

# 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.

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