

Have a Criminal Record? You Can Still Find a Pathway to a Career

Lashon Amado

For those labeled as “criminals,” the path to success can seem impossible. Having a criminal record carries a stigma and there are other barriers that make it hard for ex-offenders to pursue the career of their dreams.

How do I know? I’ve been there. Growing up in Brockton, I was a product of my environment. I had adopted the street mentality and became a rebel in society. I have been stabbed, locked up, and sold drugs to survive in the streets. It was a vicious cycle that I realized had to be broken.

I discovered YouthBuild, a national organization that helps young people gain the skills and education they need to leave street life. Through the YouthBuild chapter in Brockton, I got my GED, and shortly after I gained some college credits. I was trying to make a change in my life, but my criminal background was a huge barrier. I was



In YouthBuild programs, low-income young people ages 16 to 24 work full-time for 6 to 24 months toward their GEDs or high school diplomas while learning job skills by building affordable housing in their communities. Photo from Birmingham, Alabama, YouthBuild.



being turned down left and right by potential employers even after successfully passing the interview process. Once employers found out that I had a criminal record, they essentially slammed the door in my face.

Although the path to a career is more difficult for ex-offenders, it is still possible. I have found that there are three important steps you can take to build your credibility within your community and with employers: Education, Volunteer Services, and Discipline and Honesty.

Education

They can take away your freedom, in most cases temporarily, but they can never take away your education. Education has a huge impact on your ability to succeed. Most importantly, it gives you the skills you need to get a good job. Furthermore, research shows that as offenders get more education, their chance of re-offending decreases. Employers will see from your educational background that you are indeed a hard worker; they might be less judgmental of your criminal record and more likely to give you a chance.

Volunteering

Volunteering is another method to gain transferable skills and build credibility. The job market is tough even for those who do not have criminal histories. Even entry-level jobs require previous experience. The best way to get your foot in the door is to do some volunteer work in the community. Volunteering not only provides you with an opportunity to gain experience, it highlights your character. It shows that you are headed in the right direction, and it will appeal to employers.

Discipline and Honesty

When an employer has to make a decision on whether to hire someone with a criminal background they feel they are taking a risk. They wonder whether you will commit another crime, possibly on the job. The best way to deal with this situation is to advocate for yourself and explain to your prospective employer that you have “changed.” But your words alone are not enough. You need to show examples of ways you have been held accountable (such as in school or as a volunteer) and you have delivered on your promises.

Sometimes it is enough to let time work its magic. If years have passed since you were last involved in crime, then your employer may give you the benefit of the doubt.

No matter what, you must be honest with your future employers. You must disclose any past criminal involvement in order for you to be able to build trust. Although it may be hard and embarrassing to disclose such information, you should do it anyway. Coming to terms with your mistakes and being honest about them is key to bringing about change. If you are in denial about it, then you won’t make much progress.

Don’t Give Up

The road to getting a career for ex-offenders is a tough one. In order to succeed, you must be able to put up a good fight and never give up. You must be able to step out of your comfort zone. All the methods of proving yourself to society may be strange to you. You may have never been acquainted with the college experience, understood the value of volunteer services, or had the willpower to resist instant gratification and refrain from crime. But with hard work and dedication, you can do it. Do not let your past mistakes define who you are.

Lashon Amado graduated from YouthBuild in Brockton, MA. He completed a Bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice at UMASS Boston and is now working on a Master’s degree in Sociology.

Source: Smith, L., Tracy, A., & Steurer, S., US Dept. of Education, (2001). Three state recidivism study. <www.ceanational.org/PDFs/3StateFinal.pdf>.

What Else Might Help? CORI Reform!

CORI stands for Criminal Offender Record Information.

In Massachusetts, the Commonwealth CORI Coalition has fought for and won a new law that will reform CORI in the following ways:

First, landlords and employers will now only be able to see *conviction* data. This will prevent people from being denied housing and jobs for crimes they were charged with but did not commit.

Second, the new law will dramatically reduce the time it takes before one’s record is sealed from public view. Previously, it took 15 years after parole to seal the record of a felony, and 10 years after a misdemeanor. Now it will take only 10 years for a felony and 5 for a misdemeanor.



Members of the Commonwealth CORI Coalition fought for and won CORI reform. What do you think about the new law? In the photo above, what do they mean when they say, “CORI imprisons whole families”?

Source: <exprisoners.org>