

Study: Banning criminal conviction questions on job applications increases hiring of ex-prisoners

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Efforts to ban such questions show promise to ease re-entry into workforce for increasing number of Americans with criminal histories

Former prisoners have a better chance of getting hired if a job application doesn't include questions about criminal history, according to new employment research from Case Western Reserve University.

In fact, the practice known as "banning the box" (as in, the box job applicants are asked to check to indicate criminal convictions) increased employment of residents in high-crime U.S. neighborhoods by up to 4 percent, the study reported.

The finding has significant criminal justice and economic implications: Previous research has shown that employment significantly reduces repeat offenses and helps former prisoners establish secure housing, health insurance and other basic necessities—all of which contributes to a community's safety and stability.

"The hundreds of thousands of individuals who reenter society—and our economy—every year are a significant potential resource that is unrepresented in our workforce," said Daniel Shoag, a visiting associate professor of economics at the university's Weatherhead School of Management.

"In all likelihood, questions like 'Have you ever been convicted of a crime?' scare away some applicants who have much to offer," said Shoag, "At the same time, potential employers likely dismiss the prospects of anyone with a conviction, regardless of their skills or education."

The study's results were not all positive, though: Women—especially African-American women, who are less likely to have been convicted of crimes than [black males](#)—were hired less often in communities that "banned the box"; it's likely an increase in the hiring of black men came at the detriment of black women, according to the research.

Other findings include:

- Employment increases in communities that "banned the box" were particularly large in the [public sector](#) and in lower-wage jobs;
- Positive [employment](#) effects were seen across multiple income and skill levels, as well as in urban and suburban areas;
- "Banning the box" promoted what's known as "upskilling"—increases in education and experience requirements—as employers substitute criminal-background questions for others to determine an applicant's qualifications;
- Employers stemmed a decades-long rise in the number of background checks.

Shoag co-authored the research with Stan Veuger,

resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

As of 2018, 33 U.S. states and more than 150 cities and counties have adopted a ban-the-box or equivalent policy for public sector jobs, according to the National Employment Law Project; laws in 11 states and 17 cities require the same practice by private employers.

Many "ban-the-box" rules allow employers to do criminal-background checks later in the application process. The researchers contend this delay is better than a full-fledged ban, which may lead some employers to avoid taking any risk and result in discrimination: African-Americans and Hispanics represent a much larger share of arrestees and convicts than their share of the U.S. population.

The research comes from a chapter Shoag and Veuger co-authored in *Education for Liberation*, a new volume focusing on bi-partisan strategies for prison reform, featuring a forward by conservative politician Newt Gingrich and progressive pundit Van Jones.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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