

How ex-convicts should approach a job interview

May 1 2017, by Abdifatah Ali , Ann Marie Ryan , Andy Henion



Credit: Michigan State University

For the best chance of getting hired, former inmates should apologize for their criminal past to potential employers, indicates new research that comes amid the nationwide "ban-the-box" movement.

Trying to justify the crime can be an iffy strategy. And making an

excuse is probably the worst thing an ex-offender can do to try to gain a would-be employer's trust, said Michigan State University's Abdifatah Ali, lead author of the study, which appears in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

An estimated 70 million people in the United States - nearly 1 in 3 adults - have a prior arrest or conviction record.

"Apologizing for your past criminal offense seems to be the most effective strategy in reducing concerns about your underlying trustworthiness as a person of integrity," said Abdifatah, a doctoral student in psychology. He co-authored the study with Ann Marie Ryan, an MSU psychology professor who has investigated discrimination against various groups of job-seekers including women, military veterans and people with disabilities.

More than 25 states, as well as some 150 cities and counties, have banned the criminal history check box on job applications, delaying those questions until later in the hiring process - usually the interview - and potentially giving the candidate a better chance at employment, according to the National Employment Law Project. But lawmakers in some areas of the country, including Indiana and Texas, are fighting these ban-the-box efforts.

And even though ban-the-box may increase the likelihood of those with criminal records making it past the application stage, they still likely will be asked about prior offenses.

Abdifatah came up with the idea for the study while working with job candidates in Michigan who couldn't get a job because of their criminal history, even though their crimes had often occurred 10 or even 20 years prior. The state of Michigan does not have a ban-the-box law.

"The core issue that we were trying to address from a psychological perspective is how applicants with a criminal record can best present information regarding their offense," said Abdifatah. "From a counseling standpoint there aren't any evidence-based strategies of how to best present themselves in those situations."

The research involved three studies in which more than 500 participants evaluated job applications or watched a video of job interviews. Job applicants gave one of three responses to their criminal past:

Excuse (e.g., "I was convicted of aggravated assault. I was not responsible for the incident because I was at the wrong place at the wrong time").

Justification (e.g., "I was convicted of aggravated assault. I accept responsibility because I should have not been involved, but I got involved because I was trying to help a family member").

Apology (e.g., "I was convicted of aggravated assault. I should not have been involved and I understand what I did caused harm. I apologized and promised it would never happen again").

Across all three studies, providing an apology was the most successful strategy in leading evaluators to perceive the candidate as remorseful and less likely to engage in deviant behaviors at work. Justification could also be successful, although less so, Abdifatah said.

Making an excuse, on the other hand, had a negative effect on hiring decisions because it failed to lessen the threat associated with criminal identity.

Also co-authoring the study was Brent Lyons, a former MSU [doctoral student](#) who's now an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University in

Canada.

Provided by Michigan State University

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