



Center for Justice &
Economic Advancement

Advancing Economic Mobility for Workers With Criminal Records

A policy agenda to align systems and
strengthen the workforce



AT A GLANCE

JFF's Center for Justice & Economic Advancement offers a set of recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers to clear barriers for people with records and expand pathways to economic advancement.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to our funder, Blue Meridian Partners, for their generous support of our work.

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Policymakers Must Act to Normalize Opportunity for People With Records

Introduction

At Jobs for the Future, we believe it's likely that nearly everyone in this country knows someone with a criminal record. An estimated one in three people in the United States has had some form of contact with the criminal legal system, from arrest to conviction.

The implications for the nation's economy and workforce are vast. More than 40,000 federal, state, and local policies create barriers that make almost every aspect of life difficult for people with records—from obtaining a degree, a professional license, or other credentials to finding a good job, starting a business, or even finding a place to sleep at night.¹ Most of these barriers can hobble a worker's prospects for economic advancement for decades.² These challenges are exacerbated by limits on access to high-quality education and job training, which further restrict opportunities for members of a population of motivated workers who, as research shows, often perform as well as or better than their peers without criminal records.³ The combined effect dampens their economic prospects, particularly for members of communities disproportionately affected by police activity, compounding wealth gaps and stifling business growth.

Policies limiting the career and education prospects of people with records artificially shrink the labor pool at a time when employers in many industries are having trouble recruiting talent. It is estimated that nearly half

of unemployed men have been convicted of a crime by the age of 35 and almost two-thirds have been arrested for a nontraffic offense.⁴ People with records face significantly lower rates of employment than other workers, draining an estimated \$78 billion to \$87 billion in annual GDP from the U.S. economy and \$372.3 billion in annual lost wages from workers convicted of a crime.^{5,6}

The steep economic price Americans pay for the collateral consequences of a criminal record is not recouped through increased public safety in their communities. Most people convicted of a crime never commit another.⁷ After even just a few years without reoffending, people with felony convictions—even those for violent behavior—desist from crime and are no more likely to offend than any other member of the public.⁸ Yet a lack of employment, training, and education opportunities could create conditions that foster a drift toward recidivism by holding people back from finding jobs that lead to economic advancement.⁹

It's time for policymakers to address the complex web of laws and regulations that create these challenges. Offering new pathways to advancement for this population of workers can revitalize the workforce, expand the supply of skilled labor, and drive economic growth.

Advancing Economic Mobility for Workers With Records

The vast challenges facing people with records in the workforce require bold solutions. JFF urges state and federal policymakers to take action across four areas to increase the odds of success for workers with records: improve access to education and training, clear barriers to employment and wealth-building, ensure access to foundational mobility supports, and build infrastructure for data reporting, transparency, and system accountability.

In the following sections, we explore specific regulatory and legislative measures federal, state, and local officials can take to make progress toward each of those goals.

Advancing Opportunity and Economic Mobility for Workers With Records

Support Education and Training Opportunities



Clear Barriers to Employment and Wealth-Building



Ensure Access to Foundational Mobility Supports



Build Infrastructure for Data Reporting, Transparency, and System Accountability



Support Education and Training Opportunities

For many people in the United States, even those without records, accessing education and skills development programs can be challenging. The offerings are too expensive, and the system is too cumbersome to navigate—in addition to being unresponsive to labor market demands.¹⁰ For people with records, these challenges grow exponentially.

Offering education and job training programs for people who are incarcerated is a proven strategy for reducing recidivism and boosting individuals' employment and earnings. Public investments in these programs yield strong returns for taxpayers.¹¹ Yet despite recent progress in program expansion and participation, participation is still limited due to insufficient funding, inadequate classroom space and a lack of internet access and other basic technologies in carceral facilities, barriers that curb access to financial aid and in-state tuition for people who are incarcerated, and a shortage of incentives to encourage program completion. Additionally, direct state funding for job training and postsecondary education in prison is often inadequate, and states aren't taking full advantage of available federal resources. In the federal government's 2024 fiscal year, states used less than half of funding that the federal Perkins law makes available for state institutions like juvenile and adult correctional facilities.¹²

Too often, the credentials that people are able to earn while serving sentences aren't well aligned with the talent needs of industries and employers.¹³ Opportunities to offer training that enables people to build in-demand skills and prepare for quality jobs that pay good wages exist, but policymakers must eliminate counterproductive barriers and meaningfully expand access to those pathways.

What Policymakers Can Do



Prioritize Apprenticeships for Adults and Young People With Records

- Policymakers should promote measures designed to ensure that apprenticeships for incarcerated workers meet the same wage requirements that federal and state apprenticeship agencies set for all work-based learning programs seeking designation as Registered Apprenticeships. This would ensure that these workers are able to gain the full benefits of participating in high-quality programs based on a model that's proven to lead to economic advancement.
- Governors should issue executive orders calling for departments of correction and youth justice agencies to create and execute plans for increasing the number of Registered Apprenticeships in carceral settings by clearing any barriers prisons may impose that limit the ability of incarcerated workers to complete apprenticeships—including restrictions on the amount of time they can spend in training, their access to tools and technological resources, and their ability to take part in activities in person.
- Congress should establish a youth apprenticeship readiness program and allocate a share of the funding to support programs for young people impacted by the criminal legal system.





Expand Access to Prison-Based Education and Training Programs Through New and Existing Funding

JFF supports the use of new and existing funding from Congress and state legislatures to expand and strengthen prison-based postsecondary education and job training programs so that everyone who is incarcerated has access to the tools necessary to succeed when they return home.

- Congress should do the following: Remove the 2% cap on the share of Perkins funding that states can spend on education and job training in state institutions like adult and youth correctional facilities; establish a requirement that states spend at least 1% of Perkins dollars on workforce education and training for youth and adults who are either incarcerated or under supervision in their communities to ensure a stable and consistent funding stream for programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials; and expand eligibility for these funds to programs that support job training and education for people living under supervision in their communities.
- Congress should also establish a program through which the U.S. Department of Education, in conjunction with the Department of Labor, funds competitive grants for states to implement, expand, and rigorously evaluate postsecondary education and job training programs in carceral facilities for both young people and adults, with a preference for state initiatives that have been shown to meet the needs of workers and employers and have the potential to scale statewide.
- As part of a reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJJPA), Congress should include workforce boards and state and local workforce agencies among the youth-serving systems that collaborate to develop and implement comprehensive programs designed to help young people avoid contact with the youth justice system. In addition, federal lawmakers should add high-quality job training programs, including apprenticeships and other work-based learning experiences, to the list of services eligible for JJJPA funding.
- State legislatures should appropriate new funding to support programs that broaden access to postsecondary education and job training programs designed to provide youth and adults who are incarcerated with opportunities to develop in-demand skills that prepare them for careers in growing professions and industries.
- Governors and state legislators should ensure that youth justice and adult correctional agencies collaborate in state workforce and postsecondary education initiatives to help drive efforts to encourage employers to embrace fair chance hiring and promote training programs in carceral facilities that help young people and adults build in-demand skills and prepare them for careers in growing professions and industries once they are released.



Make Education and Training Programs More Affordable

State policymakers should explore ways to lift restrictions on access to tuition assistance, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid for people with records, including provisions ensuring that people who are incarcerated are eligible for in-state tuition when enrolled in postsecondary prison education programs.



Ensure That the Costs of Education Technology Are Not a Barrier to Education

- State legislatures should invest in technology upgrades at corrections facilities to provide people who are incarcerated with access to secure internet connections and the other IT systems and equipment they need to acquire 21st century skills that are currently in demand in the labor market.
- State legislatures should cap the fees that departments of correction and private contractors charge people who are incarcerated for access to the technology systems and equipment required for prison-based education and job training programs.



Provide Workers Returning to Their Communities With Essential Documents

Congress and state legislatures should require state departments of correction and the U.S. Bureau of Prisons to provide vital documents to people who are leaving state and federal prisons and jails, including but not limited to driver's licenses and any certifications they earned while incarcerated.



Codify and Expand Funding for the Reentry Employment Opportunities Grant Program

Congress should codify the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) grant program under a reauthorized Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act—and significantly increase appropriations for REO grants to meet the workforce needs of the millions of people released from prisons and jails each year. REO codification should require REO applicants to demonstrate that their programs will prepare young people and/or adults for jobs in high-paying fields that are in demand among jobseekers in the regional economy. Codification should maximize impact and innovation by avoiding overly burdensome statutory parameters on REO grants, such as rules stating that participants only qualify for REO

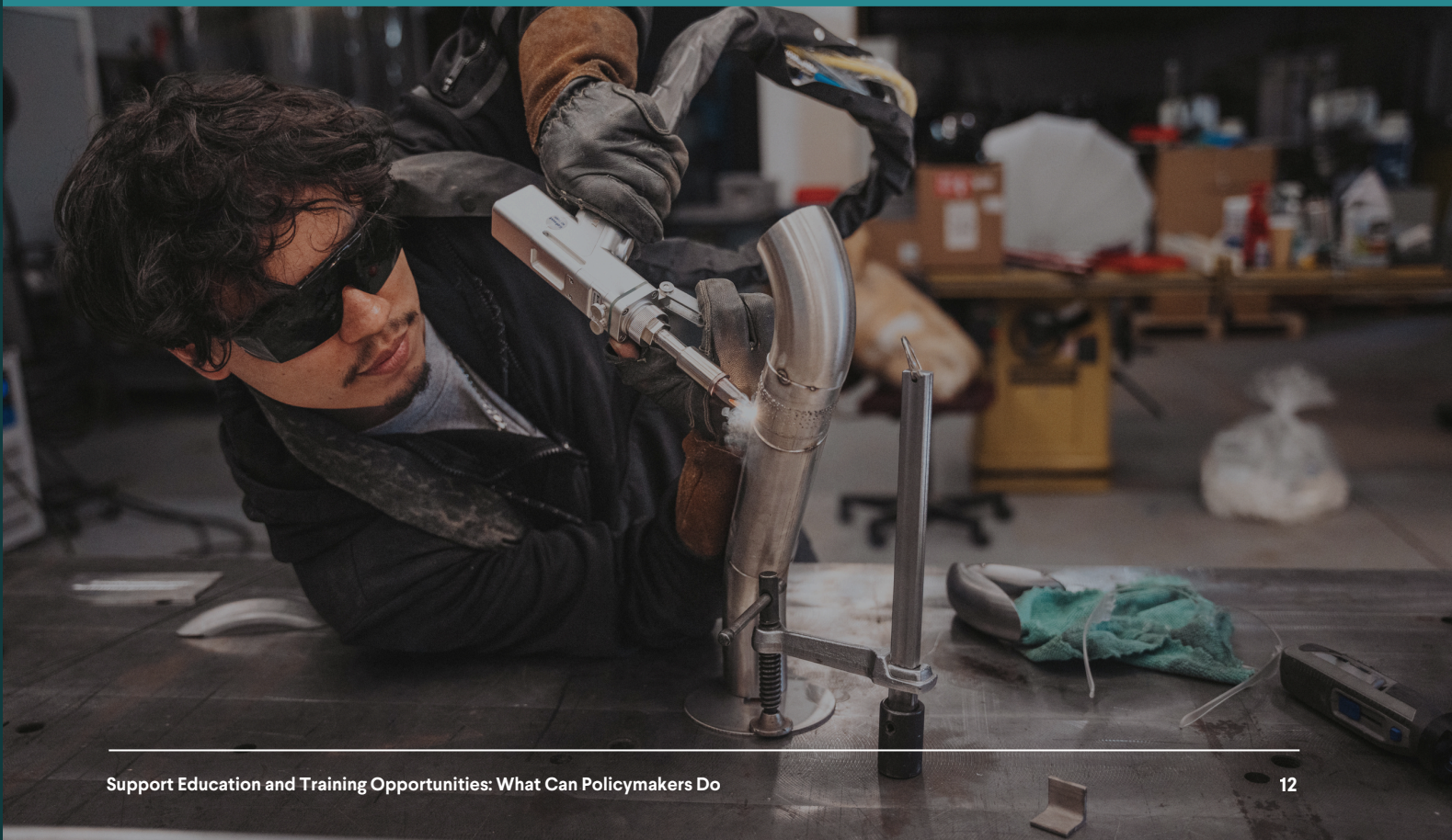
grants if they are within a certain number of days of their release, requirements that grantees obtain matching funds, or caps on how long a program may work with an individual post-release. Congress should ensure that a wide range of activities qualify for REO funding, including but not limited to case management and career navigation services, work-release and transitional employment programs, services that help people obtain identification cards and other vital documentation, and programs that provide direct financial assistance. Congress should also ensure that youth-related programs are eligible for REO funding, including programs that work in conjunction with state or local agencies that serve young people with records.





Open Pathways to Good Jobs for People Who Are Incarcerated

- State legislatures should remove statutory or regulatory restrictions that prevent private employers from hiring incarcerated workers—though any such action should include measures to ensure that employers pay these workers market-rate wages and offer them pathways to full-time jobs upon release.
- State legislatures should mandate that departments of corrections establish protocols for permitting people who are incarcerated to work remote jobs that pay good wages. They should also allocate the funding necessary to ensure that carceral facilities have adequate staffing and infrastructure—including up-to-date IT systems and equipment—to implement this mandate.
- Congress and state legislatures should ensure that federal and state occupational safety rules and regulations apply to jobs in carceral facilities.



State Policy Spotlight: Market-Rate Wages and Job Training for Incarcerated Workers

95%

of people who are incarcerated will eventually be released.

In prisons across the country, incarcerated workers are acquiring skills and gaining work experience in jobs that pay market-rate wages and prepare them for success once they return home, as more than 95% one day will.¹⁴ In most prison jobs, workers earn very little, often averaging less than a dollar per day.¹⁵

Yet remote jobs can pay wages equal to what workers earn in jobs outside of prison, enabling people who are incarcerated to pay expenses like court fees, victim restitution, and college tuition or other training and education costs, or even save money for their futures to smooth their transitions back to their communities.¹⁶



In Maine and some other states, departments of corrections permit people who are incarcerated to work jobs and internships remotely. Among other things, these opportunities enable workers to build computer skills that are critical to success in today's economy.¹⁷

Leaders at the Maine Department of Corrections, with input from people working remotely from prisons, developed a policy establishing standard procedures for administering remote work opportunities and setting eligibility criteria that individuals must meet in order to participate.¹⁸ The policy has made it possible for some people to earn five-figure salaries while working remotely from prison.¹⁹

State Policy Spotlight: Kansas

40+

private employers partnered with
DOC to hire incarcerated workers

\$26.92
per hour

Private employers recognize the benefits of tapping the incarcerated workforce at market-rate wages—and training them for long-term success. More than 40 private employers have partnered with the Kansas Department of Corrections to hire incarcerated workers, paying them as much as \$26.92 per hour.

Discussing the topic of offering training opportunities to people who are incarcerated, Kansas Governor Laura Kelly once said it's important “to use the time that they are in our system to provide an education” and ensure that they “get training, get certificates, get licenses, so that when they come out they are ready to take the jobs that we know are available.”²⁰



Laura Kelly
Kansas Governor

“[It’s important] to use the time that they are in our system to provide an education ... [ensure that they] get training, get certificates, get licenses, so that when they come out they are ready to take the jobs that we know are available.”

State Policy Spotlight: Ohio



In Ohio, two Cincinnati-based manufacturers—JBM Packaging and Nehemiah Manufacturing—addressed serious recruitment challenges by hiring people with records.²¹ JBM trains people who are incarcerated to prepare them to move into good jobs at competitive wages upon release.²²

In his 2025 state of the state address, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine called for training and hiring people released from prison. “The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction releases about 18,000 people back into society each year, and it’s in all of our interests to get them into the workforce,” he said, adding, “I say to the employers in Ohio: Give them a chance.”²³

“The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction releases about 18,000 people back into society each year, and it’s in all of our interests to get them into the workforce.”



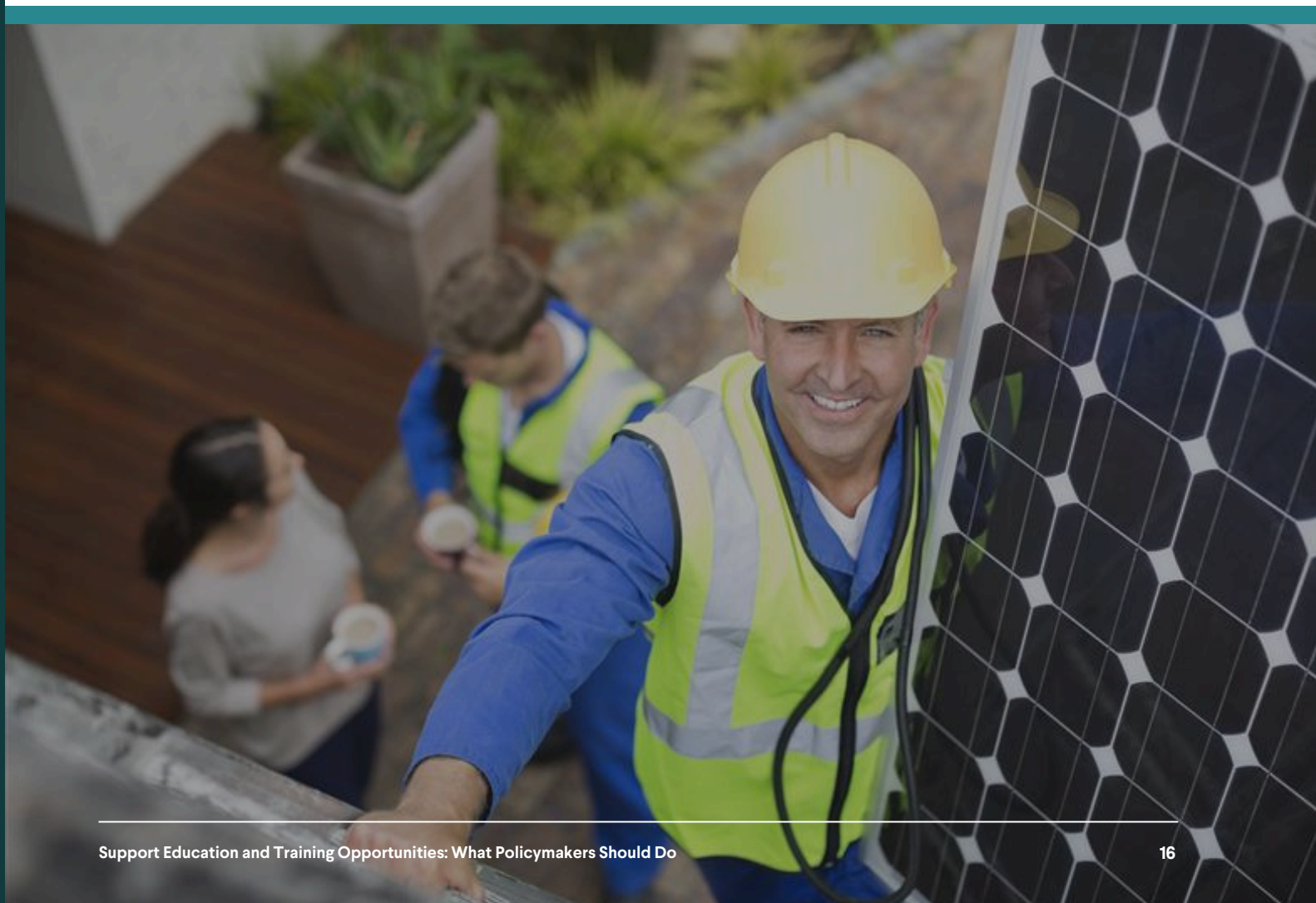
Mike DeWine
Ohio Governor



Establish Incentives to Encourage Participants to Complete Prison-Based Education and Training Programs—and Reinvest the Savings

Working toward the goal of universal access to prison-based learning programs is not enough. State and federal policymakers must enact or strengthen policies that give people incentives to complete education and job training courses while they're incarcerated.

Examples include state and federal laws that allow individuals to earn time off their sentences by participating in and completing these programs—an approach that yields cost savings that can be reinvested in efforts to expand prison-based education and training initiatives.





Increase Program Participation and Completion Rates



To increase program participation and completion rates, state policymakers should enact laws requiring prison officials to grant reductions in sentences to both young people and adults who participate in postsecondary education or job training programs with the goal of obtaining an industry-recognized credential while serving time in a carceral facility or while under community supervision. Any savings these measures yield from reductions in the prison population should be reinvested in education and job training programs both in carceral settings and in local communities.

Implement “Second Look” Mechanisms



Policymakers should also enact “second look” mechanisms that allow courts to review the cases of people serving long sentences to determine whether their sentences could be reduced. And these measures should explicitly require courts to consider whether a person completed an education program and obtained a workforce credential as part of the decision-making process.



Expand the First Step Act of 2018



Congress should build upon the success of the bipartisan First Step Act of 2018 by increasing the amount of time by which sentences can be reduced for people who complete education and training programs while incarcerated in federal Bureau of Prisons facilities. Currently, the law allows people to earn 10 days off their sentences for every 30 days they spend participating in one of the bureau’s “approved programs,” which include a number of postsecondary education and job training options.^{24,25}

Amend the Safer Supervision Act



To enhance incentives for people on federal community supervision, Congress should enact an amended version of the bipartisan Safer Supervision Act that mirrors the First Step Act by allowing people on community supervision to earn 10 days off of their sentences for every 30 days they spend in qualifying postsecondary and job training programs.²⁶

State Policy Spotlight: Incentives for Job Training and Education Yield Strong Outcomes

95%

of people who are incarcerated will eventually be released.

More than 95% of the people who serve time in prison one day return home. Policies that enable people to earn time off their sentences create a powerful incentive for participation in programs that have been shown to effectively prepare them to succeed when they return to their communities.

Lawmakers of all ideological stripes at both the state and federal levels have embraced expansion of credits that earn people time off their sentences.

2018

Congress passes the First Step Act, enabling reduced sentences in exchange for participation in education or training programs.

In 2018, Congress enacted the First Step Act, which—among other reforms—enabled people incarcerated in Bureau of Prisons facilities to earn time off their sentences by participating in education and training programs. Between 2022 and 2023, participation in learning programs increased, and subsequent studies found that people released early in accordance with guidelines in the First Step Act had lower rates of recidivism than other people who returned to their communities following incarceration during that time.²⁷

State Policy Spotlight: Kansas

83.5%

of eligible people who were incarcerated earned time-off credits in FY2016.

During its 2016 session, the Kansas legislature expanded the number of days incarcerated people could earn off their sentences for completing training and education courses and other programs, raising the maximum from 90 days to 120.²⁸

That fiscal year, 83.5% of eligible individuals earned time-off credits for program participation, according to the Kansas Department of Corrections.²⁹ The credit expansion led to a reduction in the number of prison beds the state needed, enabling the state to avoid \$6.4 million in expected expenditures between its 2017 and 2021 fiscal years.³⁰

State Policy Spotlight: Colorado

2023

Colorado passed HB 23-1037, reducing sentences for individuals who earn degrees and credentials while incarcerated.

In 2023, legislators from both parties enacted House Bill 23-1037 in a nearly unanimous vote.³¹ The legislation requires the Colorado Department of Corrections to deduct time from the sentences of learners who complete certain degrees or credentials from an institution of higher education while incarcerated.

The provisions include one year off for an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree, 18 months for a master's, and two years for a doctoral degree. The law requires any cost savings the state realizes from reductions in the length of sentences to be reinvested in state department of higher education initiatives that support prison-based programs.

Clear Barriers to Employment and Wealth-Building

Workers with records face numerous barriers in the labor market. Even if they have the skills, training, and credentials they need to enter a particular field, they often must overcome not only the stigma that employers may associate with things they did in the past but also a complex web of regulatory hurdles that make it difficult to pursue certain career paths. For example, there are more than 13,000 rules and regulations that either prevent people with arrest or conviction records from obtaining licenses and certifications in certain professions or require them to meet much stricter criteria to qualify for a license—a harsh reality given that a large share of jobs that require licenses, up substantially in recent decades.³²

Discouraged from entering the job market, people with records may turn to self-employment and entrepreneurship. But again, restrictive policies can prevent them from obtaining the licenses they need to run a business or make it difficult to qualify for the credit and financing necessary to launch a startup.

At the same time, expungement and record sealing—key policy mechanisms that can lessen the impact of a criminal histories by hiding them from the view of employers and other parties or removing them entirely from people’s records—remain beyond the reach of the vast majority of people who are statutorily eligible to qualify for such relief. In some states, less than 1% of eligible cases are sealed.³³

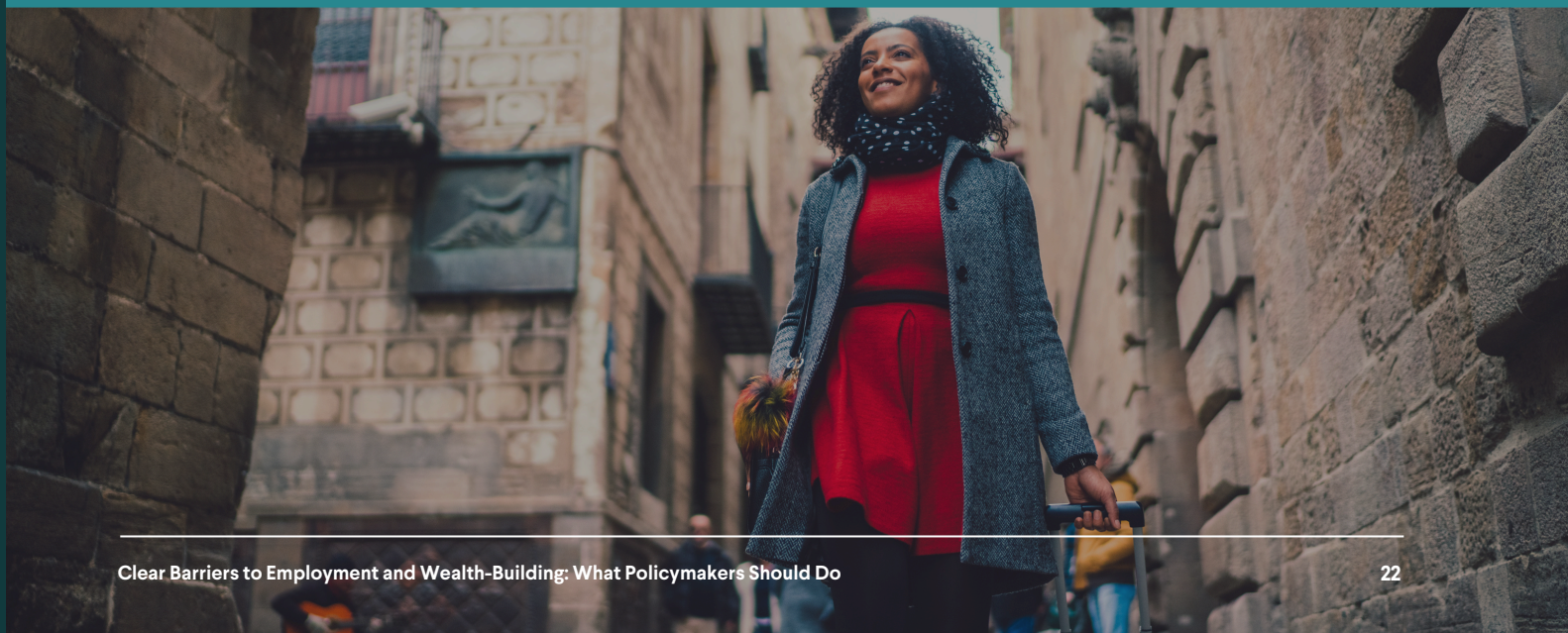


What Policymakers Can Do



Wipe the Slate Clean by Automating Record Sealing

- States should enact “clean slate” laws that automate the process of sealing the records of people convicted of a crime who have gone a certain number of years without reoffending. As of 20, 12 states had passed such laws with bipartisan support. States should also eliminate barriers that make it difficult for people to pursue petition-based record clearance processes for offenses not covered under Clean Slate laws. That would involve eliminating fees and reducing the number of years people must go without reoffending in order to qualify for record-clearing relief. To set those time frames, policymakers should review recidivism research showing that people who go even just a few years without reoffending are unlikely to ever do so.³⁴
- States should protect young workers from the negative impacts of juvenile records by enacting legislation that makes those records confidential, with only specific exceptions allowing employers or other stakeholders directly involved in public safety to access the records. States could also enact measures that prohibit consideration of juvenile records in hiring processes and automatically seal juvenile records after a brief period of time without a new offense.
- Congress should enact H.R.3114, the Clean Slate Act of 2025 and H.R.3111, the Fresh Start Act of 2025. The Clean Slate Act automates the record sealing process for people with convictions for federal crimes, and the Fresh Start Act gives states incentives to enact their own clean slate laws by offering them grants to defray the cost of implementing the data systems that support the record-sealing process.





Level the Playing Field for Obtaining a License to Work

States should enact state legislation eliminating roadblocks that make it difficult for workers with records to obtain professional or occupational licenses. Among other policies, these measures should do the following:

- Prohibit licensing bodies from denying an application because the applicant has a criminal record—unless the conviction was directly related to the duties of the profession
- Limit the length of time a given conviction can be taken into consideration as part of the license approval process
- Require occupational licensing criteria to be transparent and based on publicly enumerated factors
- Bar consideration of juvenile records or misdemeanor adult records from licensing decisions
- Remove vague and subjective language such as “good moral character” from the criteria that can be considered in licensing decisions
- Require licensing bodies to provide written notice of denials, including a list of the specific reasons for the decision
- Mandate public reporting requirements for licensing bodies to monitor implementation

Congress should enact legislation removing roadblocks to federal licenses and other necessary credentials for workers with records. For example, by passing the bipartisan TWICE Act, Congress can clear the path for workers with records to obtain the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC), a federal ID card issued by the Transportation Security Administration.



Promote the Adoption and Expansion of Fair Chance Hiring Practices

- States should enact fair chance hiring laws that put people with records on equal footing with all other workers in the job market. Such laws should, among other reforms, prohibit employers from including questions about job candidates' conviction and arrest histories on employment applications and require employers to extend conditional job offers to applicants before conducting background checks on them.
- Congress should enact a federal fair chance hiring law that extends protections to workers in private industry nationwide, expanding upon fair chance hiring requirements for federal agencies and contractors that were enacted as part of the bipartisan Fair Chance to Compete for Jobs Act of 2019.
- State and federal policymakers should reexamine state and federal laws that prohibit hiring people with records for certain jobs. For example, Congress should reduce the list of statutory exclusions barring people from employment with state and federal health care programs.³⁵
- To help alleviate employers' concerns about the perceived risks of hiring people with records, state and federal policymakers should pass legislation to limit employer liability for hiring people with records and reform—through legislation or regulation—policies that exclude workers with records from private fidelity bonds, which many businesses rely on.
- Congress should modernize the work opportunity tax credit program to create incentives for hiring people with records into long-term career pathways in fields that offer good pay and opportunities for advancement. State legislatures should augment the federal program with tax credits of their own, establishing careful guardrails to ensure that the credits are tied to employment in jobs that lead to economic advancement.
- Congress and executive branch leaders should mandate reforms to the FBI background check process, ensuring that it is fair and excludes sealed records, juvenile records, and other information unrelated to public safety.



Support Entrepreneurship and Capital Creation Opportunities

- Congress should enact the New Start Act to establish a pilot program awarding grants to support the entrepreneurial efforts of people are currently or were formerly incarcerated.
- States should remove eligibility barriers that make it difficult for people with records to obtain state contracts, access state programs supporting small businesses, or participate in any other state-sponsored economic development opportunities.
- States should take steps to clear barriers to entrepreneurship by enacting laws that, among other changes, remove statutory provisions requiring automatic denial of business licenses based on conviction history, limit the length of time certain convictions may be considered in licensing decisions (adopting new guidelines based on the findings of research on recidivism trends), and remove vague language such as “crimes of moral turpitude” from criteria that can be considered in licensing decisions.



Ensure Access to Foundational Mobility Supports



To safely and successfully reintegrate into their communities, people with criminal records need more than just a good job. They need foundational supports that provide stability during a time of transition. Yet too often, they are denied access to these limited resources by arbitrary and outdated laws, hindering their ability to move forward.

For example, a carveout in federal law permits landlords to discriminate against people who have drug distribution convictions, no matter the circumstances or the length of time since the offense occurred. And since 1996, federal law has imposed a lifetime ban on food and financial assistance for people with felony drug offenses.³⁶ In addition, people records are often burdened with court debts that prevent them from achieving the financial security they need to progress with their lives.³⁷

People with records can overcome these obstacles with the help of services supported by state and federal initiatives such as the Second Chance Act and the Reentry Employment Opportunities grant program, which have demonstrated the value of job training programs, substance use and mental health services, and other supports for people returning to their communities following incarceration.³⁸ Yet these initiatives do not have sufficient funding to meet the scale of need, particularly in rural areas. The REO program, for example, serves an average of 9,000 people annually, a tiny share of the of millions of individuals released from U.S. prisons and jails each year.^{39,40}

What Policymakers Can Do



Codify and Make Significant Investments in Reentry and Economic Advancement Strategies

Congress should increase investment in the REO grant program to widen the network of high-quality workforce supports available to people transitioning out of incarceration.

Congress should double down on initiatives shown to bolster state and local reentry support efforts. Key steps would include passing the Second Chance Reauthorization Act (approved by the Senate in May 2025) to expand critical services for people returning home from incarceration and continuing to fund the Justice Reinvestment Initiative to support state-driven systems improvements.





Eliminate Barriers to Accessing Resources That Support Reintegration Into the Community

- Congress should end discrimination in federal housing law against workers with records by closing the so-called Thurmond Amendment, which allowed landlords to deny housing to people with drug distribution convictions, regardless of the severity of their offenses or the length of time that has passed since their conviction.⁴¹
- Congress should enact the RESTORE Act to end prohibitions on access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits for people with certain drug convictions—following in the footsteps of 25 states that have already opted out of both bans.⁴² The legislation also permits people to apply for benefits within 30 days of their release from incarceration to ensure a smoother transition upon reentry.⁴³
- States should enact fair housing legislation to ensure that nondiscriminatory laws are in place for people with records.
- States should enact legislation eliminating fines and fees imposed by the criminal legal system. These levies don't help keep the public safe and they add to the financial burdens people face as they rejoin their communities, limiting their ability to advance economically.





Ensure That Federal Benefits Programs Don't Penalize People With Records

Congress should enact the Training and Nutrition Stability Act to ensure that workers, including those with criminal records, don't lose public benefits like nutrition supports because their temporary earnings from participation in job training or work-based learning are counted as income when determining eligibility for SNAP Employment and Training programs and other supports.



Build Infrastructure for Data Reporting, Transparency, and System Accountability

To ensure success and build stakeholder support, policies designed to expand services for people with records must include measures to hold the programs and systems charged with their implementation accountable for achieving strong outcomes. That means investing in the data infrastructure necessary to collect, analyze, and report evidence-based performance metrics and requiring system stakeholders to issue reports to the public about progress toward goals. For example, while the 2020 reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for people who are incarcerated was an important landmark, the systems implementing Pell programs still lack the data infrastructure and the performance metrics required to issue reports that show what is working well and what is not.⁴⁴ To move forward, policymakers must use clear, accurate outcomes data to track progress and determine whether adjustments are needed.

What Policymakers Can Do



Establish Success Metrics and Promote Shared Accountability for Achieving Goals

- States should enact legislation requiring the development and public reporting of performance metrics that illustrate how the workforce, education, and criminal justice systems are supporting reentry.
- States should allocate funding for the data infrastructure improvements necessary to collect and synthesize performance metrics.





Prioritize Quality and Accountability for Prison-Based Education and Training

State and federal statutes should tie financial support for postsecondary education and job training programs offered in state and federal prisons to achievement of performance metrics. These statutes should require programs to do the following:

- Ensure that skills and credentials can be articulated as credit in other education or training experiences
- Adhere to models with evidence-based track records of success
- Use performance-based metrics to promote the use of evidence-based practices
- Empower learners to select and pursue their preferred careers through career coaching and academic advising while they're incarcerated and after they complete their sentences
- Integrate work and learning
- Focus on skills, knowledge, and credentials that are in demand in labor market and are tied to quality jobs
- Collect and report key data performance metrics to the public

State legislatures should enact laws requiring departments of corrections and state higher education agencies and consortiums to formally coordinate their roles in the implementation and management of prison education programs. To do that, they should draft memoranda of understanding that address questions related to topics such as data sharing, program access and quality, support for people in custody who are applying for federal financial aid, and compliance with federal regulations.



Harness the Power of Bipartisan, Intergovernmental Bodies to Increase the Availability of Data

Through legislation or executive action, states should establish interbranch, interagency, bipartisan oversight bodies with mandates to do the following:

1. Ensure collaboration among business and industry leaders and officials from the workforce, education, and corrections systems
2. promote public transparency regarding progress toward goals through reporting of agreed-upon performance metrics. Such entities should regularly report to state leaders and to the public on progress toward data-driven outcomes.

Federal executive branch leadership should reestablish a federal interagency reentry council to leverage the power of the federal government to eliminate barriers that make it difficult for people with records to advance economically.



A photograph of a family of three—a man, a woman, and a young child—smiling and embracing each other outdoors. The child is perched on the man's shoulders, and the woman is smiling broadly. The background is a soft-focus natural setting.

Taking Action Toward Transformative Change

Building a path to a stronger, more inclusive economy depends on unlocking the full potential of every worker—including the millions of people in this country who have criminal records and often face roadblocks limiting their opportunities in the labor market due to a complex web of ineffective and burdensome laws and regulations.

By dismantling barriers to education, training, employment, and entrepreneurship, policymakers can restore opportunity, strengthen communities, and drive economic success for people and businesses. The policies outlined in this agenda offer a blueprint for how state and federal leaders can act now to ensure that people with records are empowered to shape their futures instead of being defined by their pasts.

Promoting the expansion of fair-chance hiring practices, prison-based education and training programs that lead to degrees and other credentials, and supports for people who are returning to their communities following incarceration is not only a matter of eliminating barriers—it's a strategic investment in the nation's workforce that will strengthen the U.S. economy. With leadership and sustained commitment, America can build a system that values redemption, rewards effort, and normalizes opportunity for all.

These recommendations can inform bold action by state and federal leaders to unharness the U.S. economy and its workforce from ineffective barriers to employment and education that are curtailing opportunities for millions of people with criminal records. Creating a level playing field for workers who are eager for a fair shot at quality jobs and lifelong economic advancement would represent an important step toward building a future that works—for everyone.

Federal Funding Streams for Employment, Training, and Support Services

Dedicated Funding

Funding specifically authorized for programs specifically supporting people with records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration.



The Second Chance Act (SCA)

Passed by Congress in 2008, the SCA is the primary source of federal funding to support efforts by state, local, and tribal governments to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for both adults and young people who are returning to their communities following incarceration. In the federal government’s 2024 fiscal year (which ended September 30, 2024), Congress appropriated \$117,000,000 for Second Chance Act programs.⁴⁵

WIO Title II

Title II of WIOA authorizes states to use as much as 20% of workforce development funding for education and training for people who are incarcerated—both youth and adults. These programs can include adult education and literacy activities, special education programs, courses that lead to secondary school credits, integrated education and training, career pathways programs, dual enrollment programs, peer tutoring programs, and initiatives that provide services to people transitioning out of incarceration that focus on reducing recidivism.⁴⁶



Dedicated Funding

Funding specifically authorized for programs specifically supporting people with records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration.



Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) Program

Authorized through WIOA and administered through the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) of the U.S. Department of Labor, REO is a competitive discretionary grant program specifically designed to provide training and skill-building services to young people and adults who are currently or were formerly incarcerated. In the federal government's 2024 fiscal year (which ended September 30, 2024), Congress appropriated \$115 million for people of all ages who have records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration.⁴⁸



The First Step Act

Enacted in 2018, the First Step Act contains a number of criminal justice reforms aimed at reducing recidivism and improving conditions at federal prisons, including offering people incentives for participating in job training and education programs while incarcerated. The law authorized \$75 million per year in funding through the federal government's 2023 fiscal year, which ended September 30, 2023.⁴⁹

Allowable Funding

Funding from broader policy initiatives that may be used for programs that support people with records



Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

Signed into law in 2014, WIOA is the primary source of federal funding for improvements to the country's workforce development system and initiatives designed to ensure that people have the skills required for jobs that lead to economic advancement. WIOA allows states to use up to 20% of their WIOA Title II workforce development funding on education and training in corrections facilities—for both adults and juvenile populations.

In addition, Title I of WIOA allows states to use funds in their governor's reserve accounts to improve coordination of employment and training activities with activities in the corrections system to assist efforts to support people returning to their communities following incarceration.

Allowable Funding

Funding from broader policy initiatives that may be used for programs that support people with records



Perkins V (the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act)

Perkins V authorizes states to direct as much as 2% of state leadership funding to support adults and young people in state corrections facilities.⁴⁷

However, states aren't fully using these funds for that purpose. In fiscal year 2024, they used less than half of the authorized percentage share.



Federal Pell Grants

People serving time in prisons, jails, and youth justice facilities are now eligible to use federal Pell Grants to pay for eligible postsecondary education programs.

Allowable Funding

Funding from broader policy initiatives that may be used for programs that support people with records



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T)

SNAP E&T is a formula-based block grant program distributed to states by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The focus of the program is to help recipients of SNAP benefits gain training and work experience that will prepare them for employment that leads to economic self-sufficiency. Overall SNAP program spending was roughly \$100.3 billion in FY 2024.⁵⁰

In addition to the block grant funds, states can apply for additional funds through a 50% reimbursement process for dollars spent on support services for SNAP E&T programs. SNAP E&T services can be provided by both state agencies and contracted partners. This makes it possible for organizations focused specifically on providing workforce development services to people with records to be selected to receive SNAP E&T funds. Services that are approved for this funding include job search training programs, on-the-job training activities, job retention support services, and courses in which participants develop durable employability skills, such as classes for English language learners.

SNAP E&T funds can also be used to pay for programs that provide wraparound supports, such as such as services for people who lack access to transportation, dependent care, and other needs, and programs that purchase books and other school supplies and for learners.

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