

For Almost Everyone, Going To Prison Is A Life Sentence For Your Job Prospects

BY [NICOLE FLATOW](#)  POSTED ON MARCH 6, 2015 AT 9:40 AM



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Jeremy Meeks was dubbed the “hot convict” and “sexy felon” after local police posted his brooding mugshot on Facebook. He is now serving a two-year prison sentence for felony weapons charges, but he has already snagged a modeling contract for when he gets out.

“I’m in a place where I will be able to provide for my family and really change my life,” he [told ABC News](#). “... I feel extremely blessed and thankful.”

Meeks' fate isn't a particular surprise. When the mugshot featuring his searing blue eyes and chiseled jaw went viral, Meeks accrued hundreds of thousands of Facebook fans and a campaign to #FreeJeremyMeeks — seemingly on account of his looks. But calling Meeks “blessed” is an understatement. Even individuals with records much less violent than Meeks — sometimes just an arrest without a conviction — typically find that their employment prospects are far worse, not better, than they were before their encounter with the criminal justice system.

Take Barbara Ann Finn, a 74-year-old grandmother who didn't get a part-time job as a cafeteria worker at a school in Maryland after a shoplifting arrest from some 50 years ago that never led to a conviction was flagged on her record.

As the Wall Street Journal reported in telling Finn's story, some one in three Americans have a criminal record like Finn. Records can include not just felony convictions but also arrests without later conviction or minor misdemeanors such as “disorderly conduct” during a protest, or marijuana possession.

The vast majority of employers — 87 percent, according to a recent Center for American Progress report — check these records before making hiring decisions. And while the law does not allow most employers to blanket reject all individuals with criminal histories, a “criminal record is a powerful disincentive,” as the Rebecca Vallas and Sharon Dietrich explained in the CAP report. A recent National Institute of Justice study found that having any arrest on your record decreases employment opportunities than any other stigma, such as having not earned a high school diploma or long-term unemployment.

These obstacles are exacerbated for those who have also spent time in prison. In addition to the lost work time and barriers to regaining housing, clothing, and other basic provisions linked to the stability to hold a job, a majority of employers are unwilling to hire individuals who have served prison time, according to a recent National Institute of Justice study.

Some 60 percent of individuals remain unemployed a year after their incarceration, according to recent data. And those who do find work are likely to earn significantly less money than they did before prison. In fact, a history of spending time behind bars is associated with a 40 percent reduction in earnings.

This lost employment from criminal records amounts to an estimated \$65 billion per year in lost gross domestic product. And with a population that has become

increasingly criminalized, reforms are slowly emerging not just to reduce arrests and prison sentences, but to relieve what are known as collateral consequences for those who do have criminal records.

Among recent reforms are bills to "ban the box," meaning employers can no longer include a check box asking about a past conviction on the initial application form, and and expansions of laws that allow individuals to seal or expunge their records.

But even in states that have implemented these reforms, individuals with a recent criminal record can't yet have their backgrounds cleared, and may still face a background check later in the job application process, albeit once they've had a chance to explain their story during an interview. A federal conviction may make matters even worse. As Vallas and Dietrich recently found, "despite the exponential increase in federal criminal prosecutions that resulted from the War on Drugs, there is no general judicial mechanism to expunge federal cases."

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