

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

Prison Labor ^{AI} With Unemployment Low, a New Group Is In Demand: Ex-Cons

Bosses Who Resort to Hiring Former Prisoners Find Many Are Ideal Workers Ohio's Killer Car Salesman

By MARK TATGE
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

LIMA, Ohio — Car dealer Tom Ahl's disinclination to hire ex-convicts diminished when the unemployment rate here dipped below 5%. Suddenly, people released from the three prisons that ring Lima represented a labor pool he couldn't ignore. Against his better judgment, Mr. Ahl hired a convicted killer as a car salesman.

That was three years ago. Today, the killer, Ben Laws, is the star of the 24-person sales force at Tom Ahl Buick GMC. And prison records no longer represent a red flag for Mr. Ahl, who has hired several other ex-convicts since Mr. Laws.

"I realize they are not that different than me," says Mr. Ahl, 49 years old. "We all deserve a second chance."



Ben Laws

The tight labor market is accomplishing what years of pleas and programs from penal experts and social scientists failed to do: It is persuading America's employers to hire ex-convicts. What statistics exist about employment of ex-prisoners suggest that companies are hiring them at higher rates than ever before. In New York, about 40% of offenders on parole are employed, up from 33% six years ago. The pool of ex-convicts is growing substantially because of the record number of felony convictions since the late 1980s. About 2.5 million felons were on probation or parole in 1998, up from 1.5 million a decade ago.

Few employers are happy about having to resort to this pool. But once they do, most are finding that despite their preconceived notions, the ex-prisoner isn't necessarily a repeat offender waiting to happen. Only 40% of ex-cons commit crimes again, and that number is much lower for those who find employment. "I don't think a person's history matters as much as who that person is," said Richard Lord, manager of a J.C. Penney store in Columbia, Mo., where unemployment of less than 1% has prompted him to hire ex-prisoners as sales clerks.

As industry hires more ex-prisoners, perceptions of them are changing in a way that could outlast the tight labor market and perhaps even lower the crime rate. "All the data and research indicate if you have a positive experience upon leaving prison — and getting a job would be just that — the chance of recidivism is going to be lower," says R. Dean Wright, a Drake University professor of sociology who specializes in penal issues.

Employers of ex-prisoners say it isn't simply a crapshoot as to who will and won't return to prison. As owner of a boat maker in Fort Dodge, Iowa, where unemployment stands at 2.8%, Lisa Wilson has hired felons convicted of robbery, burglary, drug possession and involuntary manslaughter. She doesn't regret a single hire. But she has a code — no sex offenders — and a test for prospective hires: "We walk through the plant at a brisk pace and see if they keep up," she says. "You can tell if they are going to work at a good pace by how they walk."

Signs of the Times

In a sign that the trend is picking up pace, consultants who specialize in figuring out which ex-cons can be trusted have begun to emerge. In Columbia, Mo., Dale Wolchko has placed ex-prisoners in jobs ranging from sales clerk at the local Dillard's department store to kitchen assistant at an Olive Garden restaurant. He looks for a positive attitude and a desire to please. "When a guy who has tattoos all over his body has gone through the trouble to wear a collar shirt with long sleeves, that is a good sign," said Mr. Wolchko, an employment specialist with the Job Center in Columbia, Mo., which helps ex-cons get work.

Some of these consultants, operating on the theory that you can't con a con, tout their own criminal records as credentials in selecting from among ex-prisoners. "I look for phd's — poor, hungry and driven," says Mark Paulus, a former police officer who spent three years in prison for theft and now recruits ex-cons for employers. "This economy has given offenders a chance to show they are not all Jeffrey Dahmer."

Labor demand is so hot these days that many workers don't hesitate to hop from job to job. But employers say that ex-prisoners often demonstrate extraordinary gratitude and loyalty in exchange for trust, responsibility and a paycheck. And an ex-con who is honest about his background is often less a gamble than the average candidate, bosses say. "I know more about them than I know about John Doe off the street," said Thomas Lewis, chief executive of Digital Design Inc., a Columbus, Ohio-based supplier of telecommunications wire.

Mr. Lewis' enthusiasm for hiring ex-criminals seems particularly remarkable. Ten years ago, his 25-year-old stepson was murdered. The case remains unsolved. But soon after the tragedy, Mr. Lewis began hiring ex-prisoners. He sees it as a way of reducing crime. "We've got to do something," he says. "We are throwing so much money at the prison system" and nothing seems to be working.

Before hiring ex-cons, Mr. Lewis scours the Internet, where he sometimes can find their criminal records. He talks to their parole officers. "I look for change in their behavior," he says. "What did they accomplish when they were incarcerated? Did they further their education?"

At his 65-person firm, Mr. Lewis has hired more than a dozen ex-cons. When his business got burglarized a while back, "Everybody said it is those ex-cons you are hiring," he recalls. "It turned out to be one of my other employees."

Of course, some employers steer clear of ex-cons. "We are very selective in who we hire," and that doesn't include convicted felons, says Pam Kassner, spokeswoman for USG Corp., a Chicago-based building-supply company. Demand for USG's factory jobs, paying \$11 to \$20 an hour, is so great that the company doesn't have to turn to convicted felons.

Sometimes, employer fears turn out to be warranted.

Neill Davis owns the Learning Shoppe, a toy store in Panama City, Fla. Last year, he hired Henry G. Moore, a 55-year-old whom Mr. Davis had known for more than 20 years. "He was having trouble buying groceries," Mr. Davis explains.

Mr. Moore is a convicted child molester. Mr. Davis put him to work supervising the remodeling of a new store, and made sure Mr. Moore's job didn't put him anywhere near kids.

But midway through the remodeling, Mr. Davis was stunned to learn that Mr. Moore was allegedly paying female members of the construction crew overtime

wages in exchange for sexual favors. Mr. Moore was arrested in November, and later convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to one year in jail. Mr. Davis says he's out \$18,500, and that he won't hire any more ex-cons. "It has made me a lot more cautious," he says.

Caution seems in order. Ronny Medina finished serving a six-year drug-dealing sentence in January 1997. During the next three months, seven employers turned him down, though all needed workers. The 28-year-old says he thought he would never get a job. Then building-supply maker Stark Truss Co. hired him. Three years later, he says he has been turning down better offers to go elsewhere. Stark gave "me a second shot on life," Mr. Medina, whose computer-programming job pays \$35,000, said in an interview a few weeks ago.

But now, Mr. Medina is in trouble again. Recently, Charter One Bank mistakenly deposited \$80,000 in his checking account. "I am not going to lie," Mr. Medina says. "I probably should not have spent it." But he did—at least \$22,000 of it, mostly on trips to see family in Honduras, on clothes and to pay off credit-card debt. "I kind of went crazy, like I had won the lottery," Mr. Medina says.

Charter One declined to comment, but it has told Mr. Medina and his employer that if the bank doesn't get the money back fast, it will press charges. Mr. Medina's bosses at Stark are disappointed in him—but, in a measure of the goodwill his hard work has inspired, they say they won't fire him, even if he's indicted. "My heart hurts for him," says Javan Yoder, a Stark executive vice president. "Ronny has been a good employee and even if he goes to prison, we would hire him back when he gets out."

That kind of dedication to ex-con employees seems surprisingly common. After his release from prison on a heroin-dealing conviction, Bob Whaley did such a fine job for Decor Lighting in Cincinnati that owner Robert Carter felt compelled to elevate him. Particularly impressive, Mr.

CRIMES
EX-CONS

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line sometimes gets blurry. Its president, Mr. Farris, is also chairman of the Madison Project, a political action committee that says it funneled about \$350,000 in each of the last two Congressional elections to conservative Republican challengers for Democratic-held and open seats.

Mr. Farris expects the Madison Project to give between \$20,000 and \$30,000 to each of 20 candidates this year. It is also spinning off a home-school political action committee to focus on key congressional races. One likely target: Kansas Democratic Rep. Dennis Moore. In 1983, when Mr. Moore was district attorney of Johnson County, Kan., he brought—and won—a case against two children for truancy because they were home schooled.

Legislatively, home schoolers want to shrink the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. "This will probably be the first issue you'll be lobbying on," Christopher Klicka, senior counsel of the association, tells the group at the Holiday Inn. "We noticed what we call 'NAEP creep.' It's the back door for another national test attempt."

Two years ago, home schoolers joined a right-left coalition—also including black and Hispanic Democrats in Congress—to defeat the Clinton administration's proposal for a national test for all students. Though participation would have been voluntary, home schoolers predicted the test would spawn a national curriculum.

Unlike that proposed test, NAEP doesn't give results for individual students. It provides state and national scores on various subjects, based on a sample of public, private and parochial school students. (Home schoolers haven't participated because the survey is limited to schools.) The nonprofit Educational Testing Service in Princeton, N.J., designs NAEP under a five-year, \$75 million agreement with the federal government.

Now, the Clinton administration and Vice President Al Gore have proposed extra funding for states that do well on NAEP, which is due for congressional reauthorization this year. (Gov. Bush would use NAEP as one of several mea-

sures for rewarding states.)

Worried that NAEP will morph into a national test, home schoolers linked up with McGraw-Hill and Houghton Mifflin, which fear that an expanded NAEP would give states and local school districts less reason to buy their standardized tests, now used chiefly to measure individual student performance.

"I actually was shocked the first time I met with the test publishers," says Doug Domenech, director of governmental affairs for the home-school association. "I didn't think they'd buy our changes."

Executives at both CTB/McGraw-Hill, the McGraw-Hill division that sells the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, and Houghton Mifflin, which sells the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, confirm the alliance. Michael Kean, vice president of CTB/McGraw-Hill, describes NAEP as a competitor and says its state results are largely useless. "In terms of networking in Washington, the home schoolers provide some access," Mr. Kean says. "They carry some people power."

Keith Oakley agrees. As chairman of the Texas House of Representatives' public-safety committee in 1997, he sought to repeal a law that allowed parents to teach their children to drive, in place of certified instructors. Hundreds of home-schooling families packed the legislature in protest.

With the help of a state representative whose own son was home-schooled, the bill was trounced.

Chastened, Mr. Oakley cites the defeat as part of the reason he didn't seek reelection in 1998. "I've still got their tire tracks on my back," he says.

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Carter says, was when Mr. Whaley caught a top manager of the company in the act of theft. "I watch Mr. Carter's money like it is my own," Mr. Whaley says.

Now, as operations manager earning \$50,000 a year, Mr. Whaley is responsible for recruiting—and he focuses on ex-offenders. To find workers, Mr. Whaley scours local halfway houses. He relies on personal recommendations from people he knew in prison. One-fourth of the company's 25-person work force has served time. "I like to hire guys on parole, because they have a lot to lose," he says.

He gives special consideration to ex-drug offenders—a crime that often involves no violence against others—but only if they remain clean. "I can tell based on what time they get here in the morning what they were doing the night before," he says. He is careful about avoiding mismatches between jobs and particular criminal pasts. "I let her do the payables, but not the receivables," he says of a convicted embezzler who serves as Decor's bookkeeper. "That would be too much like offering candy to a diabetic."

Hiring ex-prisoners gives some employers a sense of higher purpose. Architect Jim Monsul hires them because "you've got to give something back" to society and this is a legitimate way. "The biggest problem is ex-offenders don't make a living wage," he says. "So they go out and rob again."

One project of Mr. Monsul's was Mike Brown. Mr. Monsul taught drafting to Mr. Brown after he served an eight-year stint for robbery. Then he helped Mr. Brown, 47, set up his own drafting business. "I couldn't have done this without Jim," Mr. Brown says.

Employer acceptance of ex-cons could lead to a wider community acceptance. After Mr. Ahl, the Lima car dealer, hired convicted killer Mr. Laws, Mr. Ahl received nasty telephone calls from community members and guards at the city's three prisons, which employ about 1,200 people in a city of 45,000. Dealership employees

were upset, too. "They said, 'How could you bring in this guy who had killed somebody?'" Mr. Ahl recalls. Six years earlier, Mr. Laws stabbed a man five times and was convicted of manslaughter.

But a threatened customer boycott never materialized. Among the dealership's best customers now are a warden and several prison guards. Warden Michael Leonard of the Lima Correctional Institution bought a used 1989 Mercedes from another ex-con Mr. Ahl hired, Ron Larry. Says Warden Leonard: "I would buy another car from him tomorrow. He has good integrity."

Mr. Larry, an admitted former junkie, did time in Ohio for breaking and entering and robbery. For his part, he says the prison guards are pretty good customers. "A couple of them I couldn't get financed, but they are very respectful," he says.

With 60 cars sold this year, Mr. Laws is on his way to another banner year. Last year, he sold more than 200 vehicles and made \$74,000. He owns a four-bedroom house. He looks back at his time in that other big house and thinks: "I make as much as the warden."

Mr. Laws attributes his success in part to lessons learned in prison. His effort to treat customers well includes not rushing them into a sale, for instance. "Prison taught me to have patience," he says. "Everything you do there you have to wait to do."

His boss, Mr. Ahl, says Mr. Laws's success also has something to do with the Italian suits he wears. "He dresses to kill," says Mr. Ahl.

Attitudes have shifted so much that even Lima politicians can get away with hiring former prisoners. Mayor David Berger says, "I like to believe I am a pretty good judge of people." As his director of parks and recreation, Mayor Berger two years ago hired a battered woman who had shot her boyfriend to death and served 11 years in prison before being pardoned by the governor.

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Gore Points to Fuel Project to Show How Being Green Can Benefit Industry

By BOB DAVIS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—Vice President Al Gore is using a new research program for boosting the gas mileage of heavy trucks to argue that environmentalism doesn't have an anti-industry tinge.

During a stop Friday in Detroit, Mr. Gore announced a government-industry project to triple the fuel economy of heavy pickups, delivery vans and buses, and to double the fuel efficiency of 18-wheel trucks over 10 years.

The 21st Century Truck Initiative follows the pattern of an existing car project, in which the Big Three auto makers are working with the government to triple gas mileage. Fuel efficiency in large trucks is measured in "ton miles per gallon," meaning the amount of weight hauled per gallon of gasoline.

Mr. Gore has long argued that technology can be used to enhance environmental goals, such as reducing pollutants and greenhouse-gas emissions, without harming U.S. industry. He is sure to tout the project in his presidential campaign as evidence for his argument.

"We have learned that a strong economy and a safe environment go hand in hand," he said in Detroit. Vehicle makers gain from the project through additional research grants and a closer relationship with federal agencies. Although Mr. Gore hasn't promised to ease regulatory oversight, vehicle makers can leverage their participation in lobbying efforts to ease pollution requirements.

The project doesn't require vehicle makers to build vehicles; rather they commit to constructing "production prototypes," which could be used for mass production. Under the initiative, Mr. Gore proposes to boost spending on truck-research projects by \$47 million in the fiscal year starting Oct. 1 to \$142 million.

Research priorities include advanced engines, fuel cells and lightweight materials. Delivery trucks especially should be able to benefit from designs that use a combination of electric motors and internal-combustion engines. That is because the energy from engine start and stop can be used to recharge the battery. Industry participants in the project include Cummins Engine Co., Caterpillar Inc. and the Mack Trucks subsidiary of Renault SA.