Study finds most unemployed young men have criminal records
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More than half of unemployed American men in their 30s have a history of being arrested or convicted of a crime, a stigma that poses a barrier to them participating in the nation's labor force, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

By age 35, 64% of unemployed men have been arrested and 46% have been convicted of a crime, with the rates varying only slightly by race and ethnicity.

Researchers say the findings, published by the journal Science Advances, suggest that employment services should focus more on the special challenges facing the unemployed who have criminal history records.

"Employers need to understand that one big reason they cannot find the workers they need is too often, they exclude those who have had involvement with the criminal justice system," said Shawn Bushway, the study's lead author and a senior policy researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "Employers need to reconsider their protocols about how to respond when applicants have some type of criminal history."

While there has been much research documenting unemployment among those who have been incarcerated, the RAND study is the first to estimate the incidence of criminal histories among American men who are unemployed.

It's estimated that as many as one in three American adults have been arrested at some point in their life, a product of the nation's aggressive law enforcement practices over the past several decades.

Men are more likely than women to have a criminal history record, making it more difficult for them to secure employment. In addition, there are disproportionately high rates of criminal justice involvement for Black people, combined with persistent racism and discrimination, which may make it particularly difficult for Black job seekers to secure employment.

RAND researchers estimated the number of unemployed young men with criminal histories by using information from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997), which follows a nationally representative group of Americans over the course of their lives. Researchers examined responses from a group of about 9,000 participants who initially were recruited in 1997, and were born during the years 1980 through 1984.

The study examined the involvement of men with the criminal justice system through 2017.

For the study, being unemployed was defined as being without a job for four weeks or more during the past year. Researchers examined arrests, convictions (including guilty pleas) and incarceration that occurred after age 18, excluding traffic-related offenses.
The study found that men between the ages of 30 to 38 who were unemployed in 2017 had substantial levels of involvement with the criminal justice system. The majority had been arrested at least once, almost 40% had been convicted at least once, and more than 20% had been incarcerated at least once. The results were very similar when researchers included recently discouraged workers and those who were working fewer hours than they wanted.

Among those studied, the arrest prevalence for all Black men (both employed and unemployed) was roughly 33% higher than it was for white men at every age from 18 to 35, with some evidence that the gap widens further during their 30s. Hispanic men generally have higher rates of arrest, conviction and incarceration than white men, although the differences were not statistically significant.

However, when only considering those men who experience periods of joblessness, the study found that unemployed Black, Hispanic and white men experience similar rates of involvement with the criminal justice system throughout most of the lifecycle studied.

Researchers say the main lesson from the study is that unemployment services need to do more to help people cope with their criminal histories.

"Most government programs focus on providing the unemployed with new skills in order to get them into the workforce," said Bushway, who also is a professor at the State University of New York at Albany. "But if you only focus on skills development, you are missing a big part of the problem. The unemployment system almost never looks at the role that criminal history plays in keeping people out of the workforce."

Researchers say that efforts to bar employers from asking about criminal histories on job applications (so called "Ban-the-Box" laws) are unlikely to have a major impact on helping unemployed men with criminal records.

Employers have easy access to applicants' criminal records through commercial databases and routinely review those records as a part of background checks done before new employees are hired, even if the question is left off job applications.

Researchers say that employers need to reconsider how they view the risks posed by applicants with criminal records. New, sophisticated prediction models that seek to understand the risk of recidivism among people who apply for jobs could go a long way toward demonstrating the true relative risk of job applicants who have criminal records.

"Most employers believe that most people with criminal histories will commit offenses again," Bushway said. "But that is not the case. And the risk of reoffending drops dramatically as people spend more time free in the community without a new conviction. Employers need to adopt a more nuanced approach to the issue."


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