



Preparing justice involved youth for transition: Employer perceptions

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ABSTRACT

In this pilot study, we sought to understand employer perspectives on hiring young applicants, especially applicants who have been involved in the juvenile justice system. A survey was conducted to assess employers' perceptions of qualities young applicants often lack, what qualities they are seeking, and the skills, training, and/or documents that would be beneficial for young applicants during the hiring process. The survey was deployed to 19 employers; 12 employers responded. Six employers who completed the survey also took part in follow-up interviews. In the interviews, employers expounded on how job and career preparation programs can best prepare youth for successful employment, how their companies approach hiring candidates with juvenile records, and how STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) skills are incorporated into entry-level positions. Through both the survey and interview, employers also shared how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their hiring processes.

1. Introduction

Youth involved in the juvenile justice (JJ) system need opportunities to prepare for successful employment. Employment increases youth responsibility, work ethic, and interpersonal skills; steady employment can prevent youth from becoming involved in criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969). Additionally, youth benefit from social interactions, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making as part of their present in their work environments (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). For many youth, employment is a turning point to break away from their criminal past, providing legal income and routine with increased responsibility and commitment to prosocial values (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Research indicates that employment significantly contributes to positive outcomes and deters youth from committing or recommitting crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Mathur et al., 2023; Sheely, 2020).

1.1. Need for workforce connections

Youth, who have been in JJ and out of school or work, need strong workforce connections, so they can continue to be productively engaged (Collins et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2020). Although positive outcomes are associated with employment, research also indicates that youth involved with JJ are less successful in finding rewarding jobs

(Carter, 2019). However, one study (Carter, 2019) found that once youth are able to find a satisfying job, there is not much difference between them and their non-delinquent peers in the quality of jobs, wages, or benefits provided by employment.

Improving access to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) related career preparation and employment for JJ involved youth is vital, as incarceration generally offers limited vocational opportunities and does not afford youth the ability to attain the skills and literacy necessary to flourish in an increasingly STEM focused landscape (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015; Krezmien et al., 2017). Previous research on factors that influence college and career readiness found that engaging in more STEM related activities had a positive impact on students' future post-secondary education and career choices (Rivera & Li, 2020). Other researchers (McDonald & Waite, 2019) recommend STEM employee mentorship and internship experiences as a pathway to providing effective STEM career readiness.

In the last two decades, the workforce system has also attempted to blend education with job training, work experiences, and employment to better serve high risk youth with the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (Collins et al., 2021; WIA, 1998). In 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) superseded WIA and intentionally and explicitly called for the workforce development system to serve the most challenged and disconnected young people including those involved in the JJ system (WIOA, 1994). With the passage of these

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laws, JJ facilities have gained a better understanding of the importance of connecting youth to work-related opportunities to reduce their involvement in the system and promote post-release engagement and employment.

1.2. Theoretical underpinnings

Several sociological theoretical frameworks have provided a foundational understanding of the relationship between employment and a decrease in delinquent behavior. Extending Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977), which suggests that youth learn to engage in positive rather than negative behaviors through the prosocial modeling of peers, teachers or other influential adults, Lent and colleagues (1994) have developed Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to explain how socio-cognitive and behavioral inputs shape career development and interests. SCCT proposes that individuals' self-efficacy and outcome expectations determine how much effort they will exert in obtaining their desired career goals (Lent et al., 1994). More recently, SCCT has been used as a framework for exploring and explaining STEM career trajectories in historically underrepresented and marginalized populations, like youth in JJ (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Wong et al., 2022). It has also been expanded to allow for contextual affordances and barriers that can influence an individual's career choice and actions (Lent et al., 2000). Currently, researchers are exploring how contextual factors within JJ impact cognitive variables, like self-efficacy, as well as STEM learning opportunities and employment outcomes (Krezmien et al., in review). These contextual factors may include but are not limited to the willingness of the workforce system to hire youth with juvenile records, expectations of employers, youth exposure in STEM based learning, training opportunities, and supports along the way. These are the factors that can either enhance or constrain JJ involved youths' career interests, choice, and development.

1.3. Reasons for poor employment outcomes

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of employment, JJ involvement interferes with workforce development and has been associated with poor employment outcomes. The literature highlights three chief reasons for poor employment outcomes for youth involved in the justice system (Sheely, 2020). First, youth lack skills and human capital because they have not had the opportunity to develop them. Second, they experience employer reluctance towards them due to convictions and juvenile records, as well as legal restrictions on the types of jobs they can acquire (Griffith et al., 2019). For example, Harris and Keller (2005) found that oftentimes potential employers use legal discrimination against hiring ex-offenders, despite the nature of their convictions, a phenomenon known as *labor market exclusion* (Sheely, 2020). Third, youth stop searching for a job and drop out completely from the labor market anticipating they will not get a job due to employers' bias, also known as *labor market detachment* (Sheely, 2020). Research demonstrates that the effects of involvement with the JJ system go beyond incarceration and across the life course (Phelps & Pager, 2015; Taylor & Spang, 2017).

Holzer et al. (2004) found that ninety percent of employers were unwilling to hire youth convicted of a violent offense. A relatively large number of employers indicated that they would like to know the type of offense and conditions around the offense committed (Holzer et al., 2004). However, more recent research has indicated that employers are willing to give a job interview to a young adult who was involved in the JJ system, specifically those who have been engaged in non-violent crimes (Griller Clark et al., 2020). Maintaining workplace safety and security is a primary reason employers inquire about criminal records and may be hesitant to hire those with violent or job-related offenses (Agan, 2017; Cerda et al., 2015; Taylor & Spang, 2017). Stigmas around race, and the more serious perception of felony offenses, also influence hiring decisions (Griffith et al., 2019; Uggen et al., 2014). Employers

may also ask about criminal history to ascertain information about the personal qualities and characteristics an applicant has, such as the honesty and integrity that can be demonstrated by disclosing one's record (Agan, 2017; Uggen et al., 2014). Research also suggests the importance of proactive actions like record clearing to increase employment opportunities for youth with juvenile records (Selbin et al., 2018). However, despite the benefit that expunging or sealing juvenile records can provide to those who have been involved with the JJ system, there are a variety of barriers (e.g., fees, minimum age requirements) that make finding employment challenging (Griffith et al., 2019; Taylor & Spang, 2017). Also, hidden barriers such as restricted access to getting a license (i.e., driver's license, cosmetology license), exclusion from affordable housing, and bans from public state employment exacerbate employment opportunities and labor outcomes for JJ involved youth (Warner et al., 2020).

One of the major barriers experienced by youth involved with JJ is employers' perceptions about juvenile records. Some suggest that the hyper-visibility and easy access of these records have increased employers' bias towards youth involved in JJ (Pager et al., 2009; Varghese et al., 2010). Although the literature provides a variety of recommended practices for those with juvenile records to successfully attain employment, it remains limited in providing specific guidance on how to engage employers in the job preparation process. Uggen et al. (2014) relay employer's perspectives on the importance of applicants striving to make personal contact with employers, as this can help combat the negative stigmas associated with juvenile/criminal records. Even with a juvenile/criminal record, having previous work experience has been shown to increase perceptions of an applicant's employability (Cerda et al., 2015; Griffith et al., 2019; Griller Clark et al., 2020). Research also highlights the importance of distinguishing between adult and juvenile records, and how juvenile adjudications may be irrelevant when it comes to hiring, yet may still influence employers' perceptions (Agan, 2017; Taylor & Spang, 2017). Apel and Sweeten (2010) emphasize the need for those who have been involved with the justice system to be proactive in their job search, dedicate themselves to attaining a high school diploma or equivalent, and develop positive networks with people who can vouch for their changed character in order to work towards successfully acquiring stable employment. (Note: In this paper, we have referred to the term criminal records for youth involved in juvenile crimes, not youth who were charged as adults; and the term justice involved youth refers to youth who were detained or incarcerated in a juvenile detention or correctional facility).

1.4. Rationale, purpose, and research questions

Obtaining employers' perspectives can provide a better understanding of the local labor market and the unique skills desired by individual employers. Thus, it is important to engage in conversations with employers to see how they make their hiring decisions in relation to minimum qualifications, soft skills, and technical skills. Through their views and perspectives, we can determine how employers can be involved in workforce development initiatives that can help JJ facilities improve the quality of vocational programming and reduce recidivism (Cerda et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2021).

This research examined the perceptions of employers in an effort to understand contextual factors and identify concerns related to JJ involved youth employment. Our previous research (Griller Clark et al., 2020) found that local employers were willing to hire juveniles with a juvenile criminal record. However, we did not explore specific factors or attributes employers value that would improve employment prospects for these youth. Employers are an essential link between youth and the labor market; their voice, guidance, and input should be actively included in career curriculum development. Employers can offer invaluable insight into hiring procedures, identify skills needed, create meaningful employment connections, share relevant resources, and help promote supportive relationships with JJ involved youth (Ross et al.,

2020). In addition, we wanted to assist JJ involved youth in enhancing their career readiness through the development of the INSITE: Integrating STEM into Transition Education program. The National Science Foundation has funded the INSITE program, which focuses on implementing a STEM transition curriculum delivered in a tablet-based learning system to promote STEM career awareness and learning for JJ involved youth. Institutional Review Board from the authors' university approved this study on January 27, , 2021 (STUDY00011597). The research questions that guided this study were (a) what qualities do local employers perceive as important in applicants previously involved in JJ; (b) what skills and attributes do they perceive as important to increasing the employability of JJ involved youth, and (c) what are some specific changes employers had to adopt related to hiring practices during COVID-19?

2. Method

2.1. Positionality of researchers

The first two authors were principal and co-principal investigators for INSITE, and primarily have dedicated their work on behalf of youth with disabilities in the JJ system. In addition, the other two authors were graduate research assistants with related research interests. Because our prior work allowed us to establish rapport and collaborative relationships with various JJ facilities, and community employers, we approached this study as an opportunity to bridge connections. We have recognized the need to increase our understanding of how employers make hiring decisions and how these decisions impact JJ impacted youth.

Although our research team only knew the participants in this study after conducting interviews, a couple of participants were known to one of the researchers through professional networks. Prior to conducting this study, our research team anticipated that participants would express similar views to our previous study with employers (Griller Clark et al., 2020). Specifically, we expected that most participants would generally be open to hiring youth with juvenile records yet may express some hesitance toward more serious criminal histories. Additionally, we expected certain industries (e.g., construction, customer service) to be more receptive and supportive of hiring youth with juvenile records than industries that required employee contact with vulnerable populations (e.g., caregiving, healthcare).

2.2. Participants

A convenience sample of 19 employers in Arizona were recruited for participation. The sample was selected from Second Chance employers on the Arizona Department of Economic Security's job center database, Arizona Job Connection, and employers who have previously participated in job fairs or talks with the JJ facility. In particular, we included employers in industries that JJ involved youth identified interest in on a previous survey (Krezmien et al., in review), including construction, healthcare, and technology. Additionally, we included employers representing industries considered to have fewer barriers to entry, such as distribution and customer service. All "employers" were identified as individuals responsible for hiring. Of the 19 employers recruited, six were females. Only 12 of the employers, nine males and three females, responded (63% response rate). Participating employers represented the following industries: caregiving, distribution, customer service, technology, and construction. The caregiving industry incorporated healthcare related companies. From the 12 survey respondents, six employers, four males and two females, indicated an interest in participating in a follow-up interview. The University's Institutional Review Board approved the survey, follow-up interview, and data collection procedures.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Survey

The survey included 15 items consisting of 13 open-ended and two multiple choice questions (see Table 1). The survey was informed by previous research (Cerdeira et al., 2015; Griller Clark et al., 2020; Krezmien et al., in review; Pham et al., 2015; Varghese et al., 2010) and designed by our research team based on over two decades of experience working with JJ systems, community providers, and employers to improve transition and post-release engagement in school and work for youth. Both the survey and interview questions were vetted by members of the INSITE Advisory Board, which included Arizona employers. The open-ended questions asked about various elements of hiring young applicants. Additionally, two multiple choice questions inquired about changes in hiring and employment practices in response to the COVID-

Table 1
Survey Questions.

Question Type	Question
Open response	What industry sector does your company fall under?
Open response	What employment related soft skills (e.g. teamwork, problem solving) would make a young applicant stand out from other applicants?
Open response	What type of training and/or credential would a young applicant need to possess to work for your company?
Open response	What critical elements (basic information and skills) are you looking for on an applicant's resume?
Open response	What experiences, other than previous employment, do you look for on an applicant's resume (e.g. volunteering, specific classes, leadership roles, scouting)?
Open response	What documents (e.g., certificates, examples of work, letters of recommendations) would you like to see from an applicant in an interview?
Open response	What basic science, technology, engineering and math skills would a young applicant need to work for your company?
Open response	What is the minimum amount of education that would qualify a young applicant to work for your company?
Open response	What documents would an applicant need to produce during the hiring process?
Open response	What type of clothing or equipment would an applicant need to possess to be prepared for a position with your company?
Open response	If a young applicant has a criminal record, is there anything they could say or do that would make you more likely to consider hiring them?
Open response	As an employer, what professional traits or skills can you identify that many of today's young applicants/employees are lacking?
Open response	In your opinion, what could schools and/or job preparation programs do to better prepare young people to be successful employees?
Multiple choice (select one)	How has the number of people you employ changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? • We have increased the number of people we employ • We have decreased the number of people that we employ a bit • We have decreased the number of people that we employ substantially • It hasn't, we have maintained the same number of employees
Multiple choice (select all that apply)	How have your recruitment, hiring, or employment practices changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? (Select all that apply) • We recruit/hire more people • We recruit/hire fewer people • We have changed how or where we recruit (Please explain) • We have changed how or where we interview (Please explain) • We have changed procedures for new hires (Please explain) • We have changed working conditions for employees (Please explain)

19 pandemic. The survey, administered through Qualtrics, was sent to employers through email in February 2021. A reminder email was sent two weeks later. The survey remained active through the middle of March 2021. 12 valid surveys were received. Surveys, in which three or more questions were unanswered by the respondent were considered invalid. Industry sectors of respondents included caregiving (17%), distribution (25%), customer service (25%), technology (8%), and construction (25%).

2.3.2. Semi structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the survey to further understand and interpret the responses. Semi-structured interviews are especially useful in understanding the perceptions of stakeholders because they allow respondents to discuss and expand on issues and concerns related to the research questions (Ahlin, 2019). The interview included 10 questions on hiring practices, opinions on employment preparation, and perceptions of hiring previously incarcerated youth (Table 2) and was designed based on previous research (Cerdeira, et al., 2015; Griller Clark, et al., 2020; Varghese, et al., 2010). Each question had additional prompts for the interviewers to ask follow-up or clarifying questions if needed. Each interview lasted for about 45 min. The employers interviewed represented companies that varied greatly in size, ranging from fewer than 20 employees to greater than 1,500. Employers were asked to explain the skills they expect to see in an employee, what schools and preparation programs could do to better prepare previously incarcerated youth for the job market, and experiences and perspectives in hiring an individual who has previously been incarcerated. Interviews were conducted through Zoom and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect the employer's identity, any personal information was removed from the transcripts.

Table 2
Interview Questions and Prompts.

Question	Additional Prompts for Interviewer
What industry do you represent and how many employees do you have?	How many people do you hire yearly? What different job opportunities do you have for potential employees? (e.g., part time, full time, customer service, stockroom)
What could schools/job prep programs do to better prepare previously incarcerated youth?	The survey indicated incarcerated youth lacked skills related to problem solving, critical thinking, communication skills, real work situation/realistic view, and cultural diversity
What workplace related skills do you expect to see in a potential employee?	What workplace related skills would make a potential employee stand out? (social skills, soft skills, technical skills)
When you contact professional references for a potential employee, what information do you ask for?	What kind of responses would make you more or less likely to hire that person? What are you allowed to ask?
What if a young adult doesn't have a professional reference?	Do you ask for personal references?
To your knowledge, have you ever hired anybody with a criminal record?	What was your experience, did you have to provide additional support?
What are your perceptions of hiring an individual that had previously been incarcerated? Does crime make a difference? Drug offenses?	Would you do any drug testing?
Would your responses change for a violent offender? If so, how?	What would make an individual with a criminal record more employable (if they do not hire individuals with a criminal record)?
At what stage in the employment process would you recommend someone under the age of 18 who has been adjudicated of a crime disclose his or her history with the criminal justice system?	The survey indicated a variety of responses: when submitting resume and other application materials, during interview, after hired, never, other
Do you see your industry returning to in-person interviewing and hiring?	Virtual the new normal?

2.4. Data analysis

The research team developed a priori codes and definitions based on emergent themes in the survey (i.e., job preparation, soft skills, STEM, hiring with a criminal record, minimum job requirements, hard skills, Covid-19). Frequency codes for the themes were calculated (see Table 3). Transcripts from interviews were uploaded into Dedoose (2021), a qualitative analytic software, for coding. Two additional codes emerged after the second round of analysis (i.e., opportunities, hiring process) and transcripts were subsequently coded with these themes as well (Table 1). The coded excerpts were extracted using a process of searching for patterns and clustering (Miles et al., 2020). Two of the authors independently coded each of the transcripts. Then the two authors compared coding in areas where it differed, these areas were discussed until a consensus was reached. Examples of responses that were coded are included in Table 4.

3. Results

The results from triangulation of data from the survey and interviews are presented using the following four themes: (a) employment qualifications (including STEM related skills), (b) job preparation, (c) hiring with a criminal record, and (d) COVID-19.

3.1. Employment qualifications

3.1.1. Job requirements

The most frequently reported minimum education level that would qualify applicants for hire was a high school diploma or the equivalent of such. Other minimum education levels varied as some employers only required some high school, and some had no minimum education requirement but necessitated that the applicant be at least 16 years of age. Only one employer required a minimum of at least some college. Employers also reported the necessary training and credentials that qualify applicants for a position. Previous experience was the most common response, with only a few employers ($n = 4$) identifying specific required courses or certifications. In a few cases ($n = 4$), employers shared that prior training or credentials were not as important, as the necessary training would be provided on-the-job by the company.

Throughout interviews, employers shared that applicants with prior experience, including experience not tied to a job, were more qualified for positions. In describing what would help someone get a job, one employer shared, "if they had good job skills, a good job with some kind of responsibility, or jobs related to the field we're hiring them," they indicated that those elements would "help that person stand out more." Multiple employers, particularly those in the caregiving industry, expressed that they were looking for applicants who genuinely cared about their work. One employer talked about the care that employees bring to their work saying, "they have to have some you know some sort of passion." Several employers ($n = 7$) also shared that they were looking for specific character traits (e.g., good attitude, caring heart, compassion) to be exemplified through the applicant's resume. When asked about the critical skills that they looked for on applicants'

Table 3
Frequency of Codes.

	Count
Hiring with a Criminal Record	76
Soft Skills	49
Job Requirements	39
Opportunities	35
Hiring Process	33
Job Preparation Programs	25
COVID-19	16
Hard Skills	14
STEM	9

Table 4
Examples of Interview Responses by Code.

Code	Employer Response
Job Requirements	<i>"For my particular area...we don't require a High School diploma... They have to be at least 18."</i>
Hiring Process	<i>"Oftentimes you have to rely on references, and not just the good references but the bad ones. One of the things I like to do is ask somebody, okay, well, who did you work for that you got let go or you quit? And one of the things to do is you don't call to try to find out all the bad stuff. You just say, was their work ethic an issue?... You can find out a lot that way..."</i>
Opportunities	<i>"They can advance fairly quickly. So they'll go from, you know, general laborer, to equipment operator, to crew lead, to foreman supervisor, to area supervisor."</i>
Soft Skills	<i>"Do they have good communication skills? Are they willing to listen to direction, take it, whether it sounds commanding or however it comes across, be able to get stuff done and learn?"</i>
Hard Skills	<i>"...developing a relationship with clients, cooking, cleaning, basic laundering, vacuuming, you know, anything that helps the client stay in the community instead of going to a home."</i>
STEM	<i>"So I think the technology is the one advantage that the kids have, because every business I've seen that went under or have had issues are the ones that do not utilize technology properly."</i>
Job Preparation Programs	<i>"Provide them training and education, to help them transition to help them be job ready, for job searching, ready for interviewing, soft skills, people communication skills..."</i>
Hiring with a Criminal Record	<i>"And as we do a background check, we review that information and I'd rather have that all that stuff not be a surprise, that I knew about those pieces of it first, as opposed to okay, said nothing, heard nothing, here's what came up, now explain yourself."</i>
COVID-19	<i>"Oh, we are looking to return to normal in the next month or two. That's our plan. Of course, that depends on how the pandemic goes, if it gets faster or slower. What's happening already right now, most people are working remote that typically work in an office environment. So yeah, we are moving forward. More normal, yes."</i>

resumes, specific computer skills were the most common responses. Other critical elements frequently listed included work history, experience in the field, references, and education or training. A few employers ($n = 3$) wanted to see evidence of good communication skills, organizational skills, and the ability to perform standard labor duties.

3.1.2. Hiring process

Employers were asked what types of experiences, aside from previous employment, they look for on resumes. The most common answers were volunteer work, classes, and training. Employers also mentioned industry-specific experiences, leadership roles, extracurriculars, internships, references, and attitudes. Besides resumes, the documents that employers said they hoped to see from applicants during interviews included letters of recommendation, certifications, and examples of the applicant's work. With regard to additional qualifications for employment, employers ($n = 4$) shared that having a driver's license does open up potential growth opportunities in different positions.

As employers described employment qualifications during the interview, the topic of honesty repeatedly came up as employers wanted to verify "did they do the things that they said they did?" with regard to applicants' resumes. Employers overall seemed willing to find solutions to problems that may exist or arise with background checks, drug testing, etc., if the applicant or employee is forthcoming and honest. Most required applicants to pass a background check before hiring. For some employers, background checks verified employment and school history. In companies where employees have regular contact with vulnerable populations, a valid Fingerprint Clearance Card was also required. Like other practices, drug testing varied by company. Some employers do not drug test, some test only before employment, and others test throughout employment. A few ($n = 3$) employers mentioned that drug testing might occur if an employee is suspected of being under the influence or affected by drugs while working. "We do drug and

alcohol tests following an accident," an employer explained, to describe some of the "random" scenarios where testing may occur. Another employer provided an example of a hypothetical employee working toward stopping using methadone. While this would not cause the employer to terminate employment, the employer would hope for disclosure and honesty from that employee to ensure workplace safety. Although not all employers required references for all positions, a few of them relied on references to help support the applicant's background check and assess their honesty. An employer from a smaller company explained, "Oftentimes you have to rely on references and not just the good references, but the bad ones." Employers from larger companies often had to follow corporate procedures and policies with background checks. These employers tried to assess competence, dependability, teamwork, and ability to learn.

3.1.3. Opportunities

Employers representing smaller companies were more deliberate about who they hire and, as they are smaller, hire fewer employees each year. Additionally, smaller companies look for individuals that fit into their company culture. One of these small-company employers explained their deliberate hiring strategy as "pretty lean and mean intentionally" in an effort to hire employees who would commit to the company for a longer period of time. Employers from larger companies expressed that "turnover is huge." However, within these larger companies, there are more opportunities for upward mobility within the company. A wide variety of entry-level positions are available in actively hiring companies. Employers in the construction industry in particular, explained that the industry is experiencing a shortage of workers, which has made even more jobs available. One employer in the construction industry described the current situation saying, "This is a field that you definitely have not only places where you can start on the ground floor, but you can get in a lot of these trades where you can start learning a craft, where they can work their way up the ranks a lot easier because of the shortage."

3.1.4. Soft skills

Employers were asked to identify "soft skills" related to employment that would make an applicant stand out. Responses primarily centered around work-related soft skills (e.g., attention to detail, punctuality), people skills (e.g., teamwork, communication), and motivation (e.g., attitude, willingness to learn). In discussing people skills, one employer shared that they weren't looking for "hot shot superstars" who would do their work "at the expense of everybody else." Rather they were looking to hire "people that want to come in and do great because the group does benefit from the aggregate of individual successes." Problem-solving and the need for employees to have good judgment were additional skills mentioned.

In a related question, we inquired about the skills that young applicants and employees often lack. Employers most frequently identified motivation, communication skills, and good work ethic. Some participants ($n = 3$) also described respect and focus as missing traits. For those that mentioned young people lacking focus, employers explained not only focus and attention to work itself, but also as an over-attachment to technology (e.g., always looking at text messages). In interviews, this focus was described related to specific work tasks. One employer explained that in working with clients "they've got to be able to...see a change in a condition...[and] process in their mind that something's different about my client today." Additional positive behaviors and characteristics included punctuality, receiving criticism, following directions, taking work seriously, having gratitude for one's job, patience, flexibility, maintaining a professional appearance, and being reliable. While employers from larger companies did acknowledge the necessity of various soft skills, their need for additional workers was apparent. For example, one employer said that if they heard from a reference "about a new person that comes in they're always here and they're always on time, I'll work with that all day." This illustrated the willingness of

employers to work with employees who could get the job done and acquire other soft skills as the employee continued to work.

3.1.5. *Hard skills*

Hard skills are the technical skills that are necessary for performing the tasks of a job. As such, these are specific to particular jobs and industries, although some hard skills may be transferrable. Survey and interview questions were developed to understand what hard skills would make a potential employee more valuable to the employer. Employers explained throughout both the survey and interviews that, in regard to previous work experience, they are especially interested in experiences that demonstrate knowledge in their specific industry area. As expected, the hard skills mentioned were unique to each employer, however, some overlap between employers within the same industries (i.e., caregiving and construction) was noticed. Employers from the caregiving industry noted that it was important for employees to have at least a little experience with caring for others, even if they had only cared for family members. An employer from the caregiving industry described some specific tasks that employees would be responsible for, such as “providing in-home care, non-medical, so it’s those things like cooking, cleaning, bathing, dressing.” Technical skills such as operating equipment and safety skills were also mentioned by employers across the construction industry.

3.1.6. *STEM*

In our survey, employers were asked to identify skills in STEM that would be necessary for working within their company. Technology related skills were most frequently mentioned, followed closely by math skills, and with less mentions, science, then engineering. The majority of these skills were job and industry specific (e.g., electrical engineering knowledge for specific construction roles). However, math skills were described more broadly, as basic math skills are necessary for most employees.

In our interviews, employers again emphasized the necessity of technology. For some of the employers we spoke with, employees who have experience with spreadsheets and other Microsoft programs are a great asset. Some employers viewed young applicants as having great potential for the roles that require the use of specific technologies because young people quickly become adept with these technologies. One employer said of young people that “they would be able to run this office and the computer stuff involved better than my area manager.” They also highlighted the importance of having access to devices (e.g. computer) that would help youth in conducting a job search. Employers viewed technology skills as being advantageous and necessary for applicants and businesses alike. One employer emphasized that “every business I’ve seen that went under or have had issues are the ones that do not utilize technology properly.”

3.2. *Job preparation programs*

Another goal of this study was to gain insight into job preparation, and to identify employers’ perceptions on how education and vocational programs could better prepare young people to be successful employees. The most common survey responses related to soft skills, especially communication skills. Some employers voiced a need for opportunities that would help improve problem-solving and critical thinking skills and present young people with real work situations. Employers shared that it is important to give students a realistic view of what having a job is really like. They would like entry-level employees to have clear and realistic expectations for how job growth may occur. Further suggestions for improving job and career preparation programs included teaching cultural diversity, increasing motivation, and providing more intentional training for specific jobs.

Employers emphasized that career preparation programs “should be teaching kids and people to be valuable to an employer” and “to help them transition to help them be job ready.” They shared some of the

skills that youth are often lacking. Often, employers observe that youth are not well prepared for the application process and job interview. For example, applicants sometimes request unreasonable pay rates for entry-level positions or display inconsistent work history, yet act as though they have substantial relevant experience. Two employers reported that effective communication between employees and supervisors is one of the biggest challenges. Employees often lack professionalism and do not adjust their communication to their audience. One of the primary areas where employers expect better communication is with problem-solving. “When it comes to problem-solving,” one employer explained how they wanted their employees to call them “and say okay this is a problem here, but how can we make this work?”

3.3. *Hiring with a criminal record*

Since this study focused on understanding how to increase the employability of youth involved in JJ, employers were asked what a young applicant with a criminal record might say or do to increase the likelihood of being considered for hire. Several employers said that hiring would depend on the type of crime. In our interviews, employers explained that violent or sexual offenses might bar an applicant from employment, particularly with companies that require Fingerprint Clearance Cards. Additionally, employers would not want to place employees in a role that has relation to their criminal history (e.g., someone with a history of embezzlement handling company finances).

Throughout both the survey and interviews, employers expressed that they would want to know more about the circumstances of the offense and the applicant’s future intentions. Furthermore, employers explained that they were more willing to hire youth with juvenile records if it seemed that the crime was a mistake rather than an indicator of future behaviors. “I’m all for second chances and benefits of doubt” one employer shared, saying “that’s what I would want to hear. Tell me that this is a good kid.” Employers who contact references rely on these contacts to vouch for applicants. One employer explained, “I need to hear from someone that you’re not a bad kid—you’re a good kid who did a dumb thing.” Additionally, employers want the applicant to show remorse for their actions, and demonstrate that they have been rehabilitated and now desire to contribute to society.

Employer preferences of the delivery method of disclosing criminal history varied. Some prefer applicants to include this on the job application, and others prefer it to be discussed in the job interview. Several employers suggested that applicants write something along the lines of “juvenile offense, will discuss at interview” on their application. These employers explained that they understand that having a juvenile record often means someone made a poor choice in their youth, and the crime does not define who they are. One employer explained that they would recommend that applicants not disclose their criminal history, particularly juvenile history, when applying to larger organizations because this may act as an automatic disqualifier. One employer explained that they use background checks to look for discrepancies with the information an applicant shares. A few employers explained that on occasion, a juvenile record would show up in a background check that an applicant had forgotten about because a significant amount of time had passed since the offense. For situations like this, these employers typically provide the applicant with an opportunity to discuss their history.

3.4. *COVID-19*

Since we conducted our survey and interviews during the COVID-19 period when a great deal of uncertainty existed around employment, we found it essential to consider the pandemic’s implications on hiring practices. Although most employers participating in the survey reported that the number of people employed had not changed at their company, one employer representing a company in the distribution industry reported an increase in hiring and one employer from the customer service industry reported a substantial decrease in employees. A few employers

($n = 4$) also noted a slight reduction in employment in the caregiving and construction industries.

Our survey found that many changes occurred in recruitment, hiring, and employment practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these changes reported by employers consisted of standard COVID-19 procedures, such as the implementation of more regular sanitizing and cleaning methods, social distancing, wearing masks, and regular monitoring of symptoms. Employers also explained that more remote work was being done whenever possible, and some employers performed more interviews for hiring over the phone or through video software.

Although the pandemic had a significant impact on the workforce, for the most part, the employers we interviewed expressed that while their companies had initially implemented strict policies, these had since relaxed. During this time, various changes to practices with hiring and interviewing occurred. As explained by employers throughout the interviews, one reason for this shift toward normalcy is that applicants for entry-level positions often face barriers with remote hiring practices. Moreover, many applicants do not have access to, or an understanding of, the technology (e.g., Zoom) that remote interviewing requires. Many employers shared how their companies were moving forward and “looking to return to normal in the next month or two.” However, employers voiced ambiguity about the future and said that further policy changes were unpredictable saying “that depends on how the pandemic goes, if it gets faster or slower.”

4. Discussion

We learn from this study that employers in this study were willing to hire youth despite their juvenile record, as long as they were assured that the crime was a mistake and not a predictor of future involvement. It is important for them that the youth meet the job requirements along with technological and STEM skills, while also having the necessary soft skills. In response to the first research question, these employers, like those in other studies (Cerdeza et al., 2015; Griller Clark et al., 2020), highlighted work-related soft skills (e.g., attention to detail, punctuality), people skills (e.g., teamwork, communication), and motivation (e.g., attitude, willingness to learn) as qualities that would increase employability for JJ involved youth. Also, in alignment with previous findings (Cerdeza et al., 2015; Griller Clark et al., 2020), employers noted that the degree these qualities would increase employability was dependent on the type of crime the individual had committed. The workplace offers youth a new arena and opportunity to apply soft skills, such as problem-solving and communication (Lewis, 2020). Therefore, vocational programs for JJ involved youth should incorporate a full range of soft skills that include time management, communication, problem-solving, work ethic, and professionalism (Lipsey, 2009; van der Stouwe et al., 2021).

Despite the fundamental importance of soft skills in preparing youth for work, hard skills, such as those related to STEM, cannot be overlooked. Lewis (2020) describes the relationship between technological skills and soft skills as being intertwined in order to best facilitate employability. Reinforcing this notion, employers in our study noted that technological and STEM skills would help youth be more prepared for employment, particularly within the context of the current era (Lewis, 2020). Additionally, SCCT asserts that an individual's self-efficacy and outcome expectations determine how much effort they will exert in obtaining their desired career goal (Lent et al., 1994). Therefore, if vocational programs emphasize the importance of STEM related skills and encourage STEM career preparation, JJ involved youth will have greater self-efficacy and begin to envision themselves in STEM related jobs.

In response to our second question on how to better prepare applicants for the hiring process, employers in our study highly valued personal references and previous work-related experience. This is consistent with findings from Cerdeza et al. (2015) on the positive effect previous experience has on perceived employability. Our employers also

viewed job preparation as helpful in teaching youth how to communicate their previous work experiences and work ethic more effectively in job interviews. The employers we interviewed also highlighted the value of real-world training experiences (i.e., internships, and volunteering) that emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving (McDonald & Waite, 2019). They also noted that real-world training experiences may provide youth with opportunities to enhance on-the-job communication skills (Sheely, 2020).

Consistent with other research (Uggen et al., 2014), the majority of the employers involved in this study affirmed the importance of applicants disclosing their criminal history. Most employers expressed that lying on an application creates a poor foundation for the relationship between the employee and employer and is grounds for termination. In addition, disclosure was found to be an important consideration specifically for employers that perform background checks or those that require Fingerprint Clearance Cards. However, employers, overall, expressed a willingness to find solutions to problems that may arise with background checks, if the applicant was forthcoming and honest. Employers articulated that they were less concerned with a juvenile record if the youth expressed that they had changed, or if a personal reference stated that the individual was a “good kid” who had just made a mistake. This is in contrast to other findings (Agan, 2017; Taylor & Spang, 2017) which indicate that juvenile records negatively influence employer's perceptions despite the fact that they are possibly less relevant than adult records.

With regard to changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the main challenges shared by employers was the need to conduct parts of the hiring process virtually rather than in person. Employers explained that this was difficult for some potential employees when they did not have knowledge of, or access to, the technology this requires. This finding again supports prior research that emphasizes the need for vocational preparation and STEM related technology skills (Fletcher & Tyson, 2017; Lewis, 2020). In response to this identified need, our team has begun to incorporate additional information on hiring practices into a student and employer co-designed STEM employment preparation curriculum for youth within the JJ system. The INSITE (INtegrating STEM Into Transition Education) curriculum has specific lessons on soft skills like problem-solving, communication, professionalism, attendance, honesty, teamwork, and conflict resolution, as well as lessons on disclosure, job search, and interviewing (virtual and in-person). It also includes a variety of real-life experiences, related to situations commonly faced in entry-level jobs. Lessons and activities are consistently being refined as part of the itinerant development process with employers, teachers, and youth.

The framework of SCCT has helped in understanding the contextual affordances and influences (i.e., employers' perspectives) that affect youths' career choice behavior (Lent et al., 1994). By understanding employers' perspectives, our team has created meaningful links between career-related contexts and youth learning experiences, which is one of the goals of SCCT.

4.1. Limitations

Several limitations must be considered when reviewing the results of this study. First, due to the small number of employers in this study that were obtained through convenience sampling, the findings are not representative of all employers. Second, our findings are geographically specific, while this is useful for local youth-serving agencies, they cannot be generalized to all the youth-serving facilities in other locations. Third, we did not analyze the differences between female and male respondents to corroborate or contrast previous research findings. Fourth, the study's focus on employers' perspectives about hiring practices only reflects their intentions, and not how they actually translate their perspectives into practice. Finally, the study fails to explain how the social context and organizational policies affect employers' decision-making. Despite the limitations of this study, the information obtained from

these employers is rich and valuable and adds to the knowledge and insights of JJ staff, administrators, and researchers serving youth in the state where the study was undertaken. The findings are relevant for reentry programming for this sub-population of youth involved in the JJ facilities in the state where the study has been conducted. Researchers, facility staff, and faculty have already begun incorporating employers' perspectives into their curriculum design processes.

4.2. Implications for practice and research

Several opportunities for improving practice and research have evolved from this study. In terms of practice, a continued need exists for integrating employers' perspectives into every aspect of vocational programming to improve youth employability (VanderPyl, 2015). Employers offer unique perspectives, skills, and strengths in preparing justice-involved youth for the workforce. Second Chance employer networks, like Arizona Job Connection, provide access to employers, who are not only willing to work with justice-involved youth, but can also provide valuable insight on vocational program development, local hiring practices, and employer needs. This small-scale study illustrated the qualities (i.e., honesty, motivation, desire to work) and skills (i.e., relevant experience, communication, technology) employers perceive as important. However, due to our limited number of responses within one geographical area, our findings should be considered exploratory rather than generalizable to all employers.

Nevertheless, these findings had meaningful implications for developing the INSITE curriculum. By garnering employer perspectives, our team is continually refining the STEM content and activities, and making the curriculum relevant for JJ involved youth. As a result of these findings, workplace scenarios that emphasize honesty, integrity, and effective communication skills have been added to the INSITE curriculum. Future research should obtain data on state policies that limit an employer's ability to hire juveniles with records. Additionally, researchers should investigate JJ involved youth experiences in seeking employment after release to understand better the barriers they experience.

5. Conclusion

Employers' perceptions are beneficial for developing realistic expectations about the employability of youth in JJ. With their insights and meaningful input, JJ facilities can develop a thoughtful and methodical approach to determine what skills youth need to develop to promote their employability. This exploratory study was conducted to help inform INSITE curriculum development and career preparation for JJ involved youth to enhance reentry success and employment further. The results of this study highlight the importance of providing opportunities for JJ involved youth to obtain work-related soft skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, as well as relevant job experience. These skills, coupled with personal qualities like honesty, a desire to work, and communicating previous mistakes with an intent to change, afford JJ involved youth the best possibility to obtain employment and become more productive members of society. Through employers' input, we have refined our career preparation curriculum to fully support the development of a range of skills and personal qualities that employers value to help bridge the gap between education and employment.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sarup R. Mathur: Conceptualization, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Heather Griller Clark:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Annee Grayson:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Kristin**

Scott Robertson: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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