

Job seekers face a prison credential dilemma

March 29 2022



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New research published March 11 in *Criminology* by Sadé Lindsay, sociologist in the Cornell Brooks School of Public Policy, finds that the formerly incarcerated face a "prison credential dilemma" when deciding whether to use credentials from prison education and training programs when seeking employment.

The research article, "Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't: How Formerly Incarcerated Men Navigate the Labor Market With Prison Credentials*," discusses the quandary that confronts thousands of formerly incarcerated job seekers who know little about how companies that are seeking help evaluate these credentials.

"Employers may use, or misuse, the credentials in varying ways," Lindsay said. "Some may even use the credentials to efficiently screen out formerly incarcerated applicants, thwarting their efforts to secure good jobs."

Lindsay conducted personal interviews with 50 formerly incarcerated men in Franklin County, Ohio to understand how they deal with the uncertainty this dilemma brings when searching for work.

Prison credentials—program certificates and work experiences obtained in prison—were seen as a solution to counter the negative mark of a criminal record by signaling to employers that a formerly incarcerated person was not a lawbreaker and was ready for a job. Yet, Lindsay says the efficacy of these credentials in the [labor market](#) has been highly variable across studies dating back to the 1960s.

Lindsay attributes these inconsistencies to the prison credential dilemma and found usage of these credentials vary dramatically among formerly incarcerated men as a result. In her study, participants often considered

whether they should even use their prison credentials, and if so, how to ensure that they did not merely signal negative qualities that they desired to counteract by obtaining them.

Race plays a role in the [dilemma](#). Black men are reluctant to present prison credentials because they fear being stereotyped and relegated to low-wage work due to [racial discrimination](#) and structural racism, Lindsay found. Yet, Black men are especially reliant on prison credentials to tangibly demonstrate redeemable qualities that combat these dominant [stereotypes](#).

One practical, short-term solution comes from something as simple as changing the name of the institution on the credential. All prison credentials could come from educational and vocational organizations outside of prison to ensure it is formally tied to these organizations rather than to the [prison](#) itself, Lindsay said.

More information: Sadé L. Lindsay, Damned if you do, damned if you don't: How formerly incarcerated men navigate the labor market with prison credentials*, *Criminology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12307](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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