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Driving is ex-inmates' key to jobs

Study says invalid licenses slow post-prison employment, life

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The number of people released from prison each year into Milwaukee County has increased nearly four-fold since 1993, and this population faces severe barriers to getting and keeping jobs, a new report from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Employment and Training Institute has found.

The numbers disproportionately affect young African-American males. Some 40% of those ages 25 to 29 have served time in prison, the report finds.

"That's the work force of Milwaukee," said the study's author, John Pawasarat.

The UWM study, to be released today, focuses on one obstacle to employment that faces the majority of former inmates: the lack of a valid driver's license. Many felons have had their licenses suspended or revoked - more often because of failure to pay fines or drug offenses rather than because of serious driving violations, Pawasarat said.

Of the estimated 26,772 adults in Milwaukee County who have done prison time, 62% have driver's license suspension problems, the report found. That can be a major obstacle in finding employment.

Pawasarat recommends that the state Department of Corrections and the City of Milwaukee take steps to help former prisoners who don't have serious driving violations get their licenses back quicker and less expensively.

"If you don't have a license, you don't have a prayer of getting and keeping a job over time," Pawasarat said.

Although the UWM report does not address the cause of an increase in prisoner releases, a 2006 study by Justice Strategies, an organization founded by criminal justice policy analysts Judith Greene and

Kevin Pranis, points to a dramatic increase in Wisconsin's incarceration rates.

That study found that the state's prison population has doubled in the past decade, a trend that is in part owed to a surge in the number of people incarcerated for non-violent offenses, which in Milwaukee grew tenfold from 1990 to 2004.

Man's return took awhile

As part of Daunte Henderson's sentence for drug possession with intent to deliver, his driver's license was suspended for six months. But the suspension didn't start until after he was released from the House of Correction in 2002.

Henderson started looking for production, manufacturing or warehouse jobs, but most of them required a valid driver's license. On top of that, most of the work was beyond the reach of bus lines, in places such as Grafton or New Berlin.

In the meantime, Henderson worked temp jobs. Every time a permanent job came up, the companies would look elsewhere to fill the spots.

That reflects the findings of a previous Employment and Training Institute study, which reported that three-quarters of available Milwaukee-area jobs are in suburban areas that are difficult to reach by public transportation. And for many jobs, a valid driver's license is a requirement to get in the door.

A number of local agencies and non-profits have worked on driver's license recovery projects to help close the gap between the unemployed in the central city and available jobs in the suburbs.

A four-month Milwaukee Municipal Court amnesty program in 2004 offered drivers the chance to reduce their traffic fines by half, helping roughly 1,000 drivers recover licenses.

But Pawasarat makes further recommendations. The Department of Corrections should assess prisoners' driver's license status immediately after they enter a facility so that application waiting periods can be served while inmates are behind bars, he said.

Gregory Williams, assistant executive director of Wisconsin Community Services, a non-profit group that helps former offenders integrate into the community, was enthusiastic about the recommendation.

"All of these barriers that stand in front of them while they're incarcerated, they're multiplied once they get out," Williams said. "There needs to be more transitional planning."

The study also recommends that the Department of Corrections launch a driver's license restoration initiative. That would allow inmates to prepare for and take the written driver's test from behind bars, allow them to apply for a license from prison and give them ways to pay work off reinstatement and application fees, Pawasarat said.

John Dipko, spokesman for the state Department of Corrections, said the department was reviewing the UWM report and would consider its recommendations.

From Henderson's perspective, speeding up the driver's license recovery process would have been a big help to him.

Even after he got his license, it took him about four years to secure a permanent job as a plant operator trainee at We Energies in Oak Creek.

"I would've gotten a job earlier," he said.

On the Web To view the full report, go to www.eti.uwm.edu.

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