Title: An ever-present dilemma for former prisoners: If, when, and how to disclose (or conceal) one’s criminal past
Nancy La Vigne

Abstract:

In managing information about his or her criminal past, a formerly incarcerated person must decide “to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). The process of if, when, and how to disclose or conceal one’s “ex-con” status may be an ever-present and ongoing dilemma. This paper examines formerly incarcerated persons’ use of concealment as a coping strategy when interacting with people and in filling out applications. The sample consists of approximately 250 formerly incarcerated persons and staff involved in receiving or providing reintegration-related programming in New York State. To assess who conceals one’s criminal past, statistical analyses are utilized to examine the relationships between a concealment scale and a question about the frequency of avoiding indicating a felony conviction on written applications, and measures for perceptions of stigma and discrimination, demographics, criminal history, social bonds, self-esteem, satisfaction with life, criminal attitude/identity, and the forecast of rearrest. Implications of the findings about the concealment of one’s criminal past for prisoner reentry research, policy, and practice are discussed.

Brief bio:

Tom LeBel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Helen Bader School of Social Welfare. He is the author or co-author of numerous articles and book chapters about prisoner reentry, desistance from crime, the stigma of incarceration, and criminal justice involved women with drug and alcohol problems. Tom has served as a scientific review board member, panelist, or discussant for several prisoner reentry related projects and initiatives.

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