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**Paper proposal**

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**Session: (G11)** Public Policy Assessment in the Transition Era: Inclusiveness, Poverty Alleviation, Equal Opportunities and Territorial Justice

**Title:** Evaluating Labour Policies for Justice-Involved People. Exploring Key Implementation Factors from a regional policy in Piedmont, Italy

**Extended abstract:**

Policies for the re-entry into the labour force of justice-involved individuals have grown in importance and diffusion in recent times. The development of this kind of interventions has spread over most Western countries, as part of a series of reform trends that interested both the penal and the welfare systems during the last decades. Penal systems saw the emergence of the policy framework of rehabilitation (i.e.: conviction as part of a process of personal transformation) as the alternative to incapacitation (i.e.: conviction as a form of containment) (Allen, 1978; Garland, 2018). Proponents of rehabilitation hold that inclusive penal practices have individual and collective benefits, eventually leading to more just and secure communities. At the same time, social policy in most post-industrial Countries underwent a shift from welfare to workfare, with a general tendency to condition social support to employment services, a trend also known as the paradigm of “activation” (Weishaupt, 2011).

Within these major governance shifts, the diffusion of “active labour market policies” (ALMPs) also interested justice-involved individuals, spanning across important societal and political cleavages. Programmes of this kind stand at the crossroad of employment, rehabilitation, and social justice, making their assessment challenging, but crucial.

In fact, among the key elements of modern workfare is also the fortified interest towards evaluation and policy assessment in general. One of the underlying rationales of activation policies is to increase the effectiveness in the provision of social services, optimizing the balance between the economic cost for the State and the social benefit for the recipients. For this reason, the domain of activation policies is one of the most developed in the policy evaluation and assessment community of practice.

In this context, the study of active labour market policies for the general unemployed population has reached an advanced state of maturation. The large body of knowledge that has accumulate over time has allowed for the diffusion of large-n experimental and quasi-experimental studies, inducing a shared understanding of “what works” (Card et al., 2018; Yeyati et al., 2025). At the same time, policies that target specific sub-groups of recipients have not reached similar levels of consensus over their evaluation. This is especially the case of

policies targeting people characterized by structural disadvantages, as in the case of justice-involved individuals.

Among the main issues for this target, studies report contrasting findings about key outcome indicators. For example, some observe potential positive effects on recidivism, although the evidence remains inconclusive. The same can be said about other important outcome measures such as expected improvements in the post-release social condition and quality of jobs, education, training, and skilling.

Policy assessment in this domain is also complicated by methodological challenges common to many programmes targeting marginalized social groups. For example, programmes delivering workfare services to justice-involved individuals are often implemented on a small scale. The limitation on sample size has strong implications for policy evaluation, making it harder to achieve valid results and empirical generalizations. The difficulty in finding suitable control groups also leads to strong limits in the identification of causality with experimental methods. The heterogeneity of the justice-involved population also impacts the results of such studies, further restricting the representativeness of the data samples. Lastly, evidence about causal mechanisms is lacking, leaving wide gaps in the knowledge, especially related to the implementation of such programmes, which remains largely black-boxed.

Central questions remain unanswered, such as: which elements characterize labour policies for justice-involved individuals? How do these elements affect policy outcomes?

To overcome these limitations, this paper adopts a qualitative case-study methodology to inquire the key factors influencing active labour market policies for justice-involved individuals. The goal is to identify and assess elements that are causally linked to the effectiveness of this kind of policies. The policy assessment approach follows the established literature on realist evaluation, understood as a strategy to explore policy outcomes through the interaction between context and mechanisms (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Through in-depth qualitative inquiry, the research contributes to the construction of further knowledge to advance our understanding of active labour market policies for justice-involved individuals. The case selected for the analysis is the “Sportello Lavoro Carcere” (i.e.: “Prison Job Desk”), a regional-level active labour market policy adopted in Piedmont (North-West Italy). The research draws on semi-structured interviews with implementers delivering job services to the justice-involved individuals enrolled in the programme.

Grounded in existing literature, the research explores a series of theory-informed propositions, in search of further evidence.

First, is the coexistence of multiple and sometimes conflicting rationales within the design of the policy programmes. The complex environment of penal justice and workfare, in fact, often leads to ambiguities in the policy goals (e.g.: employment, security, rehabilitation, etc.). The different actors involved in the implementation process, in fact, can follow different logics based on their interests, routines, and organizational needs. As shown in Hjern and Porter's

seminal work (1981), the convergence between the “programme rationale” and “organizational rationale(s)” shouldn’t be expected in complex implementation structures.

Second, existing empirical studies point towards the issue of “heterogeneity of effects” based on the diversity in the justice-involved population. However, such evidence is unclear about how and why heterogeneity appears. Theory on welfare policies, for example, has highlighted the importance of adverse selection strategies such as the “creaming” and “parking” practices (Carter & Whitworth, 2015; Greer et al., 2018). Inquiring similar practices in the domain of justice-involved individuals is therefore central.

Third, in labour policies for disadvantaged populations there is often a gap between participation and effective access to post-intervention employment. Again, explanations for these phenomena are lacking, besides a focus on stigmatization and distrust by employers (Giguere & Dundes, 2002; Anazodo et al., 2019). More evidence is needed to understand if and how it’s possible to overcome these limitations towards the achievement of better outcomes.

The paper collects a series of relevant, exploratory findings, moving forward the assessment of active labour market policies for justice-involved individuals.

First, the paper confirms the importance of maintaining a balance among the multiple rationales embedded in these programmes. Such balance cannot be assumed, as different stakeholders (i.e.: penitentiary institutions, welfare agencies, and other partner organizations) tend to steer implementation according to their own institutional mandates and priorities. When the logics of penal supervision and labour market activation diverge, implementation becomes fragmented. For the target population, this fragmentation translates into discontinuous and less coherent trajectories, ultimately weakening the programme’s capacity to produce stable employment and reintegration outcomes.

Second, the findings suggest revising the “heterogeneity of effects” thesis by advancing more context-sensitive explanations. In other words, it is not solely the personal characters and individual agency of justice-involved individuals that impact policy outcomes. Rather, it’s how these interact with other contextual conditions. Successful and unsuccessful implementation pathways unfold through a sequence of critical turning points, where individual characters of the recipients combine with the discretionary decisions of frontline actors and organizations.

Third, while employer stigma and distrust emerge as significant constraints on access to stable post-intervention employment, the empirical findings offer a more nuanced account of how these barriers operate. Rather than functioning as insurmountable limits, such constraints can be mitigated through effective intermediation. In particular, programme-appointed tutors play a pivotal bridging role between employers and candidates. Acting as trusted intermediaries, tutors reduce informational asymmetries, manage expectations on both sides, and actively mediate workplace relationships during programme participation. This relational work helps to contain perceived risks and build incremental trust, thereby enabling successful placements even in cases marked by pronounced disadvantage.

The contribution of this article extends beyond the specific domain of active labour market policies targeting justice-involved individuals. More broadly, it underscores the importance of aligning the methodological approaches – not just the methods – with the nature of the policies under evaluation. For interventions addressing complex and collective social problems, evaluation cannot be meaningfully disentangled from the contexts in which such policies unfold. This is particularly true of social policies involving disadvantaged and marginalized groups, where concepts such as “outcomes”, “success”, and “failure” often imply a degree of subjectivity, given the diversity of interests and priorities (the recipient’s, the implementers’, the policymakers’, etc.). In a historical phase characterized by the constant demand for efficiency and cost-effectiveness from political decisionmakers, critically engaging with the concept of evaluation is central. Choosing the most appropriate style of policy assessment becomes a central element in offering meaningful policy feedback.

Analytically engaging with context, rather than relying exclusively on technical outcome-oriented metrics, the study demonstrates how evaluation can generate practically relevant insights grounded in concrete experiences. Such insights are empirically grounded in specific cases but are sufficiently general to be exported across similar contexts and policies. In this sense, contextualized evaluation enhances (not limits) the potential for cumulative and transferable knowledge.