinos, experience monetary sanctions of greater severity than their White counterparts (Harris et al., 2010).
3. Black-white differences, however, are not only the result of racial disparities that emerge with criminal justice contact. It is also in part rooted in Whites' anti-Black prejudice (Bobo and Johnson, 2006; Johnson 2001). Johnson (2001), for instance, reports that while racial prejudice is not the primary factor behind Whites' strong support for punitive criminal justice policies, both Jim Crow racism, a traditional form of racism defined in terms of racial antipathy and racial stereotyping, and laissez-faire racism, in which negative stereotypes about Blacks converge and interact with individualistic accounts of racial inequality, are nonetheless strong predictors of Whites' strong support for harsh criminal justice policies.
4. Twenty-two respondents were dropped from analysis because of missing data on questions related to how they might engage with formerly incarcerated job seekers.
5. Jobholders were asked if they had ever been held in a reform school (2.7% had), a detention center (6.1% had), a jail (18.2% had), and/or a prison (2.7% had). These figures are not mutually exclusive.
6. A few of those who mentioned the nature of the offense, however, did so for bureaucratic reasons. Misdemeanants, for instance, did not have to surmount the types of barriers that felons did, and so it was important to know job seekers' offense(s) to determine if they had any chance of being hired.
7. Perhaps ironically, offenders convicted of violent crime actually have some of the lowest rates of recidivism, especially so when considering only those who go on to commit the same violent crime (Durose et al., 2015; Langan and Levin, 2002).
8. See Shover (1996), who discusses the importance of offenders' resolve to desist.
9. For sixteen years, selling drugs was Kevin's primary, though not sole, means of earning money. During his hustling years, Kevin did have jobs in the formal, wage economy, too,

but these never lasted long. He worked at McDonald's for a time; he painted houses; he did butchering at an independent grocery store; and he worked with "so-called scientists or whatever" to mix chemicals at a local company, a job that required "a bunch of mathematical stuff." But he always quit, he explained, because these were dead end jobs that offered little in the way of advancement. "All of my jobs I end up quitting—I've never been fired or anything. I just end up leaving. After I get there for so long if it looks like I'm not going to go anywhere too much farther, I'm ready to quit." The life just seemed to offer so many more opportunities to make good money, to gain respect for one's talents, and to plot one's own path to advancement.

10. Just one of these jobholders seemed strongly disinclined toward helping. Mao Bopha has worked at CPSE since his arrival in the U.S. from Cambodia at 33-years of age. The 58-year old custodian with 23 years on the job explained that while he would want to help a formerly incarcerated job seeker, there was little that he could do. Any such person from his community would have to seek the aid of those in the community with the human and cultural capital to make a difference. Providing help under these circumstances was not specifically his responsibility; instead it was an obligation that others in the community were tasked to address. He explained, "I need to help, but I can't help because we have community to help them. People have high education. We have so many people. For me, when I young, before I try to help people, do what I can do, but I don't help them much because my education very low, you know?" Lacking the necessary resources, he felt that he would be ill-equipped to offer the type of assistance that would matter.
11. Latinos were not disproportionately represented among second chancers. Latinos were roughly 25% of the sample and 28% of those advocating for second chances.
12. Four jobholders who identified as multiracial sought evidence that job seekers' had changed before offering assistance. Two reported parents who were Black and White; one identified with both his mother's (White) and father's (Mexican and Italian) side of the family; and a fourth jobholder identified with a number of ethnoracial groups, including Spanish, Indian, Portuguese, and Dutch. As with Black jobholders who deployed this frame, three out of four multiracials knew at least one former prisoner and had helped one or more in the past to find work.

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