

Challenges of Returning to Workforce after Incarceration

According to a report by the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons each year, and 95% of those will eventually return to life outside of incarceration and back into their communities. Reentry is the process of people who are transitioning from life behind bars back into the community.

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/FIRC-Reentry-Report.pdf>

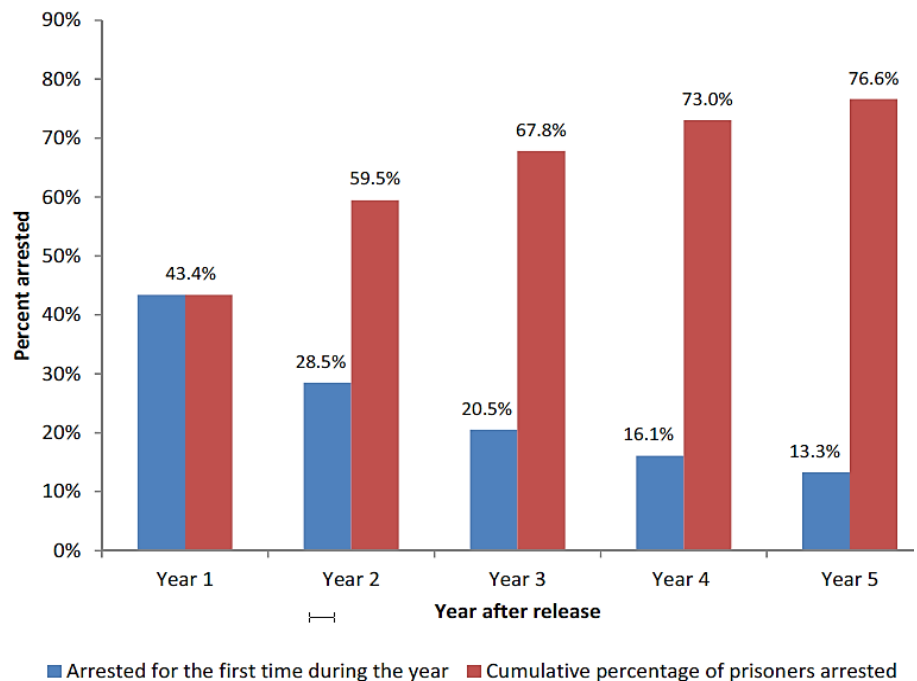
Many former inmates will return to the same communities that were breeding grounds for the crimes for which they were arrested for in the first place. These neighborhoods may have been replete with poverty, drugs, and many of poverty's collateral consequences. These include an over-representation of people with felony records, higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, geographic isolation from opportunities, etc. These conditions are likely to increase an individual's chance to be rearrested and sent back to prison. Return to disadvantaged communities is one of the reasons why the U.S. has high rates of incarceration and recidivism.

According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service report, recidivism is defined as "the re-arrest, reconviction, or re-incarceration of an ex-offender within a given time frame." As shown in the chart below, according to a U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics recidivism study that examined the recidivism rates for 404,638 prisoners released in 30 states for five years after their release from prison in 2005 found out that 76.6% of inmates released from state prisons were rearrested within five years of release.

Released Prisoners
Arrested for the First Time
and Cumulative
Percentage of Released
Prisoners Rearrested, By
Year

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 20 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010*

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34287.pdf>



The extremely high rate of recidivism is an indication of a failed reentry system, so that successful return to workforce after incarceration becomes a daunting task. Despite the existence of many reentry-oriented programs, both inside correction facilities and outside, the released individuals face serious challenges to overcome, even after paying their debt to society. In fact, their struggle may begin before they are even incarcerated. Further findings suggest that the earliest possible interventions (in childhood and in the homes) are likely to be most effective to prevent recurring incarceration.

“Our data suggest we need to be thinking about interventions that are sustained through childhood and measures that can help stabilize the home lives of at-risk kids.”

From prison to poverty, Harvard Gazette

Many studies reveal that majority of the prison population come from poor and minority communities, and there is a common belief that poverty and incarceration are closely linked. One of Harvard University's leading sociologists and professor of criminal justice policy has explored issues including the effects of incarceration on poor communities. *From prison to poverty (Harvard Gazette)* states that “things that accompany poverty, such as untreated addiction and mental illness, very severe housing insecurity, chronic unemployment, and complicated web of family relationships” puts the incarcerated in a disadvantage.

<http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/02/from-prison-to-poverty/>

A report funded by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance, prepared by the Urban Institute and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *Life After Lockup*, identified a number of workplace barriers during reentry. Such factors include low levels of education, limited work experience, minimal vocational skills, poor attitudes and reluctance of employers to hire people with felony records. As a result, it was difficult for the formerly incarcerated to obtain and maintain employment.

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/220095.pdf>



Skill and Social Erosion

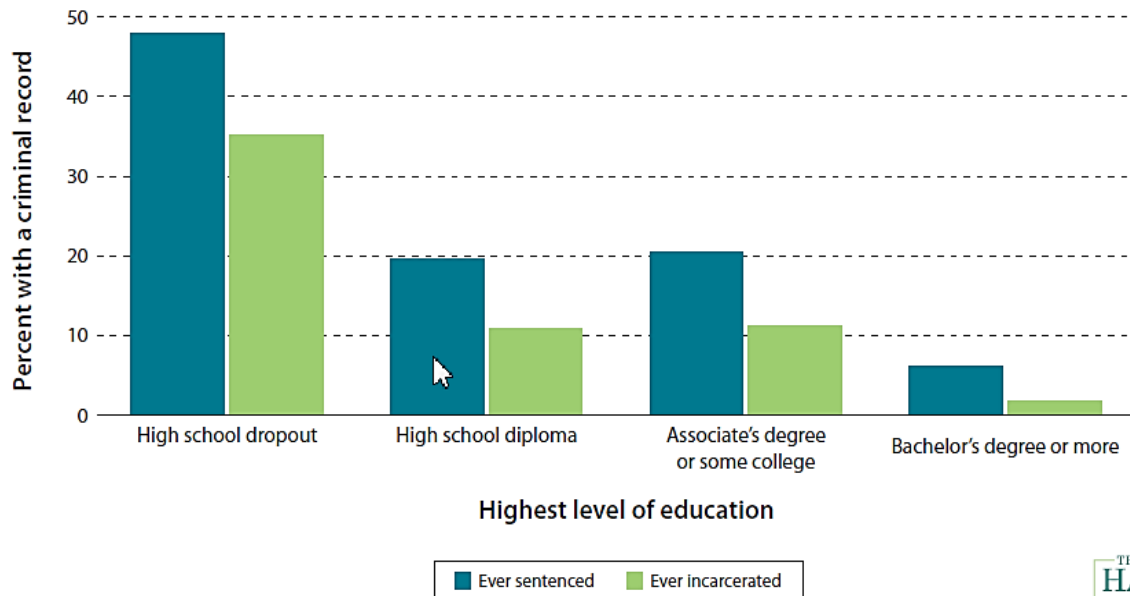
Released prisoners come out far worse-off, as they lose whatever skills they had, family ties, and social connections they had before their incarceration. Young men from poor and resource-deficit communities are disproportionately represented in the prison population. A report by the Hamilton Project, *Twelve Facts about Incarceration and Prison Reentry*, documents that low-skilled individuals are more likely to have a criminal record.

As shown in the figure below, among Americans age 28–33 in 2013, 35% of men who did not graduate from high school have been incarcerated at least once during their lifetimes.

Challenges Faced by Former Inmates

Criminal Records by Education (Men Only)

Among Americans age 28–33 in 2013, 35 percent of men who did not graduate from high school have been incarcerated at least once during their lifetimes.



Source: BLS n.d.c.

Note: Ever sentenced is defined as being sentenced to a corrections institution, to a reform or a training school, or to community service.

THE HAMILTON PROJECT
BROOKINGS

Former inmates face enormous challenges finding work.

Most are sent to jail with few skills and lower educational attainment, both that would be detrimental to success in the workplace. While imprisoned, few develop skills that would be of marketable when released, especially now that workplace technology has dramatically changed so that many processes are produced digitally.

A research brief by the Urban Institute, *Employment after Prison: A longitudinal Study of Releasees in Three States*, reports that many former prisoners lose work skills and they experience little opportunity to gain beneficial work experience during time in prison.

<http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/32106/411778-Employment-after-Prison-A-Longitudinal-Study-of-Releasees-in-Three-States.PDF>

Felony record as barrier to employment

Many employers are reluctant to hire people with criminal records. According to a report by the National Employment Law Project, "The likelihood of a callback for an interview for an entry level position drops off by 50% for those applicants with an arrest or a criminal history." Studies show that race and criminal history influence the probability of receiving a job review.

A report by the Hamilton Project, *Twelve Facts about Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry*, as the chart below shows, states that the presence of a criminal record in a job application decreases the probability of receiving a call back for a job interview. The likelihood of a call to arrange an interview is reduced much more for African-American applicants with a criminal history when only 5% receive a call, compared to 17% of whites with a criminal history who receive a call.

Callback Rate, by Race and Criminal Record

The presence of a criminal record decreases the probability of receiving a call back for a job interview.



Source: Pager 2003.

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/thp_20161020_twelve_facts_incarceration_prisoner_reentry.pdf

There is stigma associated with incarceration and involvement in the criminal justice system. In addition, when employers see gaps in resume, unavoidable for the formerly incarcerated, it becomes less appealing to schedule for job interviews compared to those with solid work histories.

Fear of negligent hiring is often stated as the main reason that employers are reluctant to hire people with a felony records. They express concern about being sued for not showing due diligence by hiring someone with a criminal record. There is the fact that many former inmates have a history of substance abuse and mental and physical ailments that could be viewed as a sign of lacking job readiness. This is seen as another deficit when it comes to how prepared the formerly-incarcerated are to easily fit employer expectations.

Addressing these barriers

Barriers the formerly incarcerated individuals face are systemic. Even after completing sentences or community supervision, having a felony record continues to make it difficult rejoining the workforce. However, there have been nationwide systemic and legislative initiatives seeking the removal of these barriers.

One initiative that has garnered attention is "Ban the Box." The Ban on the Box campaign was started by a national grassroots and human rights organization of formerly-incarcerated people and their families known as **All of US or None**. The campaign initially asked government agencies to remove the box in their employment applications regarding conviction history.

<http://www.prisonerswithchildren.org/our-projects/allorus-or-none/>

The Center for American Progress's *Ban the Box and Beyond* points out that if returning citizens have a job and somewhere to live, it reduces the likelihood of recidivism. The challenges are often greater for people of color who face additional barriers. So far, 29 states have adopted ban the box policies. It notes that adoption of a supportive policy is not sufficient, and that more comprehensive fair chance hiring policies would enhance equitable access to labor market opportunities.

Ban the Box and Beyond explains that one of every three adults in the U.S. has a criminal record, in part because of tough-on-crime policies and mass incarceration. The total correctional population increased from 1.8 million in 1980 to 7.3 million in 2007. By 2015, the correctional population experienced a decline but remained at 6.7 million. Despite some progress, much remains to be done to provide full access to jobs and services for those with criminal records.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2017/07/27/436756/ban-box-beyond/>

There is also the need to remove the policy barriers that currently disbars the utilization of public benefits from the formerly-incarcerated. These benefits are essential in securing stability for this population so they can sustain themselves while they pursue employment opportunities.

<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/VallasCriminalRecordsReport.pdf>