

Dr. Niccolò Aimo, IRES Piemonte
aimo@ires.piemonte.it

Dr. Luigi Nava, IRES Piemonte
nava@ires.piemonte.it

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Evaluating Labour Policies for Justice-Involved People. Exploring Key Implementation Factors from a Regional Policy in Piedmont, Italy

Introduction: Conviction at the intersection of activation and rehabilitation

The re-employment of justice-involved individuals has become a central topic in the administration of penal justice. During the last decades, in fact, we have assisted to a growth in the number and diffusion of policies stimulating convicts to enter (or re-enter) the workforce, both during and after serving their sentence. The origins of such interventions can be traced back at the intersection of two main shifts in justice and welfare: rehabilitation and activation.

The rehabilitation approach to penal justice believes conviction should be intended as part of a process of personal transformation (Allen, 1978; Garland, 2018). The underlying rationale is that, after committing a crime, the penal system should stimulate processes of virtuous personal change, which will prevent future iterations of undesirable behaviours. This, in turn, should generate individual and collective benefits. The history of the rehabilitation approach can be traced back for decades, with highs and lows, in contraposition to the opposite model, incapacitation (i.e.: using conviction to punish or contain dangerous individuals) (Allen, 1978; McSherry, 2018).

While the literature often portrays a radical contraposition between rehabilitation and incapacitation, reality often presents a blend of policies and practices from both approaches. In other words, most contemporary justice systems are the product of a process of layering, in which elements of both perspectives coexist, depending on contingencies and specificities (e.g.: governance models, individual crimes and circumstances, judicial interpretations, case law, political climate, etc.) (Hutchinson, 2006; Robinson, 2008; Macaulay, 2013).

Among these complex mixes of interventions, policies for the re-entry into the labour market are one example of rehabilitation-oriented measures. Their aim is to include elements of training and skilling in conviction practices, a tool to bridge the gap with post-conviction social re-entry. From this perspective, post-conviction unemployment is seen as one of the key determinants of relapse, trapping people in recurrent incarceration.

Despite the efforts, stimulating justice-involved people employment is a tough challenge. This is where the rehabilitation approach blends with the paradigm of activation in workfare

policies. The shift towards activation is one of the main outcomes of welfare reforms during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, driven by the neo-liberal turn in political economy and subsequent new-public-management reforms in public administration (Hood, 1991; Peck, 2017).

At the heart of such transition is the attempt to reduce unemployment and rationalize the use of public resources, by making access to welfare conditional to the active participation of recipients in the productive economy. As a result, we assist to the passage from the traditional model of “passive” welfare to different forms of “workfare”, in which individuals are required to actively participate in the labour market in order to access socio-economic benefits (Weishaupt, 2011). Active participation typically takes the form of training activities (e.g.: vocational training, tutoring, skilling, etc.) and job matching.

Adapting activation policies to specific population groups also aims at reducing competitive disadvantages on the job market. Especially for people facing structural disadvantages (e.g.: disabled, unskilled, justice-involved, etc.) active labour market policies promise the opportunity to reduce the structural gap, thanks to dedicated training activities and professional support in finding and maintaining a job.

The union of rehabilitation and activation represents yet another kind of layering between welfare and penal justice reforms. As a result, active labour market policies for the justice-involved mix different aims (e.g.: contrasting relapse, increasing employment, reskilling convicts, etc.) in complex policy mixes.

In this paper, we present and discuss the challenges of evaluating active labour market policies for the justice-involved. Specifically, we argue that, given the inherent complexity in the structure of these programmes, qualitative and open-ended assessments are necessary. This because, despite their apparent simplicity “on paper”, the context in which these policies are implemented substantially influences the outcomes they can achieve. We contend that giving ample space to contexts during the analysis holds a central role in evaluating these policies, and qualitative methods can achieve this successfully.

To demonstrate the contribution that qualitative approaches offer, the paper presents the evidence from a concrete evaluation of the “Prison Job Desk”, a policy for the justice-involved in North-West Italy. The evidence allows us to show the kind of knowledge that open-ended qualitative evaluations can produce, as well as drawing significant insights for policymakers and for the practice of policy evaluation.

In this paper, we adopt an exploratory approach to the topic, aiming to “probe” how a qualitative, open-ended evaluation approach can contribute to a series of open questions. This way, we wish to identify a series of key factors that steer policy outcomes during implementation, while preparing the ground for further in-depth research.

1. The Challenges of Evaluating Labour Policies for the Justice-Involved

1.1. Evaluation. Yes, but

A common trait of most active labour market policies is the strong accent put by policymakers on evaluation and performance assessment. Programmes targeting the justice-involved are no exception. This is a structural element of activation policies that is closely related to their historical background. As we have presented, activation policies are the product of processes of reform originally justified with (and oriented to) the rationalization of public expenditure.

It is thus unsurprising that these policies represent today one of the domains in which the practice of evaluation has spread stronger, leading to a decades-long history of cross-country comparative analyses (see Martin & Grubb, 2001). Overall, the evaluation practice of active labour market policies for the general unemployed population has reached an advanced stage of maturation. Current understandings of these policy tools converge over “what works and for whom”, thanks to an established tradition of quantitative studies (Martin & Grubb, 2001; Martin, 2015; Card et al., 2018; E. L. Yeyati, 2019; E. Yeyati et al., 2025) complemented by a rich stream of qualitative studies about the governance and implementation factors influencing the outcomes (Le Grand & Bartlett, 1999; Carter & Whitworth, 2015; Crépon & van den Berg, 2016; Greer et al., 2018; Hansen & Nielsen, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2014).

The same cannot be said about active labour market policies for the justice-involved. While sharing the heavy orientation towards policy evaluation, the task of assessing the outcomes of these policies is characterized by important challenges and open questions.

Existing studies have focused primarily on the establishment of causal links between programme participation, employment and relapse. In other words, these analyses have been attempting to measure the degree to which activation programmes can boost employment or reduce the chance of committing further crimes.

However, despite a growing diffusion of experimental designs and meta analyses, results of these studies still remain inconsistent, together with an overall difficulty in achieving statistical significance (Cook et al., 2015; Bales et al., 2015; Zanella, 2020; Connell et al., 2023; Mancino, 2025; Lai et al., 2026). Studies widely disagree on the size and direction of the causal effect, with recent contributions leaning on small positive effects on recidivism and employment, although still lacking enough statistical power, and showing large variations across sub-groups.

Our “working hypothesis” is that active labour market policies for the justice-involved present key characters that distinguish them from the active labour market policies for the “general unemployed” (i.e.: the average pool of unemployment). Specifically, we argue that such distinctions impact the way in which such policies ought to be effectively evaluated. Despite similarities in their formulation “on paper”, contextual conditions might play a bigger role than it's usually accepted.

The broader theoretical issues this article tackles are *the centrality of contextual conditions in policies characterized by complex governance structures, and how could evaluative practice account for such conditions when assessing complex programmes.*

The degree to which policy outcomes are influenced by the surrounding context is an open topic in the debate about policy evaluation (Stame, 2022; McFarlane et al., 2026; Nielsen & Lemire, 2026). An effective summary over this issue has been advanced by Stame (2022), who traces a

distinction between *simplifiers* and *complexifiers*. The former group includes mainstream evaluation approaches prioritizing policy design over context, producing assessments based on the programmes' expected outcomes or "planned change" (Liebhart & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010; Forss et al., 2021). These take the (quasi)experimental methodologies as the "gold standard" of evaluation, with the aim to simplify and control the empirical observation. Conversely, The latter group puts greater emphasis on programme complexity, holding that policy designs are bound to their contexts of implementation. Complexifiers also stress that the expected or planned outcomes declared in a policy design are often contested and unstable, while "unexpected" or "emergent" outcomes might offer important evaluative insights that can't be left unnoticed (Liebhart & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010; Forss et al., 2021). In these cases, methodological choices are more open, as evaluations should not try to bound the object of observation too tightly. The priority is given to the logic of discovery, and evaluation designs should leave space for incremental adjustments. Known examples of these context-dependent evaluations include Stake's (2003, 2011) "responsive evaluation", Weiss' (1997) "theory based evaluation" and Pawson and Tilley's (1997) "realistic evaluation", among others (see Stame, 2022).

A compromise between the two opposed perspective can be found based on the kind of policy under evaluation. In other words, a specific evaluation approach might be more appropriate (or less) depending on the concrete application. Some programmes can conform better to a simplification approach, and the same is true for complexifiers.

We can apply this principle to our object of discussion, active labour market policies. Programmes targeting the "general unemployed" usually conform well to a simplification approach, because it's possible to access large samples and isolate a direct causal link between the policy tools and the expected outcomes. Contexts can often blend in the background and play a minor role in the overall evaluation.

Conversely, in programmes for the justice-involved the contextual factors play a much larger role that can't be overlooked as easily. On paper, these policies might look simple and straightforward, with strong similarities to other labour policies. For example, the instruments adopted are the same (e.g.: professional counselling, vocational training, job matching, skills certification, tutoring, protected employment, etc.). At the same time, while similar in their design, policies for the justice-involved have unique contexts of implementation.

Context includes, for example, the polity of the justice system understood as the hierarchy of the courts, the procedures in trials, the governance of penitentiaries, and more. The social perception of crimes influences if and how companies will offer job opportunities. Judges' discretionary orientations define which services can convicts access, and under which conditions. Additionally, the governance of security and crime is particularly susceptible to the political climate, when compared to other kinds of active market labour policies. All these elements (and more) easily impact policy implementation as well as the outcomes.

We contend that accounting for complexity is the main challenge in the evaluation of this kind of policies. We can formally characterize this trait adopting Gerring's concept of "causal distance", or proximity between causes and effects (Gerring, 2010). When the context plays a

weaker role, we can talk about “short” causal chains. These are direct links between the policy design “on paper” and the effect observed. For example, the link between training and employment in a sample of “average” unemployed people is direct, “short”. The definition of outcome variables is fairly uncontroversial and, provided the sample is big enough, (quasi-) experimental methods can be deployed with great effectiveness.

Conversely, when context plays a stronger role, we can talk about “long” causal chains. Here, the link between the policy “on paper” and the outcomes is not direct anymore, because contextual elements intervene. The causal chain is “long”. Labour policies for the justice-involved are an example. Here, the link between training and employment is indirect, because it depends on a myriad of external factors (es.: what crime did the person commit? Will they have permission to work? Will the judge allow it? Will the company trust the candidate? Etc.). Additionally, the outcome variables are often contested. Is it employment rates? Or is it relapse rates? Do all actors agree on the goals? Or different actors pursue different measures of “success”? Long causal chains are “context-dependent” meaning that it’s possible that the same outcome is produced in different conditions, as well as the same conditions leading to a different outcome (Gerring, 2008).

Some might suggest that contextual factors can still be treated under simplified, experimental settings as “intervening variables”. The problem with this approach is that, in most cases, these elements are not predictable, not controllable, and not directly measurable by the evaluator. While we can know *some* relevant factors, it’s impossible to define a comprehensive list of *all* of them. Equally, it’s impossible to predict which exactly are going to trigger, and which won’t in a concrete case. We can approach such knowledge only *during* research. This element seriously hampers the appeal of simplified, experimental designs, and requires some degree of contextual in-depth analysis.

Ultimately, experimental approaches struggle to simplify complex programmes in tight fitted models. Thus, simplification might not constitute a reliable “gold standard” for evaluation in similar cases. Conversely, exploratory and incremental approaches focused on understanding processes can represent a stronger choice. Assessments about the effects of similar policies cannot be meaningfully separated from our knowledge of the context in which they are implemented.

An implicit recognition of the necessity of more comprehensive evaluation approaches is also found in the literature. Calls for more mechanism-oriented evaluations is found across the current debate on labour policies for the justice-involved (Cook et al., 2015; Kendall et al., 2018; Zanella, 2020; Walk et al., 2021). This reflects the necessity to enrich the current experimental findings with more grounded, contextual analysis. However, evaluation studies of this kind are largely missing, while other strands of qualitative research focusing on penal justice remain disconnected from the community of practice of policy evaluation (see Richards & Jones, 2004; Solomon et al., 2004; Munn, 2011; Berg & Huebner, 2011).

1.2. *Three challenges evaluating policies for the justice-involved*

To demonstrate the valuable contribution that contextual-oriented analysis can give to the evaluation of this kind of policies, we introduce here a list of unresolved issues in the current understanding of active labour market policies for the justice-involved people. From these, we will form our empirical research questions.

Since the evaluation literature tells us that complex programmes can be characterized by unexpected and contested outcomes (Forss et al., 2021; Stame, 2022), our first concern is identifying and understanding the goals of the actors involved.

To do so, we can deploy the concept of *logics*, or *rationales*. Following the seminal work on “implementation structures” by Hjern and Porter’s (1981), we know that policy outcomes are often the combination of multiple “rationales”. These are the underlying principles of action that guide how actors organize and make decisions during implementation. Specifically, we know that the “programme rationale” (what needs to be done to achieve the programme's goals) might conflict with the “organizational rationales” (how actors fulfil their responsibilities and interests). Labour policies for the justice-involved are a concrete example of such problem, involving a diverse set of actors with different backgrounds and scopes.

Q1: How do differences in actor's rationales affect the programme's outcomes?

Second, large-N quantitative studies often stress the importance of the heterogeneity of effects, explaining differences in policy outcomes based on the characters of the different recipients' groups. For example, studying the effects of programme participation on relapse, Zanella's study (2020) explains the effect based on the duration of incarceration. Similarly, other studies identify an extensive multitude of factors having similar effects (Mancino, 2025). Indeed, the study of the heterogeneity of effects can (and does) provide important evaluative insights for adjusting and fine-tuning these policies. At the same time, current evaluations of labour policies for the justice-involved lack a proper discussion of the discretionary processes that link personal characteristics to the policy outcomes.

For example, existing studies on active labour market policies have shown that implementers can use their discretion to benefit recipients with given characteristics (Carter & Whitworth, 2015; Greer et al., 2018; Hansen & Nielsen, 2023). Examples include job-search officials prioritizing the “better suited”, when job opportunities are scarce (known as *creaming* and *parking*). In this case, the meaning of “better suited” is defined discretionally by the officials and has important implications on the final policy outcomes.

Given the peculiar condition of justice-involved people, we can expect the delivery of job services to be severely influenced by discretionary decisions from a plurality of actors. It's reasonable to assume that discretionary decisions (e.g.: by judges, penal administrations, case-managers, etc.) will have a strong effect on how services are delivered. Especially because people are not “free” to participate in the programme but are subjected to incarceration.

Q2: how do discretionary choices made by implementers affect the pathways of service delivery for justice-involved individuals?

Third, a simple but pragmatic aspect. The evidence from existing evaluation studies points towards a persisting gap between programme's participation and access to employment, especially post-release. Yet, it remains unclear which factors can contribute to ameliorate this tendency. Here we test the capacity of a qualitative evaluation to inquire those outcomes that were expected but *didn't* occur.

Q3: *how can re-employment be more effectively stimulated?*

2. Research design and methods

2.1. Case selection

To explore these open issues, this paper advances a qualitative, in-depth analysis of an active labour market policy targeting the justice-involved in the North-West Italian Region of Piemonte. In the Italian system, competence over activation policies is shared by both the State and Regional administrations. Regions, specifically, have pioneered these kind of programmes in the past decades, mainly thanks to European Structural Funds (Rizza & Scarano, 2019; Scarano, 2021; Pomatto et al., 2025).

Italian Regional activation policies represent key cases for this research, for two main reasons. First, Regional administrations have experimented with activation policies over time, creating numerous programmes, and cross-regional variations in their institutional structure of service-delivery. This developed a rich environment in which activation policies target a multiple of sub-populations with peculiar contextual conditions. Context emerges as a strong component and highlighting the complex and “long” causal chains we described in Paragraph 1.

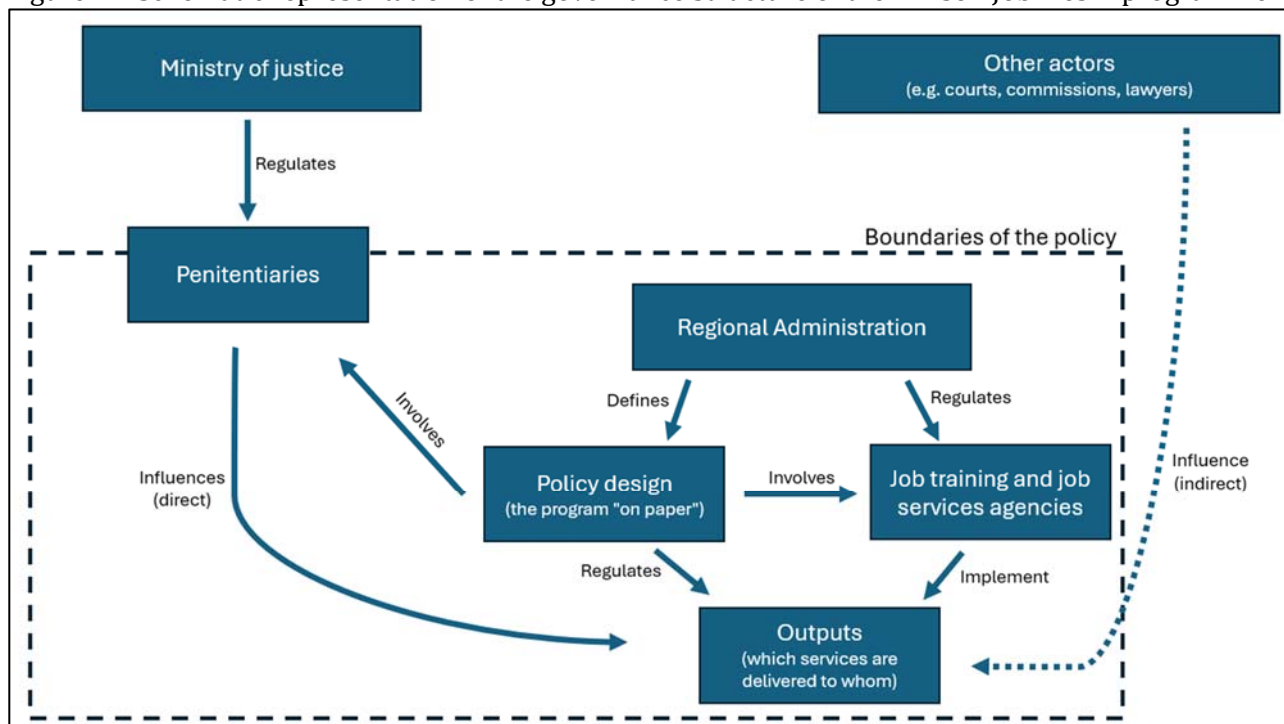
Second, given the stringent European requirements on resources allocation, Italian Regions have a strong attention to monitoring and evaluation. This has stimulated a rich debate on these policies, combining both qualitative and quantitative contributions (Gambardella et al., 2017; Vesan & Lizzi, 2017; Scarano, 2021; Pomatto et al., 2021; Padrin, 2023; Pomatto et al., 2025). This provides fertile ground for the portability of the results of this study to neighbouring contexts.

The policy analysed in this paper, named “Prison Job-Desk”¹ has been recently introduced by the Piemontese Regional Administration and represents the latest addition to a regional panel of activation policies targeting various populations.

The structure of the programme represents a key case of activation policy targeting the justice-involved. It offers a series of typical job services (e.g.: training and skilling, job search support, internships, job-matching, etc.) to people with up to 5 years of residual sentence, who are currently serving a sentence under one of the penitentiaries on the Piemontese territory. Yet, against the simplicity of the research design, its governance structure represents a typical example of the complexity that characterizes similar policies (figure 1).

¹ “Sportello Lavoro Carcere”

Figure 1 – Schematic representation of the governance structure of the “Prison Job-Desk” programme



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The policy involves 14 penitentiaries, divided into correctional facilities for people serving short sentences or waiting for trial, and detention facilities for people serving longer sentences, plus one facility for minors. The 14 penitentiaries are grouped in 4 clusters based on geographic location, and for each group a selection of training and job-seeking agencies is authorized to deliver job services.

In total, 13 agencies are involved. These are private-sector operators (for profit or cooperatives), with extensive experience in the delivery of public job-services. Such “hybrid” agencies, private companies whose core-business is strongly oriented to the delivery of public services, are common in modern workfare systems. Using specialized personnel (the case-managers) they deliver the labour market services which have been externalized by the public sector.

The access of recipients (the justice-involved people) to the policy, however, is regulated by the decision of the penal administration of each penitentiary, which can allow, deny, or interrupt the services provision at any point. To these elements, we need to add the indirect role of judiciary commissions who regulate the permits to exit the penitentiary for work-related reasons, the support given by lawyers, and more. All the process happens under the monitoring of the Regional Administration officials, who are responsible for the programme implementation and evaluation of European funds expenditure. However, they have no jurisdiction on penitentiaries, which are under direct control of the Ministry of Justice at State level.

2.2. *Materials and methods*

This paper builds on the empirical evidence collected by the authors during the process of evaluation of the Prison Job Desk initiative, under the mandate of the Regional Administration². Given the complexity of the implementation environment, the choice has been to adopt an in-depth, qualitative approach. The aim is to reconstruct the practices of service delivery adopted by case-managers working for the job agencies, delivering services directly to the justice-involved people. According to what has been discussed in Paragraph 1, the overall approach of the paper is to inquire the policy implementation process with an open-ended view on the thick relationship between policy design and context (Stame, 2022).

The data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews to personnel working in the agencies delivering services to the justice-involved recipients. In total, 19 people were interviewed from 11 agencies, equally distributed over the territory, working as case-managers. Of these, 3 were also responsible for inter-organizational coordination. Coordinators are those entrusted with managerial duties and hold responsibility over communication and coordination with penal administration officials inside the penitentiaries. This has allowed us also to explore the relational dimension between different types of actors.

The interview data is used in this paper to address the three open questions identified in the theoretical paragraph: the existence (and implications) of competing implementation rationales; the combination of recipients' characteristics and discretionary decisions; and the pragmatic insights fostering employment.

The elaboration of the data has followed an abductive approach (Danermark et al., 2019; Timmermans & Tavory, 2022; Ramesh & Howlett, 2025). This approach relies on an iterative process of open, thematic, and focused coding. The three challenges introduced in Paragraph 1.2 provide the basic coding structure, around which abductive themes are identified. Data collection and analysis proceed "in tandem" prioritizing a logic of discovery. This means that refined hypotheses and new leads have the chance to enter evaluation during the conduction of the research.

About rationales, the data offers a vivid recollection of policy implementation and its challenges from the case-managers' perspective. Using these narratives, it's possible to thematize the data around different rationales adopted by different actors, their convergence or divergence.

About personal characteristics and discretionary decisions, the data contains a series of individual causal stories of service-delivery to recipients. We selected two of these narratives, in which similar personal conditions led to different outcomes. Comparing a "thinner" description of personal characteristics with a "thicker" reconstruction of the course of events, we focused on identifying if and how discretionary decisions generate "turning points" in individual stories.

² See the report (in Italian) at:

https://www.ires.piemonte.it/pubblicazioni_ires/Rapporto_Sportello_Lavoro_Carcere_Linea1_Attività116_finale.pdf

About pragmatic insights, we use a summary of quantitative monitoring data to assess the scarcity of re-employment outcomes in the analysed programme. Comparing this evidence against the interview data, we identify a series of narrative instances about the few successful cases of job-matching and re-employment. Focusing on these interviews' sections, we identify the emergent factors supporting re-employment.

3. Results

3.1. Rationales

Q1: How do differences in actor's rationales affect the programme's outcomes?

The analysis of the data confirms that the Prison Job-Desk initiative has been characterized by a plurality of overlapping logics by the actors involved. These show how different actors pursue multiple distinct goals, that are not always converging with the policy design "on paper" (Table 1).

Table 1 – Emergent implementation rationales, their goals and key actors

Rationale	Description	Main goals	Adopted by
Job market	The "programme rationale", closer to the policy on paper. Based on delivering services and improving the job-market readiness of recipients	Training and employment	Regional Administration; Case managers
Prize-Punishment	Conditioning the access to the Job-Desk to the maintenance of good behaviour inside prison	Control inmates	Penitentiaries
Rehabilitation	"Wider" interpretation of the policy design including a stronger attention to the indirect social benefits of job-services	Social inclusion	Case managers
Opportunity	Use of the programme as an opportunity to obtain permits and temporarily leave the penitentiaries	Exit detention	Recipients

Source: authors' elaboration

First, we observe the "job market" rationale. This is what, based on Hjern and Porter's work (1981), we can define as the "programme rationale". Meaning the subset of goals that align closer to the policy design "on paper". In our case, these are represented as the delivery of job services to the recipients, with the main expected outcome of fostering job-readiness (expressed as training and/or employment).

"We are dealing with inmates at the end of their sentence, who need to be re-employed on the market. We need to be certain they know how re-employment can happen. What is an internship? How do contracts work? What is a job-service contract? What does it mean to have a contract with a company? What is an independent contractor? Well, we try to teach them and offer a general understanding of it" (Int. 10, case manager)

"After the recipients get released [...] our suggestion is for them to reach out to us and continue the work we have done so far. The guidelines from the Regional Administration for

released people is to direct them towards other active labour market policies for the general unemployed [...] our policy is to foster continuity and try to keep following everyone" (Int. 03, case manager)

The quotes portray a dynamic where case-managers put effort in the delivery of services aimed at preparing justice-involved people to re-enter the labour market. This is also the main rationale towards which the Regional Administration officials are oriented to, as can be seen in the second quote. The guidelines wish to orient the service delivery for post-release towards the general-unemployment policies, once again highlighting training and re-employment as the main goals of the policy.

Second, we observe the "prize-punishment" rationale. Differently from the programme rationale described above, prize-punishment is a key organizational logic proper of penitentiary administrations. As described in the previous chapter, officials from the penitentiary have the responsibility to allow people to access the Job-Desk initiative. This gatekeeping role, however, doesn't follow the programme rationale for re-employment. Conversely, officials are heavily influenced by the behaviour of inmates and the management of power-relationships behind the closed doors of the penitentiaries. For example, by allowing participation to the programme as a reward for good conduct or forcing exit as punishment for improper behaviour:

"Every kind of person comes in. From the ones about whom you say, "wow, if only I met this candidate outside..." to the person whom you realize, and I say this very sincerely, has been sent to us to be taken out of the cell but is absolutely not ready for placement." (Int. 09, case manager)

"If someone gets [disciplinary] reports, even if they are already involved, for six months they can no longer make phone calls home, for a few months they cannot see their family. If these were people ready for placement, we lose them like snow in the sun. For the following six months I can no longer place that person anywhere." (Int. 04, case manager)

Third, a "rehabilitation" rationale emerges from the evidence. This is found in some case-managers, and specifically the professionals with previous experience in delivering job services to fragile population targets. This rationale is based on the attempt to "refine" the programme rationale by adding a stronger component of social recovery and rehabilitation. For example, case managers can attest the participation to the Job Desk as a stimulus to achieve more favourable forms of detention (e.g.: permits, house arrest):

"This person had a procedure underway for a permit. So, I presented a letter stating that they had participated to the Job Desk in which we explain, more or less, the pathway and their chance of employment [...]. We really try to insist on this. I prepare these letters of acceptance for pretty much everyone because, in my opinion, they are important. In the process leading toward permits, job matching or vocational training has a positive impact on the decision." (Int. 05, case manager)

"It is a social issue. It has been demonstrated that work greatly reduces recidivism. So, if we manage to have a much higher percentage of people who, upon leaving prison, are stably employed, recidivism decreases. And so, this must be our main objective, precisely for social coexistence." (Int. 10, case manager)

Fourth, there is an "opportunity" rationale for the justice-involved people themselves. While recipients are not usually considered actors of policymaking, we would make an exception in this case. *Activation* policies are, by definition, based on the participation of recipients. While they don't have a role in decision-making proper, they do have a role during policy implementation. From the interviews, it clearly emerges that, for recipients, participation to the Job Desk initiative is interpreted not *just* an opportunity for training and work, but also (and perhaps mainly) as a chance to exit detention, get a permit, improve living conditions. Word-of-mouth further spreads this dynamic inside the penitentiary:

"I have learned to lower the expectations [of the recipients] because, when the user knows they can access the Job Desk, they assume to have a chance. But it is not like that for everyone. Naturally, those who get a job pass the message on to their fellow inmates, and so, for everyone, the Job Desk becomes synonymous with a job, a permit, and opportunities to exit detention." (Int. 03, case manager)

Results show that the divergence of rationales can complicate the programme's capacity to achieve the expected outcomes. This is evident in the contrast between the "job market" and the "prize-punishment" rationales. The mismatch between different actor's goals can lead to a skewed selection of candidates.

Conversely, we can also observe easier cases of coexistence between multiple goals. For example, there is a space of convergence between the job-market and the rehabilitation rationales, in which a form of "emergent change" (social inclusion) is layered on the "planned change" (re-employment).

3.2. Discretion

Q2: how do discretionary choices made by implementers affect the pathways of service delivery for justice-involved individuals?

We present here the comparison of two instructive cases that we will call, fictitiously, Karim and Mario. The comparison is instrumental to explain how individual personal characteristics mix with decisions from other implementers. It also demonstrates vividly the complex processes (the "long" causal chains) that lay between the policy on paper and policy outcomes.

Table 2 presents the main characters of the two individuals, while Table 3 presents a detailed account of their story in the programme. Both cases present key characteristics making them particularly challenging to re-employ. Despite these characters, both obtain a job opportunity through the participation to the Job Desk. However, the final outcome of the two cases is at extreme opposites, with Mario reaching post-release re-employment (a strongly positive

outcome), while Karim gets forced out of work and all other channels of social and workfare policy (a strongly negative outcome).

Table 2 – Two cases with similar characters and different outcomes

Characteristics	Negative outcome case (Karim)	Positive outcome case (Mario)
Conviction	Yes	Yes
Severity of committed crime	Petty crime	Serious felony
Termination of the sentence	Soon	Soon
Juridic status	Migrant	Italian citizen
Age	Young (under 35)	Senior (over 50)
Family ties	None	None
Habitation	None	None
ID and documents	Expired	Expired

Source: authors' elaboration

We can draw qualitative insights from the development of these individual cases. Specifically, both accounts show the non-linearity of these courses of events, characterized by abrupt stops, fast accelerations, and changes of direction. Here, while personal characteristics play a crucial role, the central node is how these combine with the discretionary decisions of other actors.

Table 3 – Detailed account of the individual cases development

Case	Short summary
Negative (Karim)	- Karim is a foreign young man. The penitentiary administration has suggested him as a potential candidate for the Job Desk and gets taken in charge by a case manager. - Obtains a job inside the penitentiary, for a company packaging foods and beverages. - He works well, and the company wants to offer him a job in a branch outside of prison, for which he could obtain a permit for exiting and enter prison during working hours. - Given the opportunity, the case-manager also starts with him a process of formal competences recognition, which could help obtaining a favourable ruling for the permit. - In the meantime, Karim sentence terminates. He is legally free, but has no place to stay, and his residency permit had expired while he was in jail. - The day after he is released, he gets deported to the detention centre for irregular migrants. - Despite a coordinated effort by the case-manager, the lawyers, and the company, the judge does not rule for Karim's release. - Karim tries to hurt himself. After some days, the detention centre revolts and everyone is transferred. - For days nobody knows where Karim is. 2 days after the case manager receives one short, last message: «I've been transferred to the South».
Positive (Mario)	- Mario is a senior Italian man. - He committed a serious crime (25 years sentence) which, together with his age, seriously complicates his re-employment chances. - In his regard the case manager states: «we would not have given much credit to this case». However, toward the end of Mario's sentence, he is given an internship opportunity with a farming company, thanks to the contacts of the prison chaplain. - The case manager starts a serious process of mediation (explaining the company what a convict intern truly entails), as well as helping Mario renew his expired documents, in order to obtain the permit to leave prison during working hours. - The commission grants the permit. - Mario sentence terminates, and he is released. The company offers to continue the job, but Mario has no place to stay. - With the help of the case manager, the company offers to host Mario in one of their structures and allow him to take legal residence and continue working.

Source: authors' elaboration

The evolution of the events is quite unpredictable. Serious constraints which we would expect to impact the outcome (e.g.: age, or the severity of the crime) are overcome fairly easily.

Conversely, the negative case runs aground because of a “minor” bureaucratic problem (expired documents) triggering deportation and a cascade of more serious issues. Ultimately, the citizenship status proves to be the major discontinuity between the two cases. In the comparison, this is perhaps “the straw that breaks the camel back”, as Karim’s deportation represents the interruption of a potentially positive experience of re-employment. Yet, some considerations are important.

Our results demonstrate that discretionary choices play a primary role in defining pathways of service delivery for the justice-involved. Both cases are characterized by the combination of multiple discretionary decisions. On the one hand, these decisions can help overcome some significant constraints which severely disincentivized the chances of re-employment for both profiles. It is only thanks to these deliberate discretionary actions that “difficult” profiles can access job opportunities. On the other hand, discretionary decisions can also form bottlenecks and even reverse virtuous processes.

3.3. *Employment*

Q3: *how can re-employment be more effectively stimulated?*

It’s well known that active labour market policies for the justice-involved struggle in achieving employment. This is true also for the Job Desk, in which only a very small portion of recipients have reached an internship or a job opportunity. Following official monitoring data (Table 4), only 13% of the recipients have accessed an internship, while only 4% a job contract.

Table 4 – Type and distribution of services in the first 18 months of implementation

Service delivered	Number of recipients	% of recipients
Basic counselling	918	100%
Advanced counselling	871	94,4%
Group training	107	11,7%
Skills formal certification	24	2,6%
Assisted job search	333	36,3%
Internship	123	13,4%
Job contract	39	4,2%

Source: Authors’ elaboration on official monitoring data

Judging similar data from the perspective of the “expected” outcomes (i.e.: re-employment), it would be very easy to give a negative assessment of the Job Desk initiative. While a more elaborate statistical assessment would be necessary to prove such judgement, the starting picture is not comforting.

We can, however, learn important lessons from the interview data and the detailed reconstruction of cases. For example, we can identify a series of factors which made possible successful cases re-employment. This kind of evidence is not concerned with how many, or how common these outcomes are. It is concerned with the fact that such few results are potentially instructive. It’s worth inquiring them and see if there is any element that could be strengthened or exported to reproduce these cases more commonly. Thanks to our interviews to case managers, we identify at least two factors: *mediation* and *timing*.

Mediation refers to the ability of case managers to manage complex cases like the ones described in Table 3. A few quotes portray different manifestations of mediation efforts:

“In every penitentiary there are other training activities funded through regional funds [...] and so, wherever possible, we try to create links between these and the Prison Job Desk [...] the case managers know these two dimensions and we try to harmonize them as best as possible, making the most of what can be drawn from both” (Int. 07, case manager)

“It was extremely difficult to let the company understand the context into which it had entered. Because it was a company that had sensed the opportunity to have trainees, therefore cheap labour. An incredible effort, with very heated discussions [...] so, before the placement started, we did a whole piece of work with the company. (Int. 02, case manager)”

It is thus to this continuous effort of mediation between the target population, companies, penitentiary administrations (and more) that cases get guided through. Mediation thus appears to be a necessary condition to achieve a positive outcome (i.e.: a job or an internship).

Timing relates to the selection of the most appropriate time frame to deliver a specific service, especially internships and job opportunities. Clearly, the proximity to the release of the recipient is a crucial factor to achieve positive outcomes:

“Speaking of a successful case, there's this man who was released after obtaining an internship. A permit allowed him to exit detention during working hours and get back inside later. This man had only eight months left to serve at the time he entered the Job Desk. So, it was a smooth path. After the internship, he was released and hired by the same company. He's still employed there” (Int. 03, Case manager)

In this quoted instance, the man had 8 months left before release. He was thus included in the Job Desk, and received counselling and training for 2 months, before 6 months of internship. The timing of this path allowed for a perfect transition to post-release employment. It's reasonable to assume that, without the internship, it would have been very complex for this person to find an equivalent job opportunity after release. Equally, if the internship had been activated too early compared to his release date, the company would have likely filled the open position with other candidates.

Mediation and timing compose a starting set of factors emerging from those cases where employment was indeed achieved. This generates important insights for evaluation. Specifically, the selection of case managers, their training and capacity for mediation become central to the policy. At the same time, refining the policy design to incentivise good timing (e.g.: prioritizing internships towards the last months of detention) can improve the chances of re-employment.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed a series of issues related to the evaluation of active labour market policies targeting justice-involved people. Specifically, we have inquired if and how the complexity of the context where these programmes are implemented affects the way in which they should be evaluated.

Our results support the hypothesis that these policies are to be considered part of the group of programmes which benefit from context-dependent evaluation strategies. In other words, they require a wider diffusion of “complexifying” approaches (Stame, 2022) based on in-depth, mechanism-oriented analyses of the “long” causal chains that characterize their implementation.

The scientific contribution of our work is twofold. First, an empirical contribution to the evaluation of labour policies for the justice-involved, addressing current questions and future research directions. Second, a theoretical contribution about the evaluation of complex programmes, addressing the more general implications of our work. Both aspects will be detailed below.

About the empirical contribution, we focused our analysis on three questions linked to known gaps in the evaluation of labour policies for the justice involved. Rather than looking for conclusive evidence about these gaps, our aim in this paper has been to “probe” them. This exploratory research has aimed, first and foremost, at establishing if and how context-informed analysis can provide meaningful explanations about these evaluative problems. Specifically, the plurality of goals and rationales across the governance structure; the importance of discretionary practices in shaping recipients’ trajectories beyond individual characteristics; and the factors supporting successful cases of re-employment, even when facing a scarcity of such outcomes.

The evidence extracted from our data demonstrates the value of context-informed analysis, and moves important steps in the direction of the existing debate on the evaluation policies for the justice-involved (Cook et al., 2015; Kendall et al., 2018; Zanella, 2020; Walk et al., 2021). It does so by providing a series of “building blocks” which future studies can use for the analysis of specific causal mechanisms for each gap.

The evidence points towards the importance of *convergence* and *divergence* of the rationales at play. This emerges as a key factor in explaining the combination of expected and unexpected outcomes. The rationales adopted by the actors might converge with or diverge from the programme rationale. If rationales converge, this might layer new, unexpected outcomes to the expected ones. If rationales diverge, unexpected outcomes might contrast those expected, acting as barriers. A particularly important role in this case is played by penitentiary administrations, whose conformity with the re-employment goals of the programme might be contested or, at least, subordinated to internal, organisational logics.

Discretion is a central factor in the explanation of long causal chains of events. If outcomes are the product of elaborate chains of decisions, then the literature’s focus on individual characteristics might be insufficient (see Zanella, 2020; Mancino, 2025). Maintaining an exclusive focus on individual characteristics might put the focus on recipients, while leaving other actors unaddressed. Our evidence confirms that, differently from other active labour market policies, in programmes for the justice-involved discretionary decisions play a much stronger role. While, in the former, discretion mainly concerns the selective delivery of services, in the latter recipients are subject to multiple discretionary choices at the same time. This

complicates judging “what works and for whom” when only based on personal characteristics of the recipients.

Lastly, *mediation* and *timing* are two key factors in service delivery at the micro-level. These show that the actors positioning closer to the programme rationale are also the ones who are most likely to steer the process towards the planned goals. This evidence suggests the presence of steering mechanisms, which can stimulate actors to move from a condition of divergence to one of convergence. Mediation and timing seem to play a central role in these processes and should be more thoroughly studied. Supporting these factors is likely a key recommendation to policymakers wishing to ameliorate convicts' re-employment chances. Practical suggestions include, for example, specific training activities for case-managers to stimulate mediation skills; or precise directives to incentivise the timing of services.

About the theoretical contribution, our analysis confirms that a deeper understanding of the context surrounding a programme's implementation is a necessary pre-requisite for a realistic assessment. Evidence suggests that in complex programmes (like the one analysed) policy goals might not be shared across actors and might not be coherent with those declared on paper. An important implication for evaluation is that, contrary to what often happens in evaluation studies, the conformity of all actors to the programme rationale should not be taken for granted.

Ignoring these elements could undermine the evaluative judgements, leading to ill-informed recommendations to policymakers. For example, a policy's “failure” to deliver the expected outcomes might be due an improper fit between a policy design and its context, rather than “mistakes” in its implementation. A simplified evaluation design might miss the former, and produce weaker recommendations. Contextually informed evaluations move policy recommendations from “correctional” (i.e.: fixing what went wrong in a policy design) to “adaptive” (i.e.: fitting the policy design to its context to avoid constraints and/or exploit unexpected opportunities).

The importance of such reflections goes beyond the mere academic interest or the methodological debate. The growing attention given by policymakers to the evaluation and “cost effectiveness” of welfare policies requires serious attention. Especially in the case of policies for marginalized population groups (like the justice-involved), it's often common to find complex governance structures. At the same time, contextual elements constrain the implementation of a policy, regardless of its contents “on paper”. These considerations can be further generalized to all those policies and programmes delivering services to vulnerable population groups, in which we observe a substantial variety in the actors involved and a complex governance structure. In such cases, policy assessment based on understanding complex, long causal chains are greatly needed to produce actionable, realistic, and contextually informed recommendations for policymakers.

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