

For job applicants with a criminal record, showcasing the right credentials can make a difference

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Employment is believed to reduce the likelihood of criminal recidivism, but a criminal record is a significant barrier to employment. People with

a criminal record are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, or to have a job that does not match their skills or interests. In a new study, researchers asked business managers to make hypothetical hiring decisions about males with a criminal conviction, changing the characteristics of the applicants to identify their effect on managers' decisions.

The study found that applicants with a criminal record were unlikely to be hired when compared with applicants without a record, but that some credentials—such as more education, certain references, and more years of experience—changed managers' decisions. In fact, some credentials, such as a recommendation by a college professor, a GED, or a [college degree](#), made the applicant with a criminal record more likely to be hired than a similar applicant without a criminal record who lacked those credentials.

The study, by researchers at the University of South Florida (USF), appears in *Criminology*.

"Having a criminal record is very costly in the [labor market](#), but this cost can be superseded by specific credentials that likely signal an applicant's reliability, which can be provided by existing programs and institutions," says Mateus Rennó Santos, assistant professor of criminology at USF, who led the study.

Using a nationwide sample of nearly 600 hiring managers in 2021, researchers catalogued responses about hypothetical hiring decisions between two male applicants for entry-level jobs. The main difference between the applicants was a prior [criminal conviction](#) for drug possession with intent to distribute. The authors randomly manipulated the education, references, wages, or experience of the applicant with the criminal record to identify which factors could offset the existence of the record in terms of the applicant's probability of being hired.

When credentials were the same, the applicant with a criminal record was consistently much less likely to be hired. However, that applicant was more likely to be hired if he had at least one year of relevant experience, a GED or college degree, or references from a former employer or a university professor. Incomplete degrees, references from criminal justice professionals (e.g., a prison reentry program supervisor, a probation or parole officer), or wage discounts did not make the applicant with the record more likely to be hired than a similar applicant without a criminal record.

With respect to experience, the study found no difference in effect on employability between experience obtained in or out of a [correctional facility](#). This suggests that there is little need to hide or gloss over jobs inside prison if a potential employer is already aware of the applicant's criminal record. In addition, increasing an [applicant's](#) experience from nothing to one year was very helpful to employability, but any increase after the first year had little benefit to being hired for an entry-level position.

The study also found that managers who had criminal records were more likely to hire applicants with records, which speaks to potential empathy in the hiring process. In addition, managers in public-facing industries, especially those serving vulnerable populations (e.g., education, health care), were less likely to select applicants with criminal records than were managers in occupations such as manufacturing and transportation.

Finally, the study investigated managers' justifications for their hiring choices, which included their desire to help people with a criminal record, their belief in redeemability, the expected benefits of hiring a candidate with better credentials, and the positive impressions signaled by certain credentials (e.g., greater commitment or skill). When deciding against the candidate with a criminal record, managers often said they wanted to minimize risk to their business, employers, or clients; worried

about having someone with a drug conviction in the workplace; or dismissed the benefits of improved credentials for their particular business.

"In mitigating the cost of a [criminal record](#) for employment, hiring managers identified several ways to boost employability, most of which take advantage of interventions already available at many correctional institutions and re-entry programs," notes Chae M. Jaynes, assistant professor of criminology at USF, who co-authored the study. "Not only can these factors be addressed individually, but they can be combined in single programs to increase the likelihood of employability for formerly incarcerated individuals."

The study's findings have practical implications, say the authors, including:

- Correctional institutions are increasingly partnering with universities to offer incarcerated people opportunities to obtain college credits; such initiatives would be most beneficial if they focused on degree completion, which can provide a clearer signal of employability.
- Professors considering becoming involved with prison education and re-entry initiatives should consider the value they can bring to the employability of individuals with criminal records, both in terms of skills and by lending their credibility through a recommendation.
- Correctional institutions and re-entry programs should ensure that incarcerated individuals are offered the opportunity to work before their entry into the labor market, advise re-entering individuals that working while incarcerated is valued [work experience](#), and discuss ways to showcase this experience on job applications.

Among the study's limitations, the authors say their findings are specific to the scenarios they established and do not necessarily generalize to complex hiring settings with multiple applicants (e.g., to females, people with records for violent crimes, managers hiring for higher-level jobs). Also, because the study was done when many employers were having difficulty finding workers, managers may have been more open to hiring people with criminal records.

"Putting our findings into practice can help justice-involved individuals in search of opportunities, as well as their communities, and the employers who are willing to hire them," suggests Danielle Thomas, a doctoral student in criminology at USF, who coauthored the study.

More information: Mateus R. Santos et al, How to overcome the cost of a criminal record for getting hired, *Criminology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12345](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12345)

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