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Building a labor force that works
Including justice-involved
individuals

Justice Reimagined Series

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Executive Summary

The integration of justice-involved individuals into the workforce can positively impact public safety and economic growth. Research cited throughout this report demonstrates that justice-involved individuals who find stable, full-time employment are less likely to reoffend, and the exclusion of justice-involved individuals from our economy depresses growth.

Justice-involved individuals in the United States face high unemployment rates - between 62% - 65% from six months to four years after release.¹ This percentage is four times higher than peak unemployment among all Americans in 2020.² At the same time, the US is experiencing a worker shortage; even when there are open jobs, justice-involved people are often unable to fill them.

Deloitte has found in several countries that this is due to justice-involved individuals' inability to find stable housing, education, transportation, and healthcare. These challenges combined with employer policies that exclude applicants based on their criminal history can create barriers that are sometimes insurmountable. Many of these obstacles are explored in greater detail in Deloitte's 2018 article [Reducing Recidivism: An Ecosystem Approach for Successful Reentry](#).

This paper zeroes in on just one factor - employment - and examines how the experiences of individuals and employers might be different if we, collectively, took a new approach. The purpose of this exercise is to offer ideas and insights that help answer the following question: what would it look like if employment was prioritized above other factors on the reentry journey?

The paper offers data-based solutions that can be implemented by corrections departments, institutions of higher learning, policymakers, community-based organizations, and employers. Readying people for the workforce should begin during incarceration and continue well into a person's reentry journey. Workforce development ecosystems³ can support people that are justice-involved by activating promising practices that help reduce recidivism, support long-term reentry, and bolster local economies.

Globally, workforce participation is declining due to an aging population and declining birth rates.⁴ The World Economic Forum cautions that as the overall workforce contracts, it is essential for countries to expand their definition of employable citizens (World Economic Forum, 2021).⁵ Although this article focuses on recent findings, case studies, and policy shifts in the United States, its lessons are applicable to a global audience.

Introduction

When it comes to the state of the criminal justice system in the United States, the news is mixed. The number of people incarcerated in the United States has decreased 20% since its peak in 2008, from 2.3 million to 1.8 million, and violent crime went down over the same period.⁶ But there remains a persistent challenge: when people with criminal records reenter their communities, they struggle to find employment.

In an international context, the United States' rate of imprisonment is unmatched; the US accounts for just five percent of the world's population but houses 25% of the world's prisoners.⁷ The United States has the largest prison population in the world, incarcerating people at a rate five to ten times higher than rates in Western Europe and other democracies.⁸

Every year more than 600,000 people return to their local communities from prisons in the United States.⁹ The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that among 50,000 people released from federal prisons in 2010, 33% found no employment at all over four years post-release. Additionally, no more than 40% were employed at any given time.¹⁰ The United States is not alone in this problem. A Canadian study found that individuals living in Canada with a criminal record face similar barriers, with roughly half of the individuals released from federal institutions remaining unemployed after 14 years.¹¹

Why does this matter? First, research tells us that people are less likely to commit crimes when they have stable, full-time employment.¹² Second, excluding formerly incarcerated people or those with felony records represents a loss of 1.7-1.9 million workers, or roughly a 1% reduction in the overall employment rate¹³ and US\$78 to US\$87 billion reduction in gross domestic product.¹⁴

Moreover, the United States is experiencing a worker shortage. Labor force participation rate remains low compared to pre-pandemic levels. According to the latest figures from the US Chamber of Commerce, there are now 8.2 million open jobs, and just 7.2 million unemployed Americans.¹⁵ There are especially high worker shortages in construction, retail, business services, healthcare, and food services.¹⁶ It is therefore critical to examine how to increase labor force participation. Building a workforce development ecosystem that includes justice-involved individuals makes sense because it better serves the economy and helps promote public safety.

To understand the role that workforce development ecosystems can play to help solve this complex challenge, let's examine the challenges justice-involved people often face when trying to reenter the workforce.

Key Definitions

Justice-involved individuals are involved in the criminal legal system, whether it be through probation, incarceration, or being charged but not convicted, whereas formerly incarcerated individuals represent a subset of this population.

Workforce development ecosystems are networks of government, education, private sector, non-profit and community-based organizations that use their collective strengths to supply employers the skilled talent they need and support workers to gain the meaningful, well-paying careers they want.

Barriers to employment for justice-involved people

Upon release, justice-involved individuals face a long list of obstacles, including a lack of stable housing, low acceptance to educational programs, limited or no access to healthcare and medication, unreliable transportation, poor credit, and low-wage job opportunities.

Long-standing policies purportedly designed to promote public safety (e.g., restricting housing and employment options) and assist with reintegration (e.g., probation requirements) can instead combine to create more difficulty.

And while corrections agencies like the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) offer certifications, General Educational Development (GED) courses, and apprenticeships to eligible adults in custody, there is a lack of post-secondary education opportunities, limiting job prospects upon release.

These challenges are compounded by the (nearly) ubiquitous background check. With more than 96% of employers in the United States conducting some type of pre-employment background check, it is perhaps not surprising that we find ourselves here.¹⁷



Creating an approach to maximize employment

Reentry ecosystem and employment planning

How can taking an ecosystem perspective help tackle the workforce development challenge? There are opportunities for governments, educational institutions, private employers, and community-based service providers to support people who are justice-involved and facilitate a successful return to their communities.

Expanding higher education in prisons

Research indicates that a one-dollar investment in prison education can reduce incarceration costs by four to five dollars during the first three years after release.¹⁸ This is because people who complete education programs while incarcerated are less likely to recidivate and more likely to find jobs once released than those who did not.¹⁹ In fact, the largest meta-analysis on the effect of education programs in prisons in the United States was completed in 2023 and concluded that education programming decreases the likelihood of recidivism by 14.8%, increases the likelihood of employment by 6.9%, and increases quarterly wages for employed returning citizens by US\$131.²⁰

These positive impacts are even more pronounced for post-secondary education, which makes this an especially exciting time; it is the beginning of a resurgence in funding for higher education in prisons in the United States.²¹

For the first time since 1994, the federal government is offering grants to incarcerated students who want to pursue a college education. Federal Pell Grants offer financial assistance for low-income students to earn a post-secondary degree.²² In 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act prohibited incarcerated people from accessing Pell Grants, which gutted higher education in prisons. Approximately 772 higher Prison Education Programs (PEPs) operated across 1,287 US correctional facilities in the early 1990s, and only eight PEPs remained by 1997.²³ But as of July 2023, that Pell Grant funding has been restored by the US Department of Education, and an estimated 760,000 individuals could become eligible for assistance.²⁴

Expansion of Prison Education Programs is happening at the federal and state level. For example, the FBOP has partnered with the US Department of Education and the Vera Institute of Justice to expand PEPs, which are supported by universities that offer certifications to adults in custody.

Expanding digital literacy training in prisons

This rebuilding of education for incarcerated people should also include access to digital literacy training. As a result of limited, or in some cases no access to digital tools for incarcerated individuals, digital literacy is suffering and becoming a barrier to re-entry in an environment that, in some countries, has gone almost completely digital - from job applications to grocery check-outs. There is a growing national²⁵ and global push for offender digital rights as a basis for helping to ensure that offenders are given the digital tools and support they need to become contributing members of society. In 2016 a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights ruled that offenders should have access to certain internet-based resources²⁶ and in 2015, Finland's Imprisonment and Remand Imprisonment Act was revised to include prisoners' digital rights.²⁷ Countries around the world are transitioning their institutions as part of the movement to allow increased communications with loved ones to maintain support networks, access to digital job training, and general digital literacy that will help facilitate a smoother transition back into the community.

Industry-specific career pathways and skills-based hiring

When looking to fill jobs and find qualified talent, many large employers have turned to industry-specific employment pathways and skills-based hiring, which has opened opportunities to individuals that do not possess a college degree or traditional form of education. It also helps employers get an edge in a tight labor market when they drop college degree requirements, for example, and instead focus on an individual's skills.²⁸ In addition to a contracted labor market, rapid technological advancements, including the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and low overall unemployment have resulted in more employers using skills-based hiring.²⁹ A recent survey revealed that 81% of employers are using some form of skills-based hiring in 2024 (up from 56% in 2022), and 95% believe that it's the dominant recruitment trend of the future.³⁰

To meet expectations of the workforce they are entering, adults in custody who are approaching release are looking to build skills to stay competitive. In South Carolina, FBOP's Federal Corrections Institution (FCI) Edgefield has collaborated with the Department of Labor to offer a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) course. The involved adults in custody obtain a CDL in addition to connecting with potential employers during product deliveries for the facility.



Since the inception of the CDL program at FCI Edgefield, there has been a notable increase in job placements for released individuals. A follow-up study conducted by the Department of Labor found that program graduates secured employment within six months of release at a rate 20% higher than the national average for formerly incarcerated individuals (Department of Labor, 2022). This program exemplifies how targeted vocational training can help address specific labor market needs while significantly enhancing job prospects and supporting successful reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals.³¹

As part of industry-specific employment, employers have started investing resources in developing apprenticeship programs, which do not require post-secondary education.³² The Department of Labor found a 106% increase in registered apprenticeship programs in the last decade³³ and the United States leads the way in skills-based job postings across most career areas.³⁴

These approaches are found to improve outcomes including:

- Employment Attainment: The US Department of Labor (DOL) conducted a meta-analysis of 46 evaluations of career pathways programs and found a substantial increase in employment in targeted industries when comparing the control/comparison group to the program group (72% relative gain in industry-specific employment).³⁵
- Improved Earnings: On average, annual earnings across all apprentices in an apprenticeship initiative sponsored by DOL grew by 49%, rising from US\$35,408 in the year before the program to about US\$52,876 one year after program exit.³⁶
- Return on Investment: Employers benefit from investing in apprenticeship programs, too. A 2022 study found that "for every dollar invested in an apprentice, the employer ultimately earns US\$1.47 in benefits — a 44% return on investment."³⁷

These outcomes were made possible by the coordinated efforts of many collaborators to support public policies and leading initiatives that provide education and training opportunities. The benefits of skills-based hiring and industry-specific career pathways can include people who are justice-involved. Reducing the number of people returning to prison can also help bring down the costs of corrections, which exceeds US\$80 billion annually in the United States.³⁸

Other countries are incorporating training and employment strategies to help reduce the cost of incarceration. In England, the Prison Governors' Association (PGA), which represents prison operators, said their criminal justice system "stands on the precipice of failure" and asked the government to tackle this problem "without delay." Their prison population has reached record highs,³⁹ and the UK Ministry of Justice has ordered a review to consider options to reduce overcrowding.⁴⁰

One response to this crisis in the UK came when newly elected Prime Minister appointed James Timpson as his Prison Minister, who has hired former prisoners as part of his successful business providing key cutting and shoe repair services.⁴¹ Mr. Timpson has indicated that he wants to see an overhaul of the justice system, with training and employment for returning citizens as key components.

Employers using these hiring strategies can work with governments, correctional facilities, and education institutions to provide training for in-demand skillsets and employ appropriately skilled people. These relationships not only help create job opportunities and support networks but also provide employers with access to new talent pipelines to help close their skill gaps.⁴²

Wraparound support services

Individuals returning to their communities after a term of imprisonment can often face challenges beyond employment, including housing insecurity, difficulty securing identification, inability to access health care, unreliable transportation, lack of childcare, a credit score compromised by their incarceration, and food insecurity.⁴³ In one study, 91% of those recently released from incarceration experienced food insecurity.⁴⁴ And in many states individuals convicted of drug felonies are prohibited from obtaining Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food benefits.⁴⁵ Housing insecurity is also directly linked to job loss.⁴⁶

Wraparound services are integral to people involved in the justice system entering and remaining in the workforce. Providing services such as behavioral healthcare, housing assistance, and legal services can reduce recidivism and lead to increased job retention. In 2021, the Research and Development corporation (RAND) evaluated the impact of the City of Los Angeles' Project, which was a community-based wraparound reentry program that provided employment, health, and legal services. Through their analysis, RAND found that program participants enrolled for at least a year had a lower rate of conviction, higher job attainment, and improved job retention than individuals who did not.⁴⁷

Better coordination between healthcare providers and government can help reduce recidivism⁴⁸ and help people that are justice-involved stay healthy and maintain their employment. An estimated 80% of those returning from incarceration have chronic medical, psychiatric, or substance use disorders.⁴⁹

Since Medicaid expansion, various states have utilized Medicaid dollars to establish in-reach services where individuals are enrolled in Medicaid prior to release, and re-enter with an identified primary care provider.⁵⁰ Other models include Transition Clinic Networks where local governments and health care workers engage people leaving incarceration to make referrals to physical and behavioral health services and provide advice on employment.⁵¹

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) offers guidance to expand state options for improving access to healthcare for returning citizens through Reentry 1115 Medicaid waivers. In April 2023, CMS provided a framework for states to develop and implement demonstration projects that enhance care continuity and health outcomes for this vulnerable population. This guidance was released in response to stakeholder recommendations aimed at improving healthcare transitions for incarcerated individuals.⁵²

Reentry 1115 Medicaid waivers can significantly enhance wraparound services by allowing states to use Medicaid funds more flexibly to support justice-involved individuals. CMS designed these waivers to allow states to test innovative approaches to providing healthcare services, including those aimed at improving the reentry process for justice-involved individuals. These waivers can cover a range of services that are critical for successful reentry, including mental health and substance use disorder treatment, housing support, and employment services. By leveraging these waivers, states can create comprehensive support systems that can help address the multifaceted needs of individuals reentering society, thereby improving their chances of maintaining employment and reducing recidivism.⁵³

Combatting the stigma of a criminal conviction

When businesses are looking to hire, they are looking primarily to the population of unemployed job seekers. A recent RAND study reveals that 46% of unemployed men have been convicted of a crime and 64% had a criminal arrest on their record.⁵⁴ Without a steady income, every challenge we've noted (housing, transportation, healthcare) is exacerbated.

Since 2018, the Indiana Department of Workforce Development partnered with Indiana Department of Corrections and the Hoosiers Initiative for Reentry (HIRE) to host virtual job fairs for people who are incarcerated and nearing release across the state.⁵⁵ The organizers attract employers by explaining the potential benefits of hiring returning citizens, including eligibility for the Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit.⁵⁶ This process is the first in a virtual series of events that allows incarcerated people to hear from employers about job opportunities, conduct interviews, and secure job offers prior to release.

Over 80% of human resource professionals and business leaders report that individuals with a criminal record perform the same or better than employees without a criminal record. Second chance hiring has tangible benefits for employees and employers, which in turn help strengthen economies.⁵⁷ JPMorgan Chase found that employment challenges cost the US economy over US \$87 billion per year,⁵⁸ a gap that can be mitigated by economic participation from people who are justice-involved, while also improving their financial health and strengthening communities.

A former prisoner leads the way on reform

One prominent figure advocating to increase opportunities for those with criminal convictions is Alice Johnson, President Trump's newly appointed Pardon Czar. Ms. Johnson has a unique perspective because she herself was incarcerated for 21 years in federal prison before being pardoned. Alice Johnson was born in Mississippi, one of nine children born to a sharecropping family who picked cotton.⁵⁹ Alice's parents were also activists in their community, with her mother leading the local chapter of the NAACP.⁶⁰ She was married and pregnant by age 15 and went on to have five children. Alice's marriage ended in divorce right around the time she lost her job at FedEx, and her son was killed in a tragic scooter accident. Alice became involved with a man who sold drugs, and he offered her money to pass messages to others on the telephone. Alice was charged with federal conspiracy to distribute drugs and was offered a deal by the prosecutor to plead guilty in exchange for three years of jail time. She opted for a trial, as this was her first criminal charge, and she had never come into contact with drugs or directly sold them. Alice was convicted after trial, and for her part in the conspiracy she was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, plus 25 years. It was her first conviction.⁶¹

While Alice Johnson was incarcerated, she fought to expand educational and vocational opportunities for her fellow inmates, even those serving lengthy sentences who were excluded by policy. Of her successful effort to overturn the exclusionary policy she said, "My argument was: How do you tell a woman not to hope? How do you tell a woman not to prepare for a future?"⁶²

Alice Johnson spent 21 years in federal prison before President Trump commuted her sentence in 2018. She went on to receive a full pardon in 2020, which removes civil penalties or “collateral consequences” resulting from her conviction. For example, her right to vote was restored, as was her ability to sit on a jury or run for office. Since being released, Alice continues to speak about the importance of employers giving a chance to applicants with criminal records, including at the recent Second Chance Forum in 2025 sponsored by Resilience Education and the Second Chance Business Coalition.⁶³

Having received a full pardon, Alice Johnson no longer has a criminal record to contend with. But she remembers the stigma: “I know what it’s like to have someone put a label on you.” Alice Johnson has also spoken of her hopes for the future, “I hope others see themselves in me, that they have the ability to move beyond their mistakes and to go into a future where they are not defined by the worst thing they have done in their lives. I represent what America is about, second chances.”⁶⁴



Working together for the future of hiring justice-involved persons

Using the power of an ecosystem, workforce and economic development partners can support the employment of justice-involved people. By convening coalitions, stakeholders can map the landscape of resources available and identify opportunities to creatively address challenges at a systemic level. This type of interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial. By addressing multiple areas of an individual's life which may inhibit their ability to maintain stable employment, like financial, educational, and socioeconomic barriers, we can develop lasting solutions that allow people to be fully present and excel in their work.

To improve outcomes for people who have history with the justice system, the ecosystem can take a collaborative approach to consider the following priorities:

- 1. Corrections officials** can work with policymakers, educational institutions, other state agencies, and employers to expand opportunities to earn degrees, acquire certifications, and explore job opportunities prior to release. Preparing incarcerated people for successful reentry should start on day one of their sentence, and the goal should be for them to leave with greater knowledge and more skills than when they came in.
- 2. Government and private sector employers** can support the inclusion of people who are justice-involved by reviewing existing exclusive policies, considering ways to support them through employment preparation, and collaborating with community-based organizations to provide wraparound support.
- 3. Education providers** can leverage investments in digital literacy as well as the recent restoration of Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, to prepare people for the future of work. Determining how to rebuild education in prisons will likely require close coordination with correctional institutions, technology partners, funders, and government officials to promote effective implementation and access. Once the program is designed by the institution, it should then be approved by the facility's oversight entity, whether that is the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the state corrections agency, or a county sheriff. It will then go to an accreditor at the US Department of Education to certify that it meets federal standards. Planning with university staff, administrators, and professors will be key to successful implementation.
- 4. Community-based organizations** and nonprofits can connect people who are justice-involved to employers with available jobs and offer wraparound services to help them maintain their employment. While employers may be able to offer some benefits directly to their formerly incarcerated employees, community-based organizations are often best suited to assist with a variety of services given their experience and knowledge of resources.
- 5. Policy makers** could examine and consider repealing some of the [28,000 work-related collateral consequences](#) (legal or regulatory penalties) that prevent justice-involved people from pursuing professional licenses or holding certain jobs. In states that have expanded Medicaid, they can apply for 1115 Medicaid waivers for reentry services in their states so that more returning citizens get access to care during this period. They can help ensure that their communities have affordable housing and reliable public transportation.

6. Citizens with lived experience of the justice system should be engaged in the design of services via co-production: a collaborative process that brings together professionals – generally from the organizations that deliver services – alongside people with experience using them. This can be particularly effective where criminal behavior is driven by unmet social need, therefore helping to identify this need and design the holistic and wraparound services required. Read more about co-production [here](#).

Expanding access to education, industry-specific job training, and wraparound support services can help individuals find, prepare for, and retain employment following incarceration. This strategy can be used globally to strengthen individuals and help prepare them for the workforce of today and tomorrow. Adopting policies and business practices that support justice-involved people qualify for and gain employment can improve communities through boosting the local economy, furthering close-knit environments, and fill workforce gaps by pulling from a population with new perspectives and skills.

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