

Research Brief: "It's a start": Formerly incarcerated adults' perceptions of second-chance employers and policies

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Research Question: *What are formerly incarcerated adults' experiences with--and perceptions of--employment policies designed to benefit them?*

Study Design

After recruiting participants through various sources, we analyzed 97 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with formerly incarcerated adults in the Greater Boston area. We examined our participants' awareness and descriptions of Ban-the-Box (BTB), a policy that has existed in Massachusetts for over 15 years; what it means for a company to be criminal record friendly (or in our study context, CORI-friendly); and which types of accomplishments, if any, participants have submitted—or could submit—to a prospective employer.

Key Findings

Ban-the-Box (BTB) Awareness

- Most participants did not recognize the phrase or underlying policy.
- BTB was viewed positively for increasing motivation to apply.
- However, BTB was ultimately seen as a starting point because employers have discretion to deny the applicant a job following a criminal background check.

"I'm going to generalize and say that when you check off [the box]...the story's almost over and everything else can be a formality of sorts. You can see in someone's demeanor, how it changes." (Jack, 65 yo white man)

"If they can get rid of that question all together, it would help a lot of people coming home from prison, but yes it's a step in the right direction..." (Herbert, 52 yo Black man)

"CORI-Friendly" Employer Perceptions

- This term was widely recognized by our participants, and led us to identify three employer categories: exclusionary, sometimes CORI-friendly, and inclusive.
- Participants were skeptical of the "sometimes CORI-friendly" employers' discretion, but even the most revered inclusive jobs—those affiliated with unions—came with warnings from those with direct union experiences.

"I think [CORI-friendly is] cap (a lie) ... I think that's the problem, where [applicants are] like, 'Oh [the company is] CORI-friendly, they're going to take me.' No." (Garrett, 35 yo Haitian American man)

"...people think that the union is a great job. It's really not. It's a lot of bullshit that goes with it." (Owen, 39 yo white man)

Sharing Evidence of Accomplishments

- This was described as largely accessible to our participants, but few reported ever submitting evidence to an employer.
- When discussing what they could share with an employer, participants often wove in descriptions of what that evidence represented to them.

"Oh, I don't know [what I would give to an employer]. All the certificates...I could have sat there and did nothing...I did all these programs. Everybody else was getting high as shit..." (Alfred, 60 yo white male)

"I would utilize my...work history since being home...I can narrow it down and just give prime examples of... me being trustworthy and reliable, independent, and skilled, and I could break that down in words to them." (Errol, 36 yo Black man)

Policy Recommendations

- **Increase awareness** of existing policies like BTB through targeted information campaigns
- Expand CORI-friendliness through **employer engagement strategies**, including tax credits and federal insurance protections
- **Promote broader culture change** by challenging stereotypes and expanding second-chance employer communities
- Strengthen individualized assessments by **formalizing processes** for applicants to share evidence of accomplishments

Key Takeaways: BTB policies alone are insufficient for promoting meaningful employment gains among formerly incarcerated individuals. While BTB provides the *potential* for individualized assessments to occur, it does not change employers' underlying calculus for hiring someone with a criminal conviction. If strategies to remove front-end gatekeeping were coupled with greater employer willingness to hire this population and the formal inclusion of positive information (e.g., evidence of rehabilitation), applicants could potentially not only get a foot in the door but also fully experience an individualized assessment.