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# Freedom to Achieve

Pathways and Practices for  
Economic Advancement After Incarceration

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## About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

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# Introduction

Hiring people who have served prison sentences has never been a priority in the United States. For men and women who were once incarcerated, finding any job is difficult; finding a sustainable, family-supporting job is nearly impossible. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, when the economy was humming and the labor market was tight, a growing number of private employers were willing to “take a chance” on people with criminal records. Momentum was building for fair chance hiring—the practice of assessing a jobseeker’s criminal record only after determining the person is qualified for the job. A year and a half later, with roughly [10 million](#) people looking for work, employers once again can choose from a large pool of qualified candidates, making it less compelling to “take a chance” and hire someone who has served time in prison.

Today our country is at a critical crossroads on this issue, and it’s time for change. As we work in earnest toward an equitable economic recovery and focus on preparing people for the jobs of the post-pandemic world, we must take action to ensure the reentry population is positioned for employment, especially employment with opportunities for advancement and

earning a living wage. The issue is not simply economic stability; it is also about disrupting systemic racial inequity, which has again been seared into our national consciousness since spring 2020. Although the number of people in prison has [fallen overall and across racial and ethnic groups](#), the nation’s stain of mass incarceration goes hand in hand with the legacy of racism. Black and Latinx people still make up the majority of the incarcerated, and they are similarly overrepresented among people reentering the community. And the ills of mass incarceration are reflected in the challenges of reentry.

Now we must seize the opportunity to eliminate these longstanding economic disparities and racial inequities for people who have served prison sentences—often called “[returning citizens](#)” to recognize their humanity and dignity—and create more seamless transitions to work. We know that work reduces recidivism; to ensure returning citizens are beneficiaries of an economic recovery, they need to be positioned for mobility. The building blocks are there: Through the work of innovative education, training, and employment services, we know how to position people for economic

advancement. It's time to apply these lessons to the reentry population, while also making an intentional effort to change the systems and policies that perpetuate stark racial disparities in talent pipelines and in hiring practices. We need to work both angles at once—accelerate movement toward employment and create a more effective approach to workforce development that focuses on both economic advancement and racial equity issues.

## **What We Gain by Getting This Right**

There is a high cost to missing this opportunity for reform. As a legacy of the nation's decades-long investment in mass incarceration, over [600,000 people](#) are released from prison annually with another 10 million going in and out of local jails. When reentering citizens are excluded from quality employment, they are far more likely to return to prison. More than two-thirds of formerly incarcerated individuals—approximately [68 percent](#)—are rearrested within the first three years after their release. The ripple effects hurt not just their families, but come at a significant cost to our society. Taking into account all people with criminal records who are excluded from the economy, the loss of workers, taxpayers, and consumers means an estimated loss to GDP of more than [\\$78 billion per year](#).

And there is much to be gained from getting this right. Not only is employment the single most important factor in reducing recidivism, but when employers invest in “fair chance” hiring practices and talent development that includes people reentering the community—and all people with criminal records—they gain [good workers](#) who [contribute to the business bottom line](#). In addition, systemic changes that eliminate barriers for people with records will eliminate barriers that impact all adult learners; an ecosystem that accelerates economic advancement for people with records will truly lift all boats and increase economic opportunity for all. As investment strategist Jeffrey D. Korzenik wrote in [Untapped Talent: How Second Chance Hiring Works for Your Business and the Community](#): “Fair chance hiring is good for criminal justice and criminal justice is good for fair chance hiring.”

## **Road Map to This Paper**

In this paper, we examine the unique challenges of people who have been incarcerated and the pros and cons of the traditional workforce development model in light of those factors. Then we focus on two distinct but interrelated solution sets: (1) based on what we know about best practices that help people effectively transition into employment and prosper

in the post-COVID economy, we describe pivotal workforce development strategies and highlight examples of these models that are applied to people who have been incarcerated, and (2) we look at anti-racist strategies to end disparities in workforce development and employment. We end with recommendations on how to implement both facets of this complex but essential work.

We recognize that no single stakeholder can remove the existing barriers to workforce development for people who have been incarcerated. We think an opportunity exists to address demand-side interventions and recognize the pivotal role the workforce development ecosystem can play. Education and training providers—those in the corrections and justice space and those in community and adult workforce development—can take the lead in building an integrated, equitable talent development pipeline. Employers and philanthropic organizations play a critical role in the impact and scale of this ecosystem and recommendations for those stakeholders will also be addressed.

## Fair Chance Hiring and “Ban the Box” Around the Country

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With [fair chance hiring](#), questions about convictions or arrests are removed from the hiring process and employers only consider a record at the point of hire if relevant to the requirements of the job. While [research](#) and emerging [employer coalitions](#) demonstrate a growing willingness among private employers to adopt fair chance hiring, policy has been the biggest lever for expansion. “Ban the box” and reimagined [local hiring requirements](#) codify fair chance hiring practice. These laws have [gained momentum across municipalities, states, and the federal government](#).

It’s important to note that racism is a labor market [constant](#), and even in fair chance hiring jurisdictions Black men and Latinx people with criminal records have not seen the same increases in callbacks and hiring as white people with criminal records. Fair chance hiring has to be paired with rigorous enforcement of anti-discrimination laws to ensure these policies provide a fair chance equitably.



## **Incarcerated America: Characteristics and Unique Challenges**

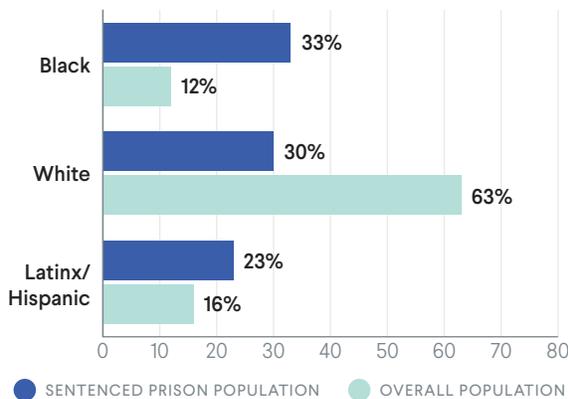
Most people who are released from prison return to the community with virtually nothing. The corrections system may hand them \$50 as they exit the gates, but most leave without housing, transportation, marketable skills, or support services to help them reengage in the civic, social, and economic life of our country and stabilize their lives. This section describes the demographics of the reentry population and the unique challenges of the people behind the facts and figures.

# Who Is Incarcerated in the United States?

While the “face” of the U.S. prison population—and the reentry population—has been represented in popular culture as a Black male, this is a heterogeneous population in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, age, educational attainment, and work experience.

**FIGURE 1**  
**U.S. Prison Population, by Race and Ethnicity**

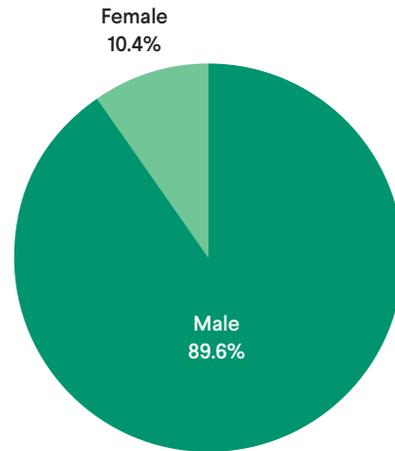
In 2018, Black Americans represented 33 percent of the sentenced prison population versus 12 percent of the overall population. White Americans accounted for 30 percent of the sentenced prison population versus 63 percent of the overall population. Latinx people or Hispanics accounted for 23 percent of the sentenced prison population versus 16 percent of the overall population.



SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS

**FIGURE 2**  
**U.S. Prison Population, by Gender**

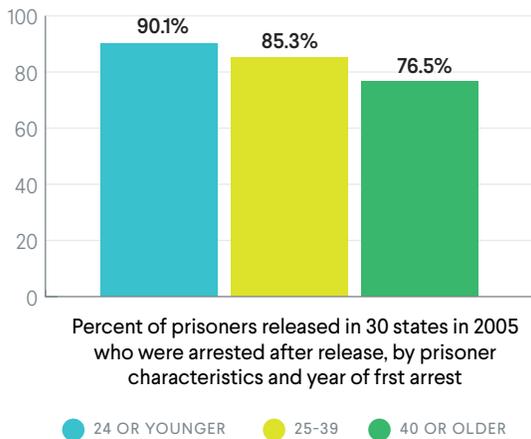
Women's rates of incarceration were noted as 10.4 percent, slightly higher than previous years.



SOURCE: BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, CORRECTIONAL POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2015

**FIGURE 3**  
**U.S. Prison Population, by Age**

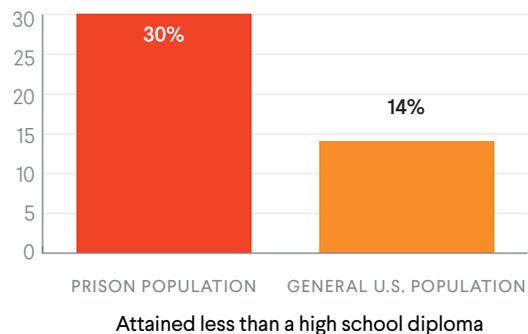
Young adults have much higher recidivism rates than older people.



SOURCE: BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, RECIDIVISM OF STATE PRISONERS RELEASED IN 2005 DATA COLLECTION, 2005–2014.

**FIGURE 4**  
**U.S. Prison Population, by Educational Attainment**

A 2016 survey of educational attainment among incarcerated adults found that 30 percent of the prison population had attained less than a high school diploma, compared to 14 percent of the general U.S. population.



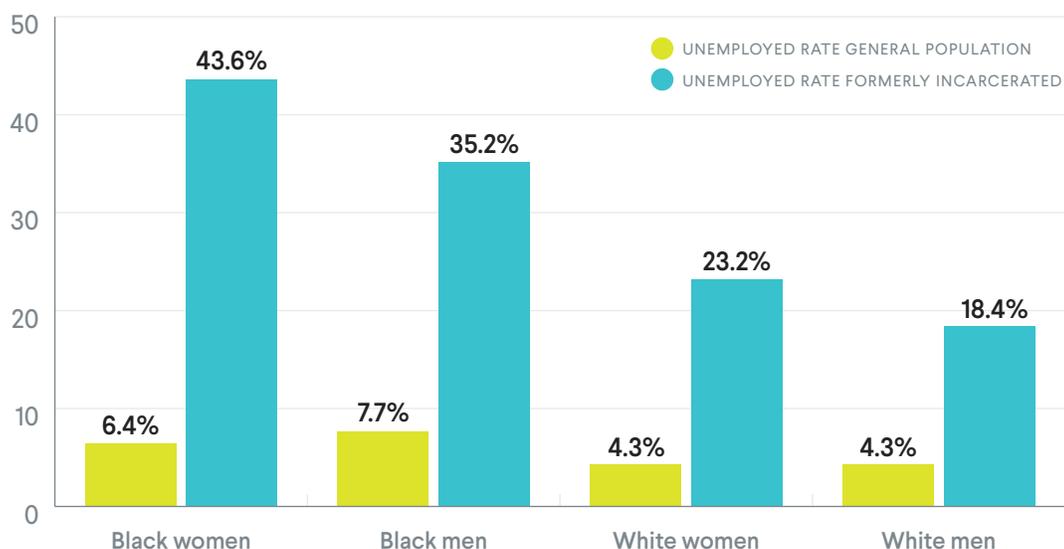
SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS BLOG, “EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN AMERICA’S PRISONS”

## What Are the Unique Challenges for Returning Citizens?

### Severe Unemployment

The unemployment rate of the formerly incarcerated is over [27 percent](#)—higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression. For Black people, especially women, previous incarceration reduces chances of employment even more than for white people (see *Figure 5*).

FIGURE 5  
**Unemployment Rates for the General Population and the Formerly Incarcerated, by Race and Gender, 2018**



Source: [Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People](#).

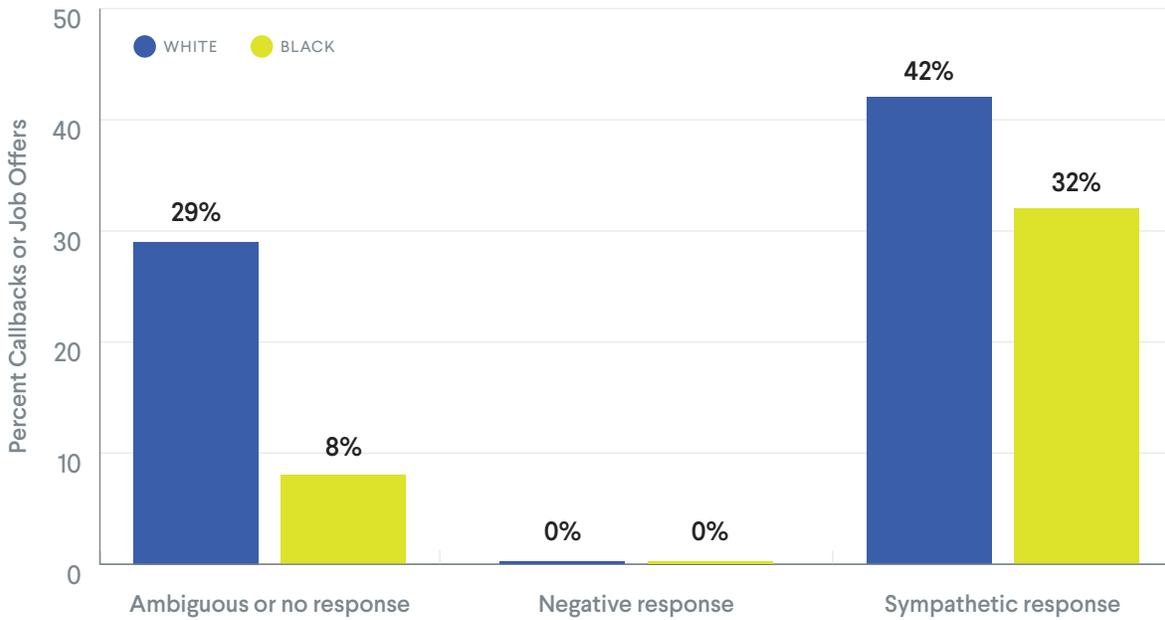
Notes: Unemployment rates of people ages 35-44 among the U.S. general public and formerly incarcerated population, by race and gender. For a comparison of unemployment rates among Hispanic women and men in the general public and formerly incarcerated population (without controlling for age), see [footnote 13](#) in *Out of Prison & Out of Work*.

Employment is further compromised by the conditions of supervision and the risks of parole revocations. The CSG Justice Center’s [Confined and Costly: How Supervision Violations Are Filling Prisons and Burdening Budgets](#) revealed a striking 45 percent of state prison admissions nationwide occur from supervision violations, such as missed appointments, rather than criminal offenses. In 20 states, more than half of admissions were from these violations, and on any given day, nearly 280,000 people in state prisons—almost 1 in 4—are confined for this reason. This costs states more than \$9 billion annually.

### Exacerbated Labor Market Racism

Figure 6 also reveals the racism that is a labor market [constant](#), and the ways having a criminal record exacerbates it. Employment prospects for Black applicants with records are [much lower](#) than for white applicants with records. Even white applicants who receive an ambiguous response or no response from an employer to their criminal record background were roughly three times (29 percent) more likely to receive a callback or job offer relative to Black applicants (8 percent) who have similar encounters.

FIGURE 6  
The Likelihood of a Callback or Job Offer, by Race and Interaction Type



Source: [Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records](#).

### Barriers to Access in Training, Licensure, and Treatment

While people with and without records have the same needs for education and training to fulfill their aspirations and potential, there are multiple, intersecting barriers that make accessing the postsecondary credentials required for economic mobility a steep climb for returning citizens:

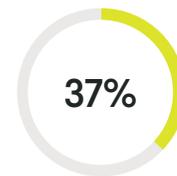
- While there is a diversity of skills and educational attainment among people with records, on [average](#), the incarcerated population has lower literacy and numeracy scores than the general U.S. adult population.
- [Prisons offer few postsecondary education and training programs](#); existing programs rarely equip people with high-demand occupational credentials, and they're not connected to the postsecondary education and workforce systems that could provide them. [Women's prisons offer even fewer options](#) and they're less relevant to the labor market.

- People reentering the community face acute financial pressures, creating a high opportunity cost for investing in the tuition and training that leads to sustainable, family-supporting careers.
- Thousands of policy barriers prevent or make it incredibly difficult for people with records to enroll in postsecondary education or access financial aid. Licensing barriers in many states bar people with records from being licensed in certain high-demand industries or occupations, which also means they are not being trained in programs leading to those careers.
- With the overreliance on incarceration and policing as a response to drug use and mental health in America, many people who are incarcerated have substance abuse and mental health disorders. [Researchers](#) estimate that more than 60 percent of the prison population has an active substance use disorder or was incarcerated for a crime involving drug or alcohol abuse. [In addition](#), 37 percent of people in state and federal prisons and 44 percent in the nation’s county jails have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Given the dearth of treatment options in corrections facilities and in communities, returning citizens will carry these conditions with them, which can compromise participation in education and training programs and employment.

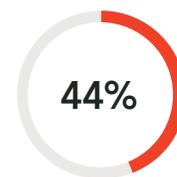
While these barriers are well documented, what is less noted is that each of the 600,000 people has a complex story, filled with both trials and triumphs, and the capacity for transformation. When we listen to the [voices of reentry](#), there is an underreported reality: people who have served prison sentences have the capacity and talent to overcome these barriers—and remove them for others—when they are given [structured supports](#) to do so.



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44%  
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# Workforce Development for Returning Citizens: Transitional Jobs as Foundations

The dominant approach to workforce development for the formerly incarcerated has been focused on “rapid attachment” to the labor market. Transitional jobs are generally short-term work experiences, paid through government subsidies, to help people gain the basic skills and work history they need to get full-time unsubsidized jobs. Intended to be a first step to permanent employment and economic opportunity, these strong programs for the reentry population provide temporary subsidized jobs, individualized support services, case management, and job placement to help program participants secure an unsubsidized job. While not all transitional jobs programs are equally effective, research has found that completing high-quality transitional jobs programs helps reduce recidivism, because employment is a key factor in preventing people from being rearrested.

Unfortunately, even the strongest transitional jobs programs are not sufficient to create pathways to economic advancement for people who have served prison sentences. Instead of serving as a first step on a career pathway, these jobs too often end up as a plateau. People are typically placed into high-demand retail or maintenance jobs in entry-level positions that do not lead to career advancement. They’re what JFF and Burning Glass Technologies call “static” jobs (see box [“When Is a Job Just a Job—and When Can It Launch a Career?”](#)). This placement approach not only reduces a returning citizen’s opportunities for economic advancement, it also perpetuates existing occupational segregation in the labor market. The disproportionately Black and Latinx reentry population is placed into occupations that are already overrepresented with people of color, where wage disparities are [exacerbated](#), and the structural racism creates even [more challenges for getting ahead](#), especially for Black workers.

## When Is a Job Just a Job—and When Can It Launch a Career?

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Getting a job is essential, but not all jobs are created equal. An [analysis](#) of millions of resumes by JFF and Burning Glass Technologies showed how different jobs impact career advancement. This research identified three types of jobs in the labor market, categorized by their potential to help people build a career.

- Static jobs are typically low-paying jobs that have few options for advancement to higher-wage positions.
- Lifetime jobs are careers that offer living wages and long-term stability but do not lead to higher-level positions.
- Springboard jobs lead to career advancement through promotion to jobs with greater responsibility and pay within an industry.

It is critical to keep this framework in the foreground of what we call “reentry education.” Static jobs are often the first placement for returning citizens, and too often people do not advance, meaning these placements perpetuate the existing racial segregation in the labor market. Instead, these jobs must be treated as the first stages of a trajectory for returning citizens on a path to career advancement.

While transitional jobs are a foundational first-step-to-employment strategy, it is time to acknowledge that we need to widen the workforce development lens for people who have been incarcerated to ensure access to education and training. People emerging from incarceration ultimately need careers with the potential for economic advancement, so they can support themselves and their families for the rest of their lives.

“You shouldn’t spend a lifetime just getting by,” says Ken Oliver, director of business development for Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs (CROP). “We need more programs that get people ready for good jobs.”

## A Broader and Better Approach

Reentry is a challenging personal experience that is complicated by structural barriers and systemic inequities. It disproportionately affects Black and Latinx Americans, and often traps them into a cycle where the best-case scenario is underemployment, and the worst-case scenario is returning to prison. The barriers are even more stark and unique for those disadvantaged at the intersection of racism and criminalization. Even with postsecondary credentials, the collateral consequences of a conviction and the structural and systemic racism in our country constrict opportunities to education, employment, housing, health care, voting, and civic participation.

A broader and better workforce development response needs to address both these individual and structural challenges, helping people move beyond entry-level static jobs, access a continuum of education and training, and launch sustainable careers.

Drawing on best practices in workforce development programming, a robust and equitable workforce ecosystem to help people beat the odds for recidivism and economic advancement should include:

- Transitional education and training to support stabilization and prepare for rapid attachment to the labor market, as well as coaching to develop a clear, feasible plan for moving from transitional jobs to permanent full-time employment and then to higher-wage jobs with potential for career advancement.
- Education and training to position people who have been incarcerated with skills and postsecondary credentials that equip individuals for jobs that pay a living wage and offer career advancement potential.
- Paid work-based learning opportunities that enable people who have been incarcerated to earn while learning on the job to demonstrate competencies in multiple industries.

- Comprehensive and structured support services—including financial assistance—to enhance people’s resilience as they work toward securing self-sustaining employment while navigating the maze of structural bias and institutional barriers facing people who have been incarcerated.

We need to also ensure that this ecosystem disrupts the currently predictable racial inequity in our systems. We need to be intentional about doing the following:

- Change the narratives about people with criminal records and their capacity for contributing to the economy and society.
- Hold workforce system stakeholders accountable for equity in practice and outcomes.
- Mitigate collateral consequences that emphasize criminal status over competency and policies that criminalize people at the intersection of race and poverty.



# Promising Practices and Building Blocks

We have the building blocks to truly maximize the benefits of an equitable economic recovery for people leaving prison and reentering the community, by disrupting structural and systemic inequities and positioning people with records to set a trajectory for economic advancement. This section describes the types of programs and strategies needed to meet the unique needs of people with criminal records. Below, we focus on pivotal strategies that need to be present in the local workforce ecosystem and share examples that illustrate how making these programs accessible to returning citizens and people with records will enable them to move from transitional jobs to springboard and lifetime jobs. We focus on the essential racial equity approaches in the following section, “Achieving an Equitable Ecosystem.”

## Transitional Jobs

As noted, transitional jobs are temporary, subsidized work experiences intended to prepare people with little work history to connect quickly to permanent full-time employment. High-quality transitional jobs programs that are designed to meet the unique needs of the people who have been incarcerated reentry population can play a key role in [improving](#) individual economic trajectories.

The strongest transitional jobs programs for people reentering the community combine in-demand skills training with case management to help individuals quickly stabilize and connect to full-time work.

### PROMISING PRACTICES

## The STRIVE Baltimore Program at the Center for Urban Families

[Center for Urban Families \(CFUF\)](#), through their STRIVE Baltimore program, provides an intensive, three-week employment readiness program that serves as a transitional program primarily for Black and Latinx residents in the local Baltimore community. In addition to readiness training and job placement, CFUF builds in case management that is customized to meet short- and long-term needs, their signature Baltimore Responsible Fatherhood Services to support family stability, and job retention supports to help workers navigate their workplace environment.

Program components include:

- short-term, intensive skill building for immediately available jobs
- employability skills training beneficial in all work settings
- paid temporary work
- support services, such as housing assistance and transportation stipends
- case management, including individualized counseling and career advising
- coaching to support full-time job placement

Some programs provide continued supports for alumni after they've secured full-time unsubsidized work, and these are often essential in helping returning citizens succeed in the critical first year following their release.



## Center for Employment Opportunities (national)

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The [Center for Employment Opportunities](#) (CEO) is not only the country's largest reentry employment provider, it's also one of the country's most successful transitional job programs. As validated through [multiple high-quality evaluations](#), CEO reduces recidivism and promotes long-term employment, while providing individuals with the ongoing support they need to achieve social and economic mobility in a way that aligns with their goals.

CEO's four-phase model begins with a one-week Pathway to Employment job-readiness class that explores positive cognitive change and workplace practices necessary for employment success. At the end of the week, each graduate receives a pair of steel-toe boots and a CEO ID, so they can begin work immediately on one of CEO's transitional work crews doing indoor and outdoor maintenance. Participants earn daily pay and receive daily feedback as they work up to four days a week. Each receives on-the-job coaching to reinforce essential skills like timeliness and teamwork. They also meet weekly with their job coach to create a resume, participate in mock interviews, and learn how to access free in-demand credential training.

Once ready, participants work with a business account manager, who refers them to CEO's network of employer partners for interviews based on employer needs and the participant's skills and interests. Most spend two to four months on a CEO work crew before securing full-time unsubsidized employment. CEO retention services works with each participant for up to one more year providing customized support services, including workplace counseling, crisis management, career planning, and monthly bonuses to help build a long-term connection to the labor force.

## Career Pathways

Career pathways have become a foundational strategy for helping people gain the postsecondary credentials they need to achieve economic advancement in a chosen field. Models vary in design to serve a range of populations. But generally, career pathways are efforts to build more [“coherent and easily navigable”](#) systems of education and training—including structured supports—that lead to high-value occupational credentials, employment, and opportunities for advancement and further education. Research into career pathways compiled by JFF and our partners in education and workforce development identifies the following core features:

- A well-articulated sequence of educational programs that lead to increasingly advanced industry-recognized credentials, such as short-term certificates and postsecondary degrees.
- Integrated education and training strategies, which contextualize academic skill building within technical occupational training. Integrated approaches have been proven to [maximize the impact](#) of education programs, resulting in more credentials earned and accelerating time to completion.
- Accessible and easy-to-navigate entry and exit points that enable individuals to earn credentials that stack toward more advanced credentials. Off-ramps should be available at points in the pathway that are likely to bring increased earning power or advance career opportunities.

### PROMISING PRACTICES

## Central Iowans Returning Citizens Achieve, Central Iowa Works

Central Iowa Works launched the [Central Iowans Returning Citizens Achieve \(CIRCA\)](#) program in 2018 at two prisons and two work release centers in Central Iowa. The program provides education and training that leads to industry-recognized certifications in industries such as construction, retail and hospitality, transportation, distribution, and logistics. CIRCA provides complete wrap-around services during and up to one year after participants complete the program. One participant in the construction program was able to secure a job paying \$9 per hour on release; two months later, working with his CIRCA case manager, he transitioned into a full-time construction job with benefits, earning \$17 per hour.

- Connection to local high-demand, high-growth industries and occupations, as established through labor market analysis and employer engagement.
- Support services that promote retention and credential completion, including academic and career guidance, tutoring, childcare, transportation, and financial assistance.

In the context of reentry education, people experience improved outcomes when high-quality career pathways begin during incarceration and connect directly to further education or employment following release.



## **Barton Community College (Kansas)**

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Barton Community College in Kansas has developed full career pathways programs in eight technical areas for over 200 men incarcerated at correctional facilities in Ellsworth and Larned. A national model, Building Academic Skills in Corrections Settings (BASICS), engages people who are within 24 months of release and the goal is successful reentry. It provides career exploration and advising to enable individuals to identify a career they'd like to pursue. Technical education options include carpentry, plumbing, welding, occupational safety and health, introductory craft skills, and computer skills.

With grant support and technical assistance through the federal Improved Reentry Education initiative, Barton has woven integrated education and training into its Ellsworth programming. This effort, known as Accelerating Opportunity Kansas, combines basic skills instruction with technical training to accelerate progress toward earning stackable industry-recognized credentials. Students released from Ellsworth who stay in the Barton area can make a seamless transition to the college: credits transfer, scholarships cover tuition, and an advisor helps navigate the campus.

However, it's more common that people leaving rural prisons head for nearby urban centers. Barton and corrections facility staff work hard to make sure that these moves don't derail the effort that men have put into their education and training while incarcerated. The staff work closely to leverage job placement connections to employers and organizations providing social supports in Wichita and Topeka. "They will be our neighbors, they will pay taxes like we do," says Jane Howard, who founded Barton's prison education programs. "It's in everyone's interest to make sure they're equipped for life on the outside."

## Work-Based Learning

[Work-based learning](#), an approach to training in which individuals complete meaningful tasks in a workplace and gain hands-on skills and knowledge, is an essential part of high-quality career preparation. It's critically important for people who are reentering the community following prison sentences who had little work experience before—or while—they were incarcerated. Work-based learning offers a progression from career exposure to career experience, including on-the-job training programs and apprenticeships. Work-based learning can be a feature of a career pathway program, such as when a community college integrates internships into its welding program. It can also be a distinct pathway to lifetime or springboard jobs through models like pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and [social enterprises](#).

### *Social Enterprise*

Social enterprises solve problems through a market-driven approach. Through social enterprises, community-based organizations provide meaningful, paid employment training in an environment that enhances participants' leadership and resiliency while also providing wraparound supports that benefit individuals, and providing a product or service that benefits the community. Workforce development that helps people overcome significant barriers to mainstream employment is a common social enterprise target.

#### PROMISING PRACTICES

### **Safer Social Enterprises, Safer Foundation (Chicago)**

[Safer Foundation](#), a Chicago-based nonprofit, has launched several [Safer Social Enterprises](#), including the Reconstruction Technology Partners (RTP). Established in 2017, RTP provides case management, construction training, work experience, and industry and business knowledge towards accredited registered apprenticeships in construction, and prepares workers for entry-level employment with opportunities to move up to higher levels within the company. Over the last four years, Safer Social Enterprises hired over 70 clients and paid \$2.8 million in wages, awarded \$1.5 million in contracts to Black and Latinx subcontractors, renovated Safer's Chicago offices, and remodeled multiple properties throughout Chicago.

## **Full Circle Auto Repair & Training Center, Vehicles for Change (Maryland)**

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[Vehicles for Change](#) (VFC) started as an organization to repair and sell low-cost cars to people from low-income households in the neighborhood of Halethorpe, Maryland, part of Baltimore County. Years later, the program's success led to a problem: the local auto shops repairing its cars couldn't keep up with the demand. VFC decided to train its own technicians; the organization acquired a 33,000-square-foot building and launched a social enterprise, the [Full Circle Auto Repair and Training Center](#).

Full Circle trains adults facing multiple barriers to employment—including many who were incarcerated—to become Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certified mechanics. The paid internship starts with a two-week trial period: participants determine if they are interested in an automotive career and instructors help ensure the program is a good match. The dropout rate is less than 2 percent. The program features work-based learning through on-the-job training with certified master mechanics. Interns are also in class every day to study and prepare for the 10 ASE certifications. Having a personal support system is critical and each intern is paired with a mentor, who helps them obtain a driver's license, build interpersonal skills, and meet housing needs. After completing the program, each graduate gets two years of ongoing support.

Graduates have a 100-percent job placement rate as auto technicians and diesel mechanics in dealerships, national chains, and independent auto repair shops, with a starting annual salary of around \$35,000. Only about 2 percent of interns have returned to prison. Some start their own garages and hire VFC alumni.

## *Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship*

[Apprenticeship programs](#) are, generally speaking, employer-driven models that couple formal instruction with paid on-the-job training to build industry-certified skills and competencies. [Pre-apprenticeship](#) programs build apprenticeship readiness with hands-on learning, support services, and case management, and provide placement into an apprenticeship. Both have long been pathways to middle-skill jobs in industries like [manufacturing](#) and construction. [Impressive outcomes](#)—for workers and employers—have inspired employers to look to apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship to expand talent pipelines in new industries, such as [wireless infrastructure](#) and [cybersecurity](#). These models also have become a vehicle for [promoting diversity](#), [racial equity](#), and [gender equity](#)—and for including [people who have been incarcerated](#).

### PROMISING PRACTICES

#### **Project JumpStart, Job Opportunities Task Force (Baltimore)**

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The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) partners with the Baltimore chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors to run [Project JumpStart](#), a 14-week, 87-hour construction training program for Baltimore residents. Experienced teachers prepare students for success in the construction trades with an overview of entry-level plumbing, carpentry, and electrical skills. Students also receive essential safety training, financial coaching, a weekly stipend, and driver's education. More than 70 percent of students are placed in careers that lead to high wages and apprenticeships.

## **Apprenticeship Readiness Programs, North America's Building Trades Unions (national)**

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North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU) developed Apprenticeship Readiness Programs (ARPs) to increase the diversity of candidates joining Registered Apprenticeships in the building trades. The 180 ARPs across the United States have been implemented by local trades councils in partnership with workforce investment boards, community-based organizations, and education providers. More than 10,000 apprentices have graduated so far, with over 3,000 graduating in 2021 alone. According to NABTU, approximately 70 percent of graduates are people of color. ARPs have also become a pathway to lifetime jobs for people with criminal records.

Many communities establish project labor agreements for public construction projects with hiring requirements that include people who have been incarcerated or have criminal records, says Tom Kriger, NABTU's director of research and education. NABTU and local trades councils also partner with multiple state corrections systems, in California, Connecticut, and Nevada, among others, to turn outdated vocational programs into ARPs that are connected to occupations in the state's high-growth industries.

For example, the California State Building Trades Councils are working with the state's department of corrections and rehabilitation to train 170 trainers to deliver the multi-craft core (MC3) curriculum in their prisons, beginning with San Quentin and Folsom. The California building trades councils and NABTU are working through the California Prisons Industries Authority to sponsor the MC3 programming in Folsom's women's facility. Local building trades councils have also developed ARPs that engage people with records. The workforce system has taken advantage of the building boom in southern California to engage with programs like [HireLAX](#), [Flintridge Center](#), and [WINTER](#)'s all-female ARP.

## Strong and Structured Support Services

People with criminal records, especially those returning from incarceration, face a host of challenges in reestablishing themselves in their communities, as noted above. Individuals need to stabilize themselves and their families, build resilience to address past or ongoing trauma, handle legal issues, navigate education and workforce systems, and persist in training programs. Workforce development programs recognize these needs and the most effective ones have integrated strong and structured support services that complement skills training to promote successful reentry and career advancement.

### PROMISING PRACTICES

#### **Cabrini Green Legal Aid (Chicago)**

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A critical service often overlooked in the workforce development context is legal assistance. [Cabrini Green Legal Aid](#) (CGLA) bridges this gap: their services promote workforce development outcomes through legal aid and criminal defense on matters including criminal record expungement, sealing, and clemency. CGLA partners with workforce development organizations to support clients by removing the barriers and collateral consequences that limit employment opportunities despite the training and credentials that they earn. CGLA support also extends beyond legal services to individual clients through advocacy and legislation to mitigate the impact of criminal records on employment opportunities.

## Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs (California)

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[Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs](#) (CROP) was founded for men in prison by men in prison to “transform the culture into something truly restorative.” While the leaders were incarcerated within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, they trained hundreds of people in personal leadership development and created a substance-abuse support program—inviting men to support the best in each other in an environment designed to bring out the worst. These men even reached outside of prison to [cover tuition](#) for a young man when both of his parents got sick and lost their jobs. When the leadership team was released from prison, they used their experiences and expertise to develop a blueprint for successful reentry, including building the skills for employment in the local labor market of Silicon Valley.

CROP’s training programs set people up for technology jobs that pay a living wage while the organization pushes for equity in the tech industry. Strong and structured supports build the foundation for its “ready for life” approach. CROP participants transition immediately from prison into full-time housing. Each participant receives individual coaching, counseling, and training in leadership, financial literacy, and digital literacy. CROP also encourages community service as a part of each participant’s personal development. To ensure that program graduates avoid the Bay Area’s crisis of homelessness, CROP works with a network of property management companies to help them secure housing by covering the cost of the first and last month’s rent.

When Emmanuel Martinez was released from prison in 2020, after five years, he was ready to make a clean start. But the work he found—washing dishes and working in a food truck—made him feel “held down” by his record and like he was “just getting by” financially. [FreeWorld](#), a nonprofit founded by returning citizens to help others find work after incarceration, changed his path, thanks to the comprehensive supports, training, and career pathways programs it offers. Martinez credits it with making his “ideas, thoughts, and goals into reality.”

FreeWorld’s founder, Jason Wang, was previously incarcerated himself, and he understands what it takes to move from prison to well-paying jobs. The entirely online platform enables FreeWorld to offer supports to returning citizens all over the country and has been a proof point for high-touch supports and case management in a forced remote environment. FreeWorld offers comprehensive, customized supports to help participants obtain identification, find housing, and secure transportation and any other supports that will facilitate their entry into employment. Participants then start a 45-day education program that includes an online curriculum, tutoring to pass the permit test, and in-person trucking school. Participants also receive one-on-one tutoring, daily check-ins with the FreeWorld team, and peer support through the organization’s Slack channel. FreeWorld pays participants a \$2,000 stipend; Martinez calls the stipend a “lifeline.”

Participants are immediately placed in a job after completing trucking school. Graduates average between \$50,000 and \$80,000 a year in their first three years of work as truck drivers. FreeWorld works to position graduates for the more favorable local, instead of long-haul, segment of the industry. Additionally, FreeWorld provides support services to participants for three years after they graduate, to support growth, including career advancement and wealth management in an effort to end generational poverty. After the three-year period, graduates earning more than \$3,500 per month participate in an income-sharing program, donating 10 percent of their monthly income back to FreeWorld for the next three years, so others can attend the program.

After completing the program, Martinez weighed multiple offers and selected a Houston-based trucking position, full time, with J.A.M.S. Trucking. He feels “blessed” to be in Houston: “because hardly anyone can get a local job fresh out of school.” The job also pays “enough to take care of myself and take care of my kids.” And FreeWorld provides financial planning and investment counseling so people can position themselves for long-term investments, like buying a house or starting a business. He is also proud to be able to support others through the income share agreement. “Jason, Shawn and O’Neal helped me change my life,” Martinez says of FreeWorld’s program managers. “And I want to help others.”

# Achieving an Equitable Ecosystem

The workforce development ecosystem operates within the context of the nation's enduring legacy of systemic racial inequities. Education and workforce systems predictably underperform for [Black](#) and [Latinx Americans](#), particularly at higher levels of education and training. Racial discrimination is also a constant in the labor market. On average, people of color are [less likely to be hired](#), and [earn less than their white peers](#). Even well-credentialed [Black](#) and Latinx workers [are disadvantaged in the labor market](#). As Tameshia Bridges Mansfield, vice president for workforce innovation for JFF, says: “We can't only have a ‘skills’ conversation when we are talking about achieving equity.”

People with a criminal record already face significant barriers to employment: on [average](#), a state has 56 occupational and 43 business licensing laws that prohibit hiring people with records. Racial inequities only compound the barriers faced by formerly incarcerated Black and Latinx workers. [Research](#) has found that Black and Latinx workers with records are less likely to be hired than white workers with records; in fact, white workers with records are more likely to get a callback than Black workers without records. This research suggests that racism trumps criminal records. Gender discrimination also intersects with race and criminal record bias. Women face a [unique disadvantage](#); according to the Women's Prison Association, reentry interventions are primarily designed for men.

Education and workforce practitioners designing high-quality education and training programs, like those highlighted in our promising practices, must go beyond skill development and credentialing in order to promote full economic advancement for the returning citizens who are disproportionately Black and Latinx. They must also disrupt systemic racial inequities—changing the destructive narratives about people who have been incarcerated, holding workforce system stakeholders accountable for equity, and mitigating the collateral consequences of convictions.

## **Change the Narrative About People Who Have Been Incarcerated**

The dominant American narrative promotes a stereotype of people who have been incarcerated as lazy, irresponsible, and dangerous—a bias informed by racist tropes about Black people, and Black men in particular. This ignorance obscures the structural barriers and perpetuates the myth that reentry challenges are the result of personal failure. While it is [estimated](#) that the number of people with criminal records is equal to the number of four-year college graduates, this population is relatively invisible in U.S. society; their experiences, especially related to reentering the community after incarceration, are not well understood.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, says an effort to [“get proximate”](#)—to get to know the person and understand their experience—is critical to changing the perceptions and ultimately changing the stories that are told and believed about people with records. Research bears this out. A [recent survey](#) of business leaders, HR professionals, and managers demonstrated how the experience of working directly with people with records countered existing biases. Over 80 percent of respondents reported that the workers with criminal records performed their jobs the same or better than people without criminal records and the quality of workers with and without criminal records is the same.

As direct experiences close the gap between perception and reality, it is important for employers and all stakeholders who work with returning citizens to promote the leadership and contributions that they make in an effort to counter negative perceptions and narratives. Slack, for example, encourages employees to form mentoring partnerships with [formerly incarcerated workers training for technology careers through its Next Chapter program](#). Reality regularly disproves the negatively charged narratives about people with records; the corporations and workers involved in such efforts need to be intentional about amplifying the new asset-based narrative positioning them as accomplished students, strong workers, and leaders in the community.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

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[Central Iowa Works](#) (CIW) runs a reentry simulation for workforce stakeholders to make the structural barriers explicit. Building on a program created by the U.S. Attorney’s office in Atlanta, CIW offers employers a simulation of a month in the life of an individual returning from incarceration. Participants are assigned the role of a person who was recently released from prison and who must achieve a set of goals, such as paying rent, buying groceries, finding a job, and getting to work, while encountering common barriers, such as the lack of transportation in rural communities. The simulation allows employer participants to gain insight into the many hurdles individuals can face as they try to reintegrate into communities and obtain employment. Judges have also found the simulation useful in gaining a greater understanding of how the requirements they might impose can have day-to-day implications. People “go into the simulation with one perspective,” says Amber Ramirez, CIW’s director, “and come out of it with another.”

## **Hold Workforce System Stakeholders Accountable for Equity**

Practitioners also have to hold stakeholders accountable when it comes to promoting equitable practices, and striving for effective education and employment outcomes. In our current construct of workforce development, employers are often deified, with a system that encourages workers to train to meet employer needs, but does not encourage employers to reciprocate. The pandemic put this disparity on display, with essential workers risking COVID exposure without receiving PPE, overtime pay, or paid sick leave. Outside of these pandemic-specific risks, workplace discrimination—by race, gender, and other characteristics—still exists and makes it difficult for people to thrive in their workplace.

While practitioners may feel compelled to partner with any employer that is willing to hire people with criminal records, hiring alone is not enough; employers must do the work to create equitable and inclusive workplaces that enable people to advance and thrive.

### **PROMISING PRACTICES**

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California’s CROP recognizes that employer partners are committed to fair chance hiring but may not have experience moving beyond the hiring process. CROP developed an employer “bootcamp” for HR professionals and executives to provide strategic advice and training to both implement fair chance hiring, and create a workplace culture where people with records can thrive.

Center for Urban Families in Baltimore works closely with employers in the construction industry to design transitional jobs programs that equip people for entry-level positions. It requires their employer partners to show a commitment to workplace equity: employer partners have strong DEI practices and demonstrated commitment to ongoing training and advancement for people to move from static to springboard or lifetime jobs in the construction industry.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

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In addition to providing direct workforce services and supports, Chicago-based Safer Foundation advocates extensively for people reentering the community after prison, uses data to inform conversations, and develops coalitions to help remove barriers. Health care is a high-demand industry, yet many occupations are not accessible to people with records because of policies preventing licensure, or employer bias. To expand fair chance hiring, Safer worked with the Illinois Department of Public Health to support legislation that now allows workforce intermediaries and pro-bono legal organizations to kick-start the process of obtaining waivers that permit work in the health care industry. By initiating early background checks, people with records can more quickly be added to the health care worker registry, and ultimately find employment in health care.

Over the last five years, Safer Foundation also has worked systematically and strategically to educate Chicago-area health care employers about fair chance hiring practices. Through Safer's Demand Skills Collaborative Initiative, an employer-driven pipeline approach to workforce development, and its policy and advocacy efforts, Safer has provided employers with workforce services and technical assistance, helping to open job opportunities for Safer participants at around 60 area health care employers, including four major health care systems. This has resulted in over 230 people with criminal records being hired to date.

In Maryland, for 25 years, JOTF has been a leading force to advocate for policies that eliminate educational and employment barriers and increase access to job opportunities and increased wages. This includes "Ban the Box" legislation to eliminate the arrest and conviction question on initial college admission and job applications, expanding criminal record expungement, and expanding access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other public benefits for formerly incarcerated persons. During Maryland's 2021 legislative session, JOTF and partners supported legislation to reduce the reliance on educational credentialing in hiring that can serve as a barrier to skilled workers without high levels of educational attainment (SB191), to eliminate driver's license suspension as a consequence of child support debt (HB580/SB402), and to prohibit incarceration for uninsured motorists who can't afford car insurance (HB699). JOTF also supported legislation to increase diminution credits to reduce sentences for incarcerated people who obtain educational or vocational training and credentialing, which passed in 2021 and is now law (HB89/SB397).

CROP [co-sponsored the Reentry Housing and Workforce Development legislation](#) (AB328), which reallocates 80 percent of the estimated cost savings from the anticipated prison closures to support organizations that providing housing and workforce development services to people who were incarcerated. There is a requirement that the community-based organizations have people who have been incarcerated on their board and in executive leadership in order to be recipients of [AB328](#) funds. CROP was recently awarded funding under this legislation to support its programming. This policy reinforces the adage that people closest to the problem are also closest to the solution.

## Mitigate the Collateral Consequences of a Conviction

[Theresa Hodge](#) had a bachelor's degree when she left prison and was able to start her own business. Still, the opening line of her [TEDxTalk](#) was: "We have made coming home from prison entirely too hard." As noted above, there are thousands of collateral consequences of a conviction that emphasize criminal status over competency and policies that criminalize people at the intersection of race and poverty. Postsecondary institutions and most private employers require conviction disclosure as part of applications; this limits access or creates a chilling effect that keeps people from even applying. These practices put criminal status ahead of competencies and make credentialing—in theory, a cornerstone of equitable economic advancement—moot. Workforce stakeholders must disrupt these practices and policies if they are committed to creating opportunities for people with records.



# Recommendations for Progress and Change

Moving from incarceration to careers is a daunting challenge for both individuals and mobility systems. We need to create pathways for the individuals who have served time in prison and redesign the systems that should be (but are not yet) able to set the trajectory for economic advancement for people reentering the community. The examples of promising practices highlighted in this report show that we have the building blocks to widen the workforce development lens and ensure there is access to programming that interrupts the recidivism cycle and promotes economic advancement. What will it take to develop a connected, scalable workforce development ecosystem that disrupts current inequities? We recommend the following action steps for practitioners, policymakers, employers, and funders:

**1 | Ensure that people who have experienced the justice system—and specifically, incarceration—are core stakeholders in all aspects of workforce redesign efforts.**

Those most impacted by the problem are closest to the solutions. We see evidence of their success around the country: people who have been incarcerated and others impacted by the consequences of a criminal record are shaping solutions, nationally and in their communities, that create conditions for economic advancement. Leaders impacted by the system are developing [comprehensive programs](#) that equip people for career advancement, leading [policy campaigns](#) for state postsecondary systems to “ban the box” in college applications, promoting [expungement so people have a “clean slate”](#) when pursuing opportunities, and developing technology-based [platforms](#) for people to search for fair chance employers. Safer has also built a reentry network called the Illinois Alliance for Reentry and Justice which brings directly impacted individuals,

advocates, and service providers together to remake the reentry and criminal legal system through [best practices](#) that create alternatives to incarceration, reduce recidivism, and end mass incarceration.

**2 | Establish cross-sector collaboration to ensure policies, resources, and best practices for talent development are aligned across the systems responsible for providing education and training for people with records.** Multiple systems—including corrections, postsecondary education, workforce development, and human services —provide education and training and social supports for people reentering the community. But the sectors typically operate in isolation, and standards of practices are not aligned with what we know works for economic advancement. To meet the scale of the demand, these systems need to align their resources, policies, and best practices to ensure the integrated pathways for returning citizens have shared standards and the resources and policy conditions for sustainability. For example, the leaders of Barton’s BASICS program work in collaboration with community college leadership, wardens at the Ellsworth and Larned facilities, and the Kansas Department of Corrections to align resources to offer the programming at the facility. Pathways are selected based on labor market analysis from the workforce sector and confirmed with local employers. The same level of collaboration that drives the larger workforce system is brought together to ensure high-quality opportunities for participants in the BASICS career pathway continuum.

**3 | Integrate evidence-based models into a transparent, navigable, and equitable workforce development ecosystem that positions people who have been incarcerated for economic advancement.** Most communities have programs and services for returning citizens. Unfortunately, these are usually siloed, making it challenging for individuals to identify which programs meet their needs, navigate the transitions

between programs to secure necessary supports, or scaffold education and training as they learn and advance. This ecosystem should begin in corrections. We need to [develop and implement models](#) that introduce high-quality prison education and training, structure partnerships between corrections and community providers to provide a “warm handoff” from the prison gates to community-based organizations, and connect transitional jobs programs to career or work-based pathways that build on foundational training and work to position returning citizens for springboard and lifetime jobs.

There is also [an acute need for career navigation supports](#) for people trying to advance from static jobs to careers; this is even more so for adults who need to navigate collateral consequences as part of their journey. Without knowledge of the system, impacted people often aren’t aware of supports, and lack the information to chart a trajectory toward a career goal.

**4 | Ensure inclusive and equitable practices promote access, retention, and advancement in education pathways and employment.** Barriers to economic advancement for all people with criminal records are complex and occur at multiple points of a talent development pipeline: at points of access to education, points of advancement in training, and points of entry with employers. To counter this, education and training institutions and organizations need to examine and eliminate or mitigate practices that constrain access, such as questions about convictions at the application stage. [Employers must champion practices that promote access](#), as well: establish fair chance hiring as part of a DEI practice, ensure a workplace that embraces diversity and inclusion of people with records, and consider employees’ competencies and not criminal status in promotion and advancement opportunities. Where criminal status is reviewed, employers and education and training providers should consider the relevance and nature

of the offense, as well as other mitigating factors such as age and time elapsed. Stakeholders need to directly confront such structural and institutional barriers to economic advancement for people with records by ensuring individual institutions and organizations examine their practices and remove exclusionary practices.

**5 | Increase investments in pathways and practices that promote economic advancement for returning citizens and people with records.** Nearly [95 percent of people in prison](#) will ultimately be released to communities across the country, joining the millions of people with records but without incarceration history. There are simply not enough quality programs to meet the resulting demand for education and training, and programming gaps include supports designed for women or to address recidivism challenges for young adults. Getting to scale will require an increased investment from public funding and private philanthropy, and could include allocating federal or local workforce development funding to developing education and training programs for people with records. Specific resource areas, such as developing education and training programs for women, could be the focus for catalytic funding to support the design and pilot of a new program.

# Conclusion

Mass incarceration and criminalization policies have made the United States into a carceral nation, with less than five percent of the world's population and more than [one-quarter of its prisoners](#). With more than half a million people returning from incarceration each year, we must expand investments in reentry success to match the breadth and scale of the investments that support and maintain our systems of incarceration. This is not simply an ethical imperative—though the impact of incarceration extends well beyond the people with records, and has a [profound impact on millions of children](#)—but an economic one. As noted, when people with criminal records are excluded from the workforce and economy, it adds up to an estimated GDP loss of more than [\\$78 billion per year](#).

Evidence from the corporations, institutions, and practitioners supporting reentry success demonstrates the power of employment to reset the trajectory for people with records. Now we need to invest in a comprehensive workforce development approach that connects people with jobs, equips them for long-term careers, and can be replicated and widely scaled. This will require investments to scale high-quality transitional jobs programs and career pathway programs, structured supports that equip people for economic advancement, and intentional cultural shifts across industries and corporations. Public and private investments in this reimagined workforce development approach will need to be significant to have the quantity, quality, and dosage of supports needed for returning citizens to achieve economic mobility.

By any measure, though, such investments will still be far cheaper than incarceration and the costs, financial and cultural, of excluding people with records—especially the disproportionately Black and Latinx people with records—from full economic participation. To make this a reality, we need to create talent development opportunities that promote economic mobility, beyond preventing recidivism, so people with records do not merely survive in life after incarceration, but thrive.



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