



Second Chance Cities

Local Efforts to Promote Re-Entry Success

By Betsy Pearl and Lea Hunter | April 19, 2018

Every year, more than 625,000 Americans are released from prison, and nearly 11 million more cycle through local jails.¹ Although their court-mandated sentences are complete, their punishment continues once they return to their communities. For formerly incarcerated individuals, a past mistake can create a lifetime of barriers to opportunity.

Nationwide, there are more than 46,000 legal sanctions that restrict the civic participation of justice-involved individuals.² The majority of these sanctions are employment-related. Nearly one-quarter of workers need a government-issued license or certification to participate in their occupation; with a criminal record, these certifications are often off-limits.³ Even in industries that do not require an occupational license, the stigma of a criminal record can close doors to economic opportunity. An estimated 9 in 10 employers use background checks in hiring decisions, and even a minor criminal record from decades in the past can disqualify a job seeker from consideration.⁴ In one survey, more than 60 percent of employers reported that they were unwilling to hire a person with a record.⁵ For the 70 million Americans with a criminal record, the impact is clear.⁶ Research shows that in the first year after leaving prison, only 55 percent of individuals report any earnings at all.⁷ The majority of those individuals reporting earnings still fall below the federal poverty line, with median income levels hovering around \$10,000 per year.⁸ With few opportunities to earn a living wage, justice-involved individuals often struggle to meet their most basic needs, such as buying food or paying rent—and that’s if they can find housing. For those with a criminal record, stable housing is often out of reach. Like employers, most landlords run background checks—and even a minor criminal history can disqualify a prospective tenant. Taken together, these barriers can turn a criminal record into a life sentence.

After decades of failed “tough on crime” policies, too many Americans are trapped in a cycle of arrest, incarceration, and economic disadvantage. The impact reaches beyond the individual, creating lasting harm for entire communities—particularly communities of color, which have been disproportionately affected by the justice system. Without meaningful opportunities to build productive lives, people are more likely to return to prison or jail, driving up crime rates and correctional costs and exacerbating inequality.

Nationwide, cities are working to interrupt this pattern by opening doors to opportunity for justice-involved residents. Mayors for Smart on Crime—a national initiative led by the Center for American Progress—has brought together 12 local leaders who are taking a smarter approach to criminal justice reform that is rooted in fairness and equity. The mayors represent cities of all sizes in different regions of the country, each with a unique local context that drives their public safety priorities. Through a range of evidence-based approaches, mayors are taking crucial steps toward ensuring that all justice-involved residents get a second chance.

A criminal record should not be a lifetime sentence

One in three Americans has a criminal record, often for minor offenses that occurred decades in the past.⁹ Any criminal history can create a lifetime of barriers to opportunity—even if the charge did not result in a conviction or if the crime is no longer considered a crime. The state of Washington, for example, voted to legalize marijuana in 2012,¹⁰ ending an era of racially skewed arrests and prosecutions for minor drug offenses.¹¹ Although marijuana possession is no longer illegal, thousands of Washington residents still carry a permanent record for old marijuana charges, impeding their chances of finding jobs, housing, and other opportunities. The consequences are felt most strongly among Washington’s black residents, who were convicted of marijuana crimes at three times the rate of their white counterparts.¹² In Seattle, Mayor Jenny Durkan is working to address the persistent harm caused by the failed and discredited policies of the war on drugs. This year, Mayor Durkan announced that Seattle will automatically vacate convictions and dismiss charges for misdemeanor marijuana possession.¹³ By giving people the clean slate they deserve—without the costly and time-intensive process of filing a court appeal—Durkan’s actions will open doors to opportunity for hundreds of Seattle residents.

Seattle is also among the more than 150 communities that have enacted “ban the box” rules to level the playing field for job applicants with criminal histories.¹⁴ Ban the box policies remove questions about criminal history from job applications and delay background checks until later in the hiring process, encouraging employers to focus on applicants’ qualifications rather than their past mistakes. By banning the box for public-sector jobs, cities are not only expanding access to employment, but they are also encouraging communities to reconsider the stereotypes and stigmas associated with a criminal record. Mayor Michael Tubbs of Stockton, California—who led the movement to ban the box during his time as a city council member—views the policy as a shift toward a culture of second chances. “This move signals to the community that we want to reconnect,” Tubbs said in a 2014 blog interview, “and that we are committed to the formerly incarcerated getting jobs so they aren’t tempted to go back to a life of crime.”¹⁵ And by embodying a culture of second chances within the city government, mayors can encourage change in all sectors of local industry. Newly elected Birmingham, Alabama, Mayor Randall Woodfin supports expanding the city’s ban the box policy to cover

private employers as well.¹⁶ And in Denver, Colorado, Mayor Michael Hancock called banning the box an opportunity for the city to “lead by example” within the community. “By removing a small check box on city job applications, we can create big opportunities for those seeking a positive future,” Hancock said. “I encourage our local businesses to follow that lead and eliminate this barrier.”¹⁷

Creating new pathways to employment

By banning the box, cities are giving all job seekers a fair shot at public employment. At the same time, cities are establishing dedicated pathways to employment for justice-involved individuals.

In Los Angeles, for example, Mayor Eric Garcetti’s Office of Reentry partnered with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to establish New Roads to Second Chances, a supportive employment program for formerly incarcerated individuals.¹⁸ Program participants are placed in transitional employment opportunities with Caltrans, while simultaneously receiving intensive case management, career-readiness workshops, job placement assistance, and other supportive services. Participants perform highway cleanup and community beautification for the duration of the program, ensuring that they are able to earn a living while they prepare for permanent careers. New Roads to Second Chances is an investment in the health and appearance of the Los Angeles community, but most importantly, it’s an investment in Angelenos who deserve a second chance. In its first nine months, New Roads served more than 260 justice-involved individuals, putting the program on track to meet its goal: to connect 1,300 formerly incarcerated individuals with employment opportunities over the course of three years.¹⁹

By expanding economic opportunity for the justice-involved, workforce development programs have been shown to reduce recidivism rates among participants. In Dayton, Ohio, for example, the Montgomery County Office of Ex-Offender Reentry launched a career preparation program that has significantly improved outcomes among participants. Program graduates have a recidivism rate of around 18 percent, compared with a countywide rate of nearly 28 percent.²⁰

Transitional employment has improved outcomes for residents of Gary, Indiana, as well. “We understand that those who have some type of criminal record face a different set of challenges when it comes to securing employment,” explained Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson in a 2015 press release.²¹ In response to these challenges, Mayor Freeman-Wilson piloted the Gary 4 Jobs program, which prepares justice-involved individuals for long-term careers in landscaping and lawn care. Participants conduct maintenance and beautification work for the city, while simultaneously receiving intensive entrepreneurship and career training. Five new small businesses have been launched with help from the Gary 4 Jobs initiative.²²

The city of Boston has also created meaningful public employment opportunities for residents with criminal records. In 2015, Mayor Martin Walsh established the Professional Pathways program, which places high-risk or justice-involved young people in paid internships with the city government.²³ Following their completion of the program, several interns have been hired into permanent positions with the city. Professional Pathways is part of Mayor Walsh's signature re-entry initiative, Operation Exit. Launched in 2014, Operation Exit is a three-week intensive training program that prepares participants for apprenticeships with trade unions.²⁴ In its first two years, Operation Exit placed more than 75 percent of participants into careers with a dozen trade unions, including carpenters, laborers, iron workers, roofers, and electricians.²⁵ All these jobs provide a starting pay above the city's living wage, with opportunities for advancement. In 2015, Boston expanded Operation Exit to include careers in culinary arts and technology, leveraging a partnership with Resilient Coders to offer courses in website design and development. Notably, 98 percent of Operation Exit graduates remain crime-free for at least two years after completing the program.²⁶ Reflecting on the impact of Operation Exit, Mayor Walsh called the program "a true example of what can be achieved when people are given second chances and opportunities for a fresh start."²⁷

Offices of re-entry

As part of his commitment to promoting successful re-entry, Mayor Walsh created the Office of Returning Citizens in 2017, modeled after similar offices in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.²⁸

In Washington, D.C., the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizens Affairs (MORCA) has supported and empowered justice-involved individuals since 2008. Under Mayor Muriel Bowser's leadership, the office helps clients create resumes, set up email accounts, submit job applications, and prepare for interviews. MORCA partners with private employers to support a job placement program, which connected more than 800 clients with unsubsidized jobs from 2011 to 2015.²⁹ MORCA also offers computer skills-building classes in partnership with Byte Back, a local nonprofit focused on technological education, and launched an entrepreneurship training program with the D.C. Department of Small and Local Business Development.³⁰ With the support of agencies across the city government, MORCA provides on-site behavioral health services, offers housing vouchers for formerly incarcerated senior citizens, and covers the cost of nondriver ID cards for re-entering residents.

MORCA's collaborative approach has yielded impressive results. In 2015, the office served 4,644 clients. With MORCA's help, 193 individuals were placed in jobs; 1,868 established their first email account; 2,000 received a nondriver ID card; 56 trained to earn a commercial driver's license; and 640 registered as D.C. voters.³¹

To reduce recidivism in Philadelphia, Mayor Jim Kenney’s Office of Reintegration Services (RISE) is taking a comprehensive approach to addressing returning citizens’ needs. Established in 2005, RISE works with local nonprofits and service providers to offer on-site GED courses, vocational training for the culinary arts, forklift certification programs, financial counseling, legal services for record expungement, and personalized case management.³²

Notably, RISE is using innovative solutions to improve service delivery for clients. Many clients, for example, face housing instability and lack reliable internet access, making it difficult to connect with their case manager on a regular basis. In response to this challenge, RISE piloted a new system that allows case managers and clients to communicate via text message. Case managers can send automated reminders about upcoming meetings and chat directly with clients. RISE staff members have found that the app has increased contact and strengthened relationships with clients, who are often more responsive via text message. Automated text reminders have boosted attendance at RISE classes by an estimated 30 percent, connecting more people with key re-entry services.³³

Reducing the criminal justice population

In addition to promoting second chances for returning citizens, Philadelphia is among the many cities working to keep residents from entering the justice system in the first place. By enacting fair laws—and enforcing them fairly—local leaders are reducing unnecessary arrests and incarceration. In 2016, Mayor Kenney signed a bill to decriminalize nuisance offenses such as disorderly conduct or obstructing traffic. Police now issue tickets for these infractions instead of criminal charges, keeping an estimated 10,000 Philadelphians from entering the criminal justice system each year. “This is being ‘Smart on Crime,’” District Attorney R. Seth Williams said of the reform. “It will prevent many Philadelphians from getting criminal records that reduce job opportunities and will allow us to focus on more serious offenders.”³⁴

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is poised to enact an ordinance that would end criminal charges for marijuana possession so that individuals pay a fine instead of serving jail time. Baton Rouge Mayor Sharon Weston Broome praised the reform as a way to address low-level drug offenses “without the stigma of prison.”³⁵ Importantly, the new penalty structure represents a significant step toward addressing the harm caused by racially skewed enforcement of drug laws.

New York City has also taken measures to recalibrate its penalties for minor offenses. Under Mayor Bill de Blasio’s leadership, the city enacted reforms that limit the use of criminal charges for infractions such as disobeying park rules and littering. The policy changes have reduced criminal summonses by 90 percent, keeping tens of thousands of New Yorkers out of the justice system each year.³⁶

New York has also invested in programs that divert individuals away from arrest and incarceration. In 2017, Mayor de Blasio announced that the city will expand on existing diversion programs by opening two drop-off centers to provide stabilizing services for individuals with mental health and substance use disorders.³⁷ Police officers will soon have the option to bring individuals to diversion centers instead of making an arrest. Each year, the centers will be able to divert an estimated 2,400 individuals away from the justice system by offering them shelter, food, and clinical services.³⁸ Such diversion programs are an important piece of the mayor's comprehensive justice reform efforts, which have led to an 18 percent reduction in the city's jail population since he took office.³⁹

Conclusion

Decades of “tough on crime” policies have created a web of barriers to employment, housing, and opportunity for justice-involved Americans. Even after individuals have served their time, U.S. society continues to treat them like criminals, turning a criminal record into a lifetime sentence. In a nation where one-third of adults have a record, the American approach to re-entry has significant implications—not just for justice-involved individuals but also for the millions of children, families, and communities that have been affected by the criminal justice system.

Nationwide, cities are leading the movement to expand opportunities for all residents. CAP's Mayors for Smart on Crime initiative brings together local leaders who are pursuing policies to dismantle barriers to successful re-entry and avoid incarceration in the first place. Through a range of smart, fair, and equitable approaches, these mayors are establishing a culture of second chances in their cities, ensuring that citizens who have served their sentences get a fair shot at better lives.

Betsy Pearl is the campaign manager for Criminal Justice Reform at the Center for American Progress. Lea Hunter is a Research Assistant for Progress 2050 and the Criminal Justice and Executive teams at the Center.

Endnotes

- 1 Peter Wagner and Wendy Sawyer, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2018" (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018), available at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018.html>.
- 2 Council of State Governments Justice Center, "National Inventory of Collateral Consequences," available at <https://nccscsgjusticecenter.org/map/> (last accessed March 2018).
- 3 Jason Furman and Laura Giuliano, "New Data Show that Roughly One-Quarter of U.S. Workers Hold an Occupational License," Obama White House Blog, June 17, 2016, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/06/17/new-data-show-roughly-one-quarter-us-workers-hold-occupational-license>.
- 4 Maurice Emsellem and Michelle Natividad Rodriguez, "Advancing a Federal Fair Chance Hiring Agenda" (New York: National Employment Law Project, 2015), available at <http://www.nelp.org/content/uploads/2015/01/Report-Federal-Fair-Chance-Hiring-Agenda.pdf>.
- 5 Harry J. Holzer, Steven Raphael, and Michael A. Stoll, "Perceived Criminality, Criminal Background Checks, and the Racial Hiring Practices Of Employers," *The Journal of Law and Economics* 49 (2) (2006): 451–480.
- 6 Anastasia Christman and Michelle Natividad Rodriguez, "Research Supports Fair Chance Policies" (New York: National Employment Law Project, 2016), available at <http://www.nelp.org/publication/research-supports-fair-chance-policies/>.
- 7 Adam Looney and Nicholas Turner, "Work and Opportunity Before and After Incarceration" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2018), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/work-and-opportunity-before-and-after-incarceration/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Christman and Natividad Rodriguez, "Research Supports Fair Chance Policies."
- 10 Aaron Smith, "Marijuana legalization passes in Colorado, Washington," CNN, November 8, 2012, available at <http://money.cnn.com/2012/11/07/news/economy/marijuana-legalization-washington-colorado/index.html>.
- 11 Ezekiel Edwards, Will Bunting, and Lynda Garcia, "The War on Marijuana in Black and White" (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 2013), available at <https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/1114413-mj-report-rfs-rel1.pdf>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Mayor Jenny Durkan, "Why Seattle Is Erasing Misdemeanor Marijuana Convictions from People's Records," *The Stranger Slog* blog, February 8, 2018, available at <https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2018/02/08/25794565/guest-editorial-why-seattle-is-erasing-misdemeanor-marijuana-convictions-from-peoples-records>.
- 14 Beth Avery and Phil Hernandez, "Ban the Box: U.S. Cities, Counties, and States Adopt Fair Hiring Practices" (New York: National Employment Law Project, 2018), available at <http://www.nelp.org/publication/ban-the-box-fair-chance-hiring-state-and-local-guide/>.
- 15 Aimee Allison, "A Year Later – Michael Tubbs' Reinvention Efforts Taking Hold," *Power PAC Plus Political Intelligence* Blog, February 28, 2014, available at http://www.powerpacplus.org/a_year_later_michael_tubbs_reinvention_efforts_taking_hold.
- 16 Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin, "Making Neighborhoods Safe and Secure," available at <https://www.randallwoodfin.com/safety> (last accessed March 2018).
- 17 Denver Mayor's Office, "Text of Mayor Hancock's 2016 State of the City Address," available at <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/mayors-office/newsroom/2016/text-of-mayor-hancocks-2016-state-of-the-city-address.html> (last accessed March 2018).
- 18 City of Los Angeles Mayor's Office, "New Roads To Second Chances Connects Hundreds Of Formerly Incarcerated Angelenos To Employment Opportunities" Press release, August 8, 2017, available at <https://www.lamayor.org/%E2%80%98new-roads-second-chances%E2%80%99-connects-hundreds-formerly-incarcerated-angelenos-employment>.
- 19 Ibid.; Chrysalis, "New Roads to Second Chances," available at <https://changelives.org/roads/> (last accessed April 2018).
- 20 Marshall Weiss, "Jewish Community Relations Council Partners on Reentry Hiring," *The Dayton Jewish Observer*, November 24, 2015, available at <http://daytonjewishobserver.org/2015/11/jewish-community-relations-council-partners-on-reentry-hiring/>.
- 21 Inside Indiana Business, "City Details Gary 4 Jobs Program," Press release, August 18, 2015, available at <http://www.insideindianabusiness.com/story/29823643/city-details-gary-4-jobs-program>.
- 22 White House Council On Strong Cities, Strong Communities, "Gary, Indiana – Coordinated Delivery Of Federal Support: Lessons In Government Efficiency" (2017), available at https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/pdf/Gary_SC2_FactSheet.pdf.
- 23 Youth Options Unlimited Boston, "Program Overview: Operation Exit & Professional Pathways" (2016), available at http://www.youboston.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Operation-Exit_Professional-Pathways-fact-sheet.pdf.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Youth Options Unlimited Boston, "Operation Exit," available at <http://www.youboston.org/services/operation-exit/> (last accessed March 2018).
- 27 City of Boston Mayor's Office, "Mayor Walsh Announces Expansion of Boston's Successful Reentry Program, Operation Exit," Press release, November 20, 2015, available at <https://www.boston.gov/news/mayor-walsh-announces-expansion-bostons-successful-reentry-program-operation-exit>.
- 28 City of Boston Mayor's Office, "City Launches Office of Returning Citizens," Press release, October 27, 2017, available at <https://www.boston.gov/news/city-launches-office-returning-citizens>.
- 29 Mayor's Office on Returning Citizens Affairs, "FY 2015 Annual Report" (2016), available at <https://orca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/orca/publication/attachments/MORCA%20Report%20v2.pdf>.
- 30 Washington, D.C., Mayor's Office on Returning Citizens Affairs, "MORCA Programs," available at <https://orca.dc.gov/page/morca-programs> (last accessed April 2018); Washington, D.C., Department of Small and Local Business Development, "Aspire to Entrepreneurship," available at <https://dslbd.dc.gov/service/aspire-entrepreneurship> (last accessed April 2018).
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 City of Philadelphia, "Mayor's Office of Reintegration Services," available at <https://beta.phila.gov/departments/mayors-office-of-reintegration-services/> (last accessed March 2018); City of Philadelphia, "RISE Services," available at <http://www.phila.gov/rise/riseservices/Pages/default.aspx> (last accessed March 2018).

- 33 Granicus, "Success Story: Philadelphia Mayor's Office of Re-integration Services," available at http://www.granicus.com/pdfs/successstory_GC_philadelphia_rise.pdf (last accessed March 2018).
- 34 City of Philadelphia Office of the Mayor, "Mayor Kenney Signs Bill to Decriminalize Nuisance Offenses," Press release, June 23, 2016, available at <https://beta.phila.gov/press-releases/mayor/mayor-kenney-signs-bill-to-decriminalize-nuisance-offenses/>.
- 35 Andrea Gallo, "Baton Rouge eases marijuana penalties, cuts out jail time for less than 14 grams," *The Advocate*, February 28, 2018, available at http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_9d76b760-1cd7-11e8-9366-ff481253aa72.html.
- 36 New York City Council, "The Criminal Justice Reform Act: One Year Later," available at <https://council.nyc.gov/the-criminal-justice-reform-act-one-year-later/> (last accessed March 2018).
- 37 City of New York Office of the Mayor, "Mayor de Blasio Announces \$90 Million Investment in Reducing Low-Level Arrests for People with Behavioral Health Needs," Press release, May 12, 2017, available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/302-17/mayor-de-blasio-90-million-investment-reducing-low-level-arrests-people-with->
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 City of New York Office of the Mayor, "Mayor de Blasio Announces 18% Drop in City Jail Population Since Taking Office," Press release, March 23, 2017, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/criminaljustice/news/press-release-jail-population.page>.