

# Why Hiring People with Criminal Records Benefits All of Us

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From the smallest “mom and pop” shop to the largest international corporation, businesses across America are constantly looking for good employees. We want committed, engaging and creative individuals who can grow our organizations. We scour applications and resumes, trying to discern whether a potential employee will fulfill our needs and become an asset to our teams.

In the past, many employers would often not consider hiring people who had even minor criminal records. But as the former CEO of a 10,000-employee organization, I have one message for America: we can no longer exclude this vital component of our workforce.

An estimated one in three American adults has a criminal record of some kind. And about 600,000 people leave our nation’s prisons every year, looking to rejoin the workforce. While individuals in this group of workers won’t be right for every job, the right job is out there for everyone.

The benefits of boosting employment for those with criminal records are significant.

First, opening up opportunities to this population will make our country safer. Right now, almost [60 percent of individuals](#) remain unemployed a year after being released from incarceration. It’s in our collective self-interest for them to get jobs, because steady employment is one of the best ways to ensure that individuals lead productive, crime-free lives. In one study of 6,000 returning citizens, employment cut the rate of those who committed a new crime in half.

Second, employers all across the country are suffering from a dearth of skilled labor. Every year, one major national bank [surveys](#) small businesses across this country. This year the survey found incredible optimism: 80 percent of employers said their business is stronger than ever; 40 percent said they plan to make a capital expenditure to grow their companies; and a quarter of those surveyed said they plan to hire more workers.

In West Michigan, most of the business leaders I know plan to expand their workforces. The downside? The businesses can’t find enough workers.

In fact, 61 percent of business owners reported extreme or moderate difficulty finding qualified employees. Adding to the challenge is the number of baby boomers retiring and a shortage of entry-level workers to fill all the vacancies that currently exist.

I've experienced this firsthand in West Michigan, where we've built one of the hottest job markets in the country. We've become one of the top places for growth and one of the best places to live. But our success has made it very difficult to find employees.

Our region is almost at full employment, so we must look for alternatives. We have a very strong manufacturing base, and these businesses are looking for people who will show up on time and test negative for drugs – that's it. This opens the door for people who were formerly incarcerated and who are serious about turning their lives around.

It is not unheard of for employers to send vans to pick up workers who are in residential community corrections programs because the employers are so desperate for workers.

Some of our country's largest employers are making second-chance hiring their official policy. Target and Home Depot have "banned the box" in their employment practices. "Ban the box" delays inquiry into an applicant's criminal history until late in the hiring process, ensuring that those with criminal records aren't tossed aside before having an opportunity to detail their skills, training and qualifications.

This policy also allows these individuals to explain the circumstances of their offense, and show potential employers how they have turned their lives around.

Government jobs provide valuable training for private sector employment, so many private companies are asking their lawmakers to shift hiring processes for public sector jobs as well.

The West Michigan Policy Forum, made up of some of the state's most influential business leaders, has ranked criminal justice reform as one of the five top "pro-business" policy priorities.

This type of leadership from the business community has yielded incredible results across the country. A whopping 29 states have "banned the box" for public-sector jobs. And the bipartisan Fair Chance Act, sponsored by Senators Ron Johnson, R-Wis., and Cory Booker, D-N.J., would replicate this policy at the federal level.

Reforms to seal or erase records of criminal convictions are also a priority for job creators. These policies seal minor criminal records after a certain crime-free period. Research shows that low-level offenders who have remained crime-free for three to five years are no more likely to commit a crime than anyone else.

And in many states, when minor criminal records are sealed, law enforcement and judicial officers still have access to these records, ensuring that public safety continues to be a priority.

Almost all states have some mechanism through which certain criminal records can be erased or sealed, but erasing records at the federal level is virtually impossible. Fortunately, the issue is gaining traction in Congress.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., is spearheading the REDEEM Act, with bipartisan support. And Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., introduced the Renew Act with Rep. Trey Gowdy, R-S.C.

Occupational licensing reform is another issue important to the business community. Today one in four occupations requires a government license – but a criminal history often bars an individual from the licensing process.

Ironically, such restrictions make us less safe. One study showed that states with more burdensome licensing laws saw an average 9 percent increase in recidivism, while those with the lowest burdens had a recidivism reduction of 2.5 percent.

States as diverse as Illinois, Arizona, and Louisiana have already begun peeling back the layers of government-issued permission slips to work.

At the federal level, the New HOPE Act, introduced by Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Mich., and similar legislation sponsored by Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, would allow states to use federal funding to identify and reduce unnecessary licensing barriers within their regulations and statutes.

Elected officials should look to job creators for sound public policy. I urge my fellow employers to beat the drum even louder and make their voices heard at the local, state and federal level.

We can improve public safety, strengthen the economy and broaden our pool of skilled labor through commonsense criminal justice reforms and offering second chances for those who have earned them. I don't know a good businessperson who would turn down that deal.

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