

Research Brief: The Transferal of Criminal Record Stigma in the Employment Context: Evidence from Conjoint and Vignette Experiments

Luzi Shi and Megan Denver

Criminology (2025) - Article available online (<https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12398>) or by email (luzi.shi@uri.edu or m.denver@northeastern.edu)

Background

Support for "second chance hiring," or implementing fair and inclusive hiring practices for individuals with criminal records, has become increasingly popular in the business community. We think of the second chance hiring movement as including four key categories of employers:

Transparent Publicize second chance hiring, which aligns with practices	Symbolic Publicly discuss hiring this population but do not in practice
Inconspicuous Hire people with criminal records but not publicly	Non-Second Chance Second chance hiring is not publicized or occurring in practice

For all but the transparent second chance employers, stigma may be an underlying and recurring consideration.

Research Questions: *Does the public react negatively to businesses that hire individuals with criminal records (i.e., engage in courtesy stigma)? Do the same factors that drive personal stigma apply to courtesy stigma, and do messaging frames mitigate courtesy stigma?*

Study Design

We conducted a nationwide survey (N=1,000) through YouGov with two experimental components. First, a conjoint experiment tested whether restaurant hiring initiatives focused on people with criminal records decreased public support compared to neutral or other initiatives. Second, a vignette experiment examined whether factors predicting personal stigma (e.g., race, crime type, and crime-free time after release) also predict courtesy stigma, and whether messaging strategies (normalization, public safety framing, employer concealment) influence courtesy stigma.

Key Findings

Conjoint Experiment: Evidence of Courtesy Stigma

Restaurants with hiring initiatives for people with criminal records were less likely to be selected compared to neutral initiatives (hiring "more employees"). The LGBTQ hiring initiative had a similar effect, while a veteran hiring initiative was preferred. However, respondents typically prioritized restaurant characteristics (price, food quality, distance) over hiring initiatives when explaining their decisions.

Vignette Experiment: Service Quality Matters Most

Excellent service consistently improved perceptions towards the business, owner, and other employees. Factors that predict personal stigma (crime type, time since release, race) did not influence courtesy stigma. The messaging strategies (normalization, public safety, employer concealment) did not have a significant effect on reducing courtesy stigma.

Instrumental vs. Expressive Concerns

When respondents mentioned criminal records in open-ended responses, concerns were primarily instrumental (personal safety) rather than expressive (e.g., feelings of disgust or anger). Most respondents focused on business characteristics rather than employee criminal records when making decisions.

Policy Recommendations

- **Recognize courtesy stigma** as a barrier to second chance hiring and develop public awareness campaigns
- **Encourage job training opportunities and emphasize employees' capabilities**, given consumers' overarching interest in the quality of products and services
- **Focus on business outcomes** rather than messaging about employee trustworthiness or public safety benefits
- **Support transparent second chance employers** who hire this population in practice and publicize their commitment

Key Takeaways: We find evidence of criminal record courtesy stigma—the public is less likely to support businesses that openly hire people with criminal records. However, this stigma appears to be driven by instrumental concerns (primarily safety) rather than moral opposition. In addition, excellent service quality was consistently a primary decision factor for consumers. Since consumers prioritized business characteristics over employee backgrounds, our study suggests that employers should focus on rigorous job training and quality service rather than messaging strategies designed to reduce personal stigma.