

# VOICES OF REDEMPTION

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**A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PEOPLE WITH RECORDS**

## ABOUT ALLIANCE FOR SAFETY AND JUSTICE



Alliance for Safety and Justice (ASJ) is a multi-state organization that aims to replace over-incarceration with more effective public safety solutions rooted in crime prevention, community health, rehabilitation, and support for crime victims. Focused on the largest states in the country, we partner with state leaders and advocates to achieve safety and justice reforms through advocacy, organizing, coalition building, research, and communications.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In producing this report, ASJ leaned on the experience of staff and members of TimeDone, a nationwide membership community of people with records joining together to build strong families and communities by organizing to end post-conviction poverty. Many thanks are owed to them for their dedication and ongoing commitment to elevating the voices of people with records in safety policy debates. Thank you for your partnership.

Many people played a role in developing and executing this work. ASJ would like to thank Seiji Carpenter and David Kordus at David Binder Research. Most importantly, we would like to thank all of the people who have told us their stories and allowed us to learn from their experiences. We owe a great deal to those who have allowed themselves to be profiled in this report and who speak out with great courage and conviction. Thank you deeply.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

States across the nation continue to grapple with the need for changes in our criminal justice and public safety systems. There is increasing recognition that over-reliance on incarceration without enough prevention and treatment locks communities into cycles of crime.

The voices and experiences of people who are impacted by crime and incarceration are critical to informing the urgent debate on public safety and defining the best path forward to stop the cycle of crime and promote safety and justice.

Understanding the short and long-term impacts of these policies, however – particularly the impacts of post-sentencing policies on people with records – has been alarmingly limited.

To help decision-makers understand these impacts, in March, 2023, Alliance for Safety and Justice commissioned a first-of-its-kind National Survey

of People with Records. A nationally representative sample of 4,060 people across the country were contacted. From that pool, 554 people who had been arrested, convicted, or incarcerated were interviewed about their experiences with, and impacts of contact with the criminal justice system.

The 2023 National Survey of People with Records reveals that the majority of people with records have suffered significant barriers to economic mobility as a result of their record, nearly all have been victims of crime who did not receive support in the aftermath of harm, and most experienced crisis prior to arrest.

The following key findings from this survey point to opportunities for further research and reform to advance policies that balance accountability, prevention, rehabilitation, and second chances that keep all communities safe.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Economic impacts of having a record

The 2023 National Survey of People with Records shows that people with records have a wide range of demographics and backgrounds – but they overwhelmingly experience economic devastation as a result of having a record. Of those sampled:

- **2 out of 3 of people** with a record (**67%**) were over the age of 35
- **7 in 10 people** with a record (**69%**) were last convicted or incarcerated more than five years ago
- **1 in 5 people** with a record (**20%**) had an annual gross household income of less than \$25,000
- **2 in 5 people** with a record (**42%**) had an annual gross household income of less than \$50,000
-

- **More than 4 in 10 people** with a past conviction (**44%**) cited difficulties attaining housing
- **More than 1 in 2 people** with a felony conviction (**53%**) had been evicted or forced to move because they were unable to pay housing bills\*



## Challenges accessing record relief

Most people with past convictions have been unable to access record clearance, and those who have had their records cleared found the process difficult:

- **More than 3 in 4 people** with a past conviction (**76%**) had not removed or cleared any conviction from their record
- Of those surveyed who were able to remove or clear a past conviction from their record, **more than half (51%)** reported that they found it difficult to do so\*

## Factors that contribute to arrest, conviction, or incarceration

People with records often faced multiple crises prior to arrest, including chronic unemployment, housing instability, or limited options for resolving substance use disorder or unaddressed trauma. The 2023 National Survey of People with Records reveals that the criminal justice intervention did not effectively address, or even exacerbated these underlying drivers.



- **Nearly 2 in 3 people** with a past conviction (**64%**) cited financial struggles as a factor that led to their arrest
- Of people with a past conviction who cited financial struggles as a factor that led to their arrest, **nearly of half (48%)** said their experience being convicted or incarcerated made their financial struggles worse
- **Half of people** with a past conviction (**50%**) cited trauma from prior crime victimization as a factor that led to their arrest
- Of people with a past conviction who cited trauma from prior crime victimization as a factor that led to their arrest, **nearly 4 in 10 (39%)** said their experience being convicted or incarcerated made this trauma worse
- Of people with a past conviction who cited mental health as a factor that led to their arrest, **nearly 1 in 2 (48%)** said their experience being convicted or incarcerated made their mental health worse
- **Nearly 6 in 10 people** with a past conviction (**57%**) cited substance use or addiction as a factor that led to their arrest



## The impact of victimization on people with records

People with records are much more likely to become victims of crime than people without records. The 2023 National Survey of People with Records found that of those sampled:



**9 out of 10** people with a record (**91%**) have been a victim of a crime, compared to less than half of people who do not have a record (**44%**)

- **More than 1 in 3** people with records who have been a victim of a crime (**37%**), were victims both before and after their arrest
- **More than 1 in 3** people who have been incarcerated in jail or prison for one week or longer (**35%**) were victimized during their incarceration
- Types of crime personally experienced by people with records:
  - Someone injuring or threatening to injure with a weapon or physical force: **1 in 2 (51%)**
  - Someone forcing, or trying to force sex or sexual contact: **Nearly 1 in 4 (23%)**
  - Someone shooting at you with a gun: **Nearly 1 in 4 (22%)**
  - Someone trying to kill you: **Nearly 1 in 4 (22%)**
  - Someone killing your family member or loved one: **Nearly 1 in 5 (19%)**

NEARLY **2** IN **3**

people with records who have been a victim of a crime (65%), were victims before their arrest

According to results from the [2022 National Survey of Victims' Views](#), a nationwide survey of crime victims regarding their experiences with the justice system and public safety policy preferences, survivors who reported having records were more likely than people without records to have wanted help that they did not receive:

- **Nearly 4 in 10 (37%)** would have wanted but did not receive counseling or mental health support, while **fewer than 3 in 10 (28%)** received it
- **More than half (53%)** would have wanted but did not receive help understanding and navigating the civil and criminal courts following their victimization, while **only about 1 in 6 (17%)** received this help
- **1 in 3 (33%)** would have wanted but never received emergency or temporary housing, while only about **1 in 12 (8%)** received it



# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

More than 78 million Americans have a criminal record. Yet despite the promise of having paid their debt to society, the reality is, many of them will find themselves caught in a labyrinth of more than 40,000 legal restrictions and barriers that thwart their best efforts to achieve stability.<sup>1</sup> These prohibitions place undue burdens on millions of people and impose an invisible, life-long sentence that can make it difficult to get back to work, find housing, or support their families.

Most of these legal barriers have nothing to do with public safety and do far more harm than good. In fact, they can make it harder — not easier — to stay out of the cycle of crime. Research shows people who have paid their dues to society are less likely to return to crime and more likely to contribute to the stability of their families and communities if they are not burdened by needless barriers.<sup>2</sup>

When someone is denied a second chance to provide for their family, the entire community bears the social and economic impact. These barriers even impact future generations — at least 33 million children in the United States now have at least one parent with a record.<sup>3</sup>

The voices and experiences of people who are impacted by crime and incarceration are critical to informing the urgent debate on public safety and defining the best path forward to stop the cycle of crime and promote safety and justice. This community is best positioned to inform lawmakers about the impacts of current policies — and even more importantly, can offer insight into the root causes of crime so that lawmakers may pursue safety solutions that are most effective at preventing crime from happening in the first place.

To help decision-makers understand both the barriers faced by people with records and the circumstances that led to arrest and incarceration, in March, 2023, Alliance for Safety and Justice commissioned a first-of-its-kind National Survey of People with Records. A nationally representative sample of 4,060 people across the country were contacted. From that pool, 554 people who had been arrested, convicted, or incarcerated — were interviewed about their experiences with, and impacts of contact with the criminal justice system.

This report is a summary of the study's findings.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Record:** A past arrest or conviction

**People with records:** Individuals who have an arrest or conviction record. People who have been arrested may or may not have been convicted of a crime and may or may not have been incarcerated. People with a conviction may or may not have been incarcerated.

# WHO ARE PEOPLE WITH RECORDS?

An estimated 78 million people in the United States have a criminal record — that is, one in three adults nationally, and as many as one in two in some states.<sup>4</sup> While some of these numbers overlap,<sup>5</sup> researchers have estimated that as many as 45 million people have a past misdemeanor conviction,<sup>6</sup> and nearly 20 million have a past felony conviction.<sup>7</sup>

## People of color and people from low-income backgrounds are overrepresented

National research on disparities in criminal justice outcomes reveals that people of color receive harsher responses at every stage of the criminal justice system, resulting in overrepresentation of people of color among those with records. For example:

- Between 1980 and 2020, law enforcement arrested Black people at **nearly three times** the rate of white people, and Indigenous people at **one and a half times** the rate of white people.<sup>8</sup>
- Black people were **more than three times** as likely as white people to be arrested on a drug charge,<sup>9</sup> despite research showing that Black and White people use drugs at **similar rates**.<sup>10</sup>
- By 2010, according to one study, approximately **8%** of all Americans but **23%** of Black Americans had an old felony conviction record.<sup>11</sup>
- Research shows that Black people account for **12%** of the US population but **35%** of people with an old prison record, and Latino people account for **18%** of the US population but **30%** of people with an old prison record.<sup>12</sup>

National studies also reveal that the collateral consequences of having a record also impact people differently across race demographics. For example, one study estimates that Latino people who have an old prison record face an average lifetime earning loss of \$511,500, Black people who have been to prison face an average lifetime earning loss of \$358,900, and White people who have been to prison lose \$267,000 on average.<sup>13</sup>

National research also points to income disparities. Average incomes are significantly lower among all people with old conviction records compared to people without records.

- People with misdemeanor convictions earn on average **\$26,900** per year
- People with felony convictions earn on average **\$23,000** per year
- People with a prison record earn on average **\$6,700** per year<sup>14</sup>



# Survey demographics vary widely, representing a broad cross section of the country

The 2023 National Survey of People with Records interviewed people with a wide range of demographics and backgrounds. The demographics of the people surveyed who had records are as follows:

## Gender

- **4 in 10 people (39%)** identified as female
- **6 in 10 people (60%)** identified as male
- **1%** of people identified as having a gender identity other than male or female

## Age

- **1 in 3 people (33%)** were under age 35
- **2 out of 3 people (67%)** were over age 35
- **More than 1 in 4 people with records (27%)** were age 55 or older

## Race and ethnicity

- **1 in 2 people (54%)** described themselves as white
- **4 in 10 people (46%)** described themselves as Latino or Hispanic (**25%**), Black or African American (**15%**), Asian American or Pacific Islander (**1%**), Native American (**1%**), Mixed Race (**3%**) or other (**1%**)

## Education

- **More than 1 in 5 people (22%)** had a college degree
- **Almost 1 in 4 people (24%)** were a high school graduate or had earned a GED
- **More than 3 in 4 people (77%)** did not have a college degree

## Type of community lived in

- **About 1 in 4 people (26%)** urban
- **About 1 in 4 people (27%)** suburban
- **About 1 in 2 people (47%)** town/rural

## Voting habits and political affiliation

- **2 in 3 people (66%)** were registered to vote
- **More than 4 in 5 people** who were registered to vote (**81%**) voted in the 2020 Presidential election
- The political party with which survey respondents most closely identified were similar regardless of whether they had a record or not
  - *People with records*
    - **35%** Democrat
    - **24%** Republican
    - **26%** Independent
    - **15%** other, don't know or prefer not to say
  - *People without records*
    - **33%** Democrat
    - **29%** Republican
    - **25%** Independent
    - **13%** other, don't know or prefer not to say

## Contact with the justice system

- **More than 1 in 2 people** with a conviction (**51%**) said their most serious conviction was a misdemeanor
- **Less than 2 in 5 people** with a conviction (**37%**) said their most serious conviction was a felony
- **Six percent of people** with a conviction said their most serious conviction was an infraction and **5%** said they did not know.
- **More than 1 in 2 people (55%)** were last arrested or convicted more than 10 years ago
- **More than 2 in 3 people (69%)** were last arrested or convicted more than five years ago
- **More than 3 in 4 people** who had been incarcerated (**76%**) were in jail or prison for less than a year

# WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF HAVING A RECORD?

## People with records face extreme economic devastation

People with past convictions face lifelong barriers to stability. Long after their sentences are completed, many people with past convictions face a rarely acknowledged second sentence: over 40,000 legal prohibitions on eligibility to many jobs, professional licenses, housing, and more. These prohibitions often thwart their best efforts to stabilize and move forward in their lives.<sup>15</sup> The barriers people with past convictions face that undermine safety and stability include prohibitions on eligibility for employment, education and stable housing.<sup>16</sup> These barriers leave people with records and their families financially devastated. Of those surveyed who had records:

- **1 in 5 people (20%)** reported having an annual gross household income of less than \$25,000
- **2 in 5 people (42%)** reported having an annual gross household income of less than \$50,000
- **2 in 5 people** with a felony conviction (**40%**) reported having an annual gross household income of less than \$25,000\*
- **6 in 10 (59%)** people with a felony conviction reported having an annual gross household income of less than \$50,000\*

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MORE THAN **2** IN **3**

people with a felony conviction (69%) said that they have had trouble paying for groceries\*

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People with records experience numerous restrictions on eligibility for employment. Employers can prohibit people with past convictions from eligibility depending on the state and the law, including career

options that require licenses, like a cosmetologist, or massage therapist.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, while federal financial aid practices have recently changed to improve access to higher education for many people with records, people with past convictions continue to face exclusion from a number of state financial aid and scholarship programs.<sup>18</sup> It also remains common practice for colleges and universities to consider a person's record during the admissions process,<sup>19</sup> representing a barrier to advancing in the job market.



**More than 1 in 2 people with a past conviction (55%) cited difficulties attaining a job, maintaining employment, or making a living**

Private landlords and public housing limit the eligibility of people with past convictions to attain housing, which destabilizes individuals and whole families. Among respondents:

- **More than 1 in 2 people** with a felony conviction (**53%**) have been evicted or forced to move because they were unable to pay housing bills\*



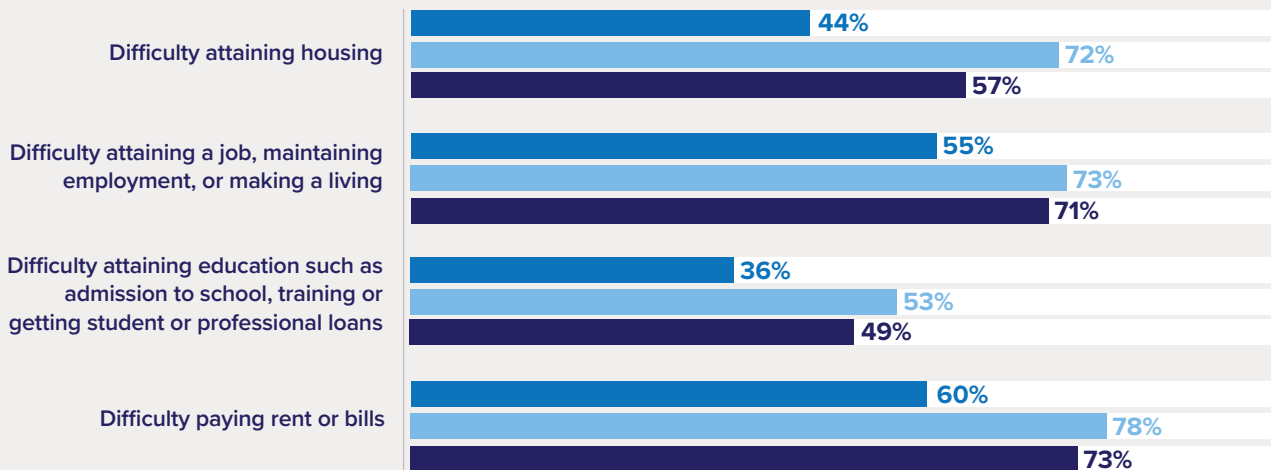
**More than 4 in 10 people** with a past conviction (**44%**) cited difficulties attaining housing

These, and barriers like them make it virtually impossible for many people with records to gain traction achieving economic stability for themselves and their families that may lift them out of cycles of crisis and crime.

**NEARLY 3 IN 4** people who have a felony conviction (73%) have had a problem attaining a job, maintaining employment, or making a living\*

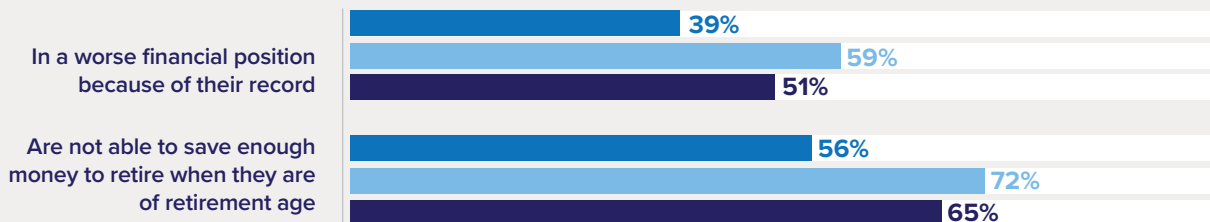
*For each of the following, please indicate how much of a problem, if at all, this has been for you after your conviction or incarceration.*

**THIS HAS BEEN A PROBLEM AFTER CONVICTION OR INCARCERATION:**



*Please indicate if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your own financial situation. If it doesn't apply to you, just indicate that.*

**INDICATED AGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT ABOUT FINANCIAL SITUATION:**



● PEOPLE WITH A CONVICTION    ● PEOPLE WITH A FELONY CONVICTION\*    ● PEOPLE INCARCERATED FOR ONE WEEK OR MORE

## TERRANCE, CALIFORNIA

In 2004, I went to prison for violating probation after getting caught with drugs. In my initial case, I faced a twenty-year sentence if I went to trial, so I took a plea deal.

Within two weeks of my release in 2007, I enrolled in college, and while there, I got married, and we had our first child. That's when I realized how extremely difficult it is to rent with a criminal record. I was low-income and financially eligible for low-income housing, but my record disqualified me from qualifying for such housing. As a result, we had to live in hotels and with people, and the stress was eating away at us. My grades began to plummet.

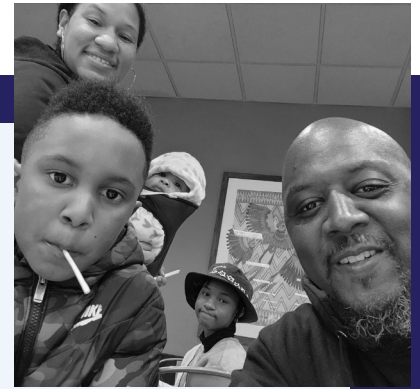
Finally, we found a place 35 miles from campus. I had to take the bus every day, which was a three-hour round trip. Later, we got accepted into a three-bedroom house to rent on campus family housing, and we finally had a place to stay.

To maintain access to student housing after completing my Bachelor's degree, I went to school for my Master's. However, when I finished, my problems started again. First, a slumlord rented me a roach-infested apartment. When the conditions became unbearable, we moved into another house, but there were huge rats that were eating holes in our walls. When I finally withheld rent because of the rodent infestation, the landlord evicted us. Eventually, we found another apartment where I currently reside, but due to the eviction and my record, the landlord demanded an extra month's security deposit.

I have been out of prison for over 15 years, but because my wife married me, even though she never committed a crime, it has made her life difficult. I now have three kids who have to go to school in bad neighborhoods because no one will rent to us in nice neighborhoods.

Everyone else in the house has to suffer because of me. When will redemption be possible?

Today, I focus on organizing others who are facing the same barriers I have in the hopes that I can help them find hope and healing.



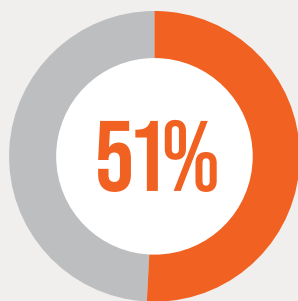
People who have served a community supervision term reported significant economic barriers. Of people surveyed who have served time on probation or parole:

- **More than 1 in 2 (51%)** reported facing difficulty attaining housing after conviction or incarceration.
- **Nearly 2 in 3 (63%)** reported facing difficulty attaining a job, maintaining employment, or making a living after conviction or incarceration
- **Nearly 7 in 10 (68%)** reported difficulty getting ahead after conviction or incarceration.
- **More than 6 in 10 (61%)** said that they have struggled to pay fines and fees following conviction or incarceration
- **Nearly 2 in 3 (65%)** said they have had difficulty paying rent or bills after an incarceration or conviction

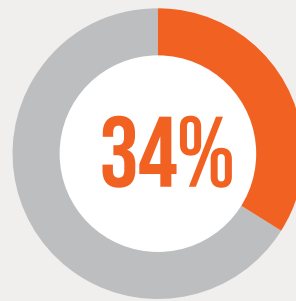
- **Nearly 2 in 3 (63%)** report not being able to save enough money to retire when they are of retirement age
- **Nearly 7 in 10 (69%)** said difficulty making a living or financial struggles was a factor that led to their arrest. Of those who said this was a factor, twice as many said their conviction or incarceration made these issues worse than better (**50%** worse vs. **24%** better)
- **More than 4 in 10 (41%)** report having had suicidal thoughts after an incarceration or conviction

Even people who have the lowest levels of contact with the justice system cited difficulty overcoming economic barriers to achieve stability.

- **More than 1 in 4 people** whose most serious conviction was a misdemeanor (**26%**) cited difficulty attaining housing
- **Nearly 1 in 2 people** whose most serious conviction was a misdemeanor (**47%**) cited difficulty attaining a job, maintaining employment, or making a living
- **1 in 4 people** whose most serious conviction was a misdemeanor (**25%**) cited difficulty in attaining education, such as admission to school, training, or getting student or professional loans
- **About a third of people** incarcerated for less than a year (**32%**) cited difficulty in attaining education such as admission to school, trainings, or getting student or professional loans



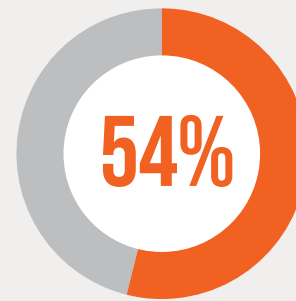
**More than 1 in 2 people** whose most serious conviction was a misdemeanor (**51%**) cited difficulty paying rent or bills



**More than 1 in 3 people** incarcerated for less than a year (**34%**) cited difficulty finding housing



**More than half of people** incarcerated for less than a year (**55%**) cited difficulty finding a job, maintaining employment, or making a living



**More than half of people** incarcerated for less than a year (**54%**) cited difficulty paying rent or bills



The 2023 National Survey of People with Records also shows an aging population of people with records who are unprepared for retirement. Despite the fact that 9 out of 10 people with records who are Boomers (ages 59-66) or Seniors (over the age of 67) are more than 10 years away from their last arrest or conviction:

- **1 in 4 people** with incarceration or conviction records who are Boomers or Seniors (**25%**) said difficulty attaining housing has been a problem after their conviction or incarceration
- **More than 1 in 3 people** with incarceration or conviction records who are Boomers or Seniors

(**34%**) said difficulty attaining a job, maintaining employment, or making a living has been a problem after their conviction or incarceration

- **Nearly 1 in 3 people** with records with incarceration or conviction records who are Boomers or Seniors (**30%**) said difficulty paying rent or bills has been a problem after their conviction or incarceration
- **More than 1 in 3 people** with records who are Boomers or Seniors (**36%**) agreed that they are not able to save enough money to retire when at the age of retirement

## ARTISE, OHIO

Growing up in Washington, DC, I witnessed many atrocities due to the era's raging crack epidemic in the late 1980's and early 1990's. This experience had an impact on my life that was so traumatic that I was sent to Ohio with hopes of getting my life back on track. But unprocessed childhood trauma led me down the wrong path.

At 15 years old, I was sentenced to Ohio's prison system. When I was released in January, 2008, I wanted more than anything to stand on my own two feet and build a new life. But like many people with a record, I found countless doors closed to me. I spent a year fruitlessly looking for work.

What made it especially difficult was that I went into the system as a 15-year-old child and came out as an adult. I had no job history, no driver's license, no rental history or credit history, no experience looking for jobs or housing. I didn't experience the normal ramp up to adulthood. It was just BOOM — you're out, you're in your 30s, and you're on your own.

I have found it incredibly difficult to sign an apartment lease or acquire a professional license let alone to buy a house. These systems don't just hold us back, they often lock our families into poverty, making it harder to escape cycles of crime and victimization for generations.

I have been fortunate. People took a chance and invested in me, and I have been able to find some stability. I work as a re-entry coordinator and substance abuse counselor. I help people leaving prison find the right treatment and resources to overcome substance abuse addiction and recidivism.



# CAN PEOPLE WITH RECORDS GET RECORD CLEARANCE RELIEF?

## Most people with records do not attain expungement

Nearly every state has existing laws that allow people to petition to seal or clear their criminal record after a certain amount of time. Unfortunately, the petition process to clear criminal records in most states is complicated and burdensome—and often costly. Most of these laws are also very limited in scope and only eligible for certain types of crimes.

The ability to clear records when appropriate is an essential tool to allow people with records to regain economic stability and mobility, expand their capacity to care for family members, and enhance their connectedness to communities and civic engagement.

Despite the availability in most jurisdictions of record clearing procedures, most people with records do not benefit from these laws. Many are not apprised of their eligibility for record relief, while others attempt to clear their records only to find the process difficult or not successful. Still others are ineligible for relief even if their locality has some types of relief available. The inability to attain record relief contributes to economic devastation and hopelessness.

Most people with a past conviction have been unable to access record clearance, and those who have had their records cleared found the process difficult:



Of those surveyed who were able to remove or clear a past conviction from their record, **more than half (51%)** reported that they found it difficult to do so.\*

# WHAT LEADS TO CRIME?

## Crisis drives crime — and often worsens after being sentenced

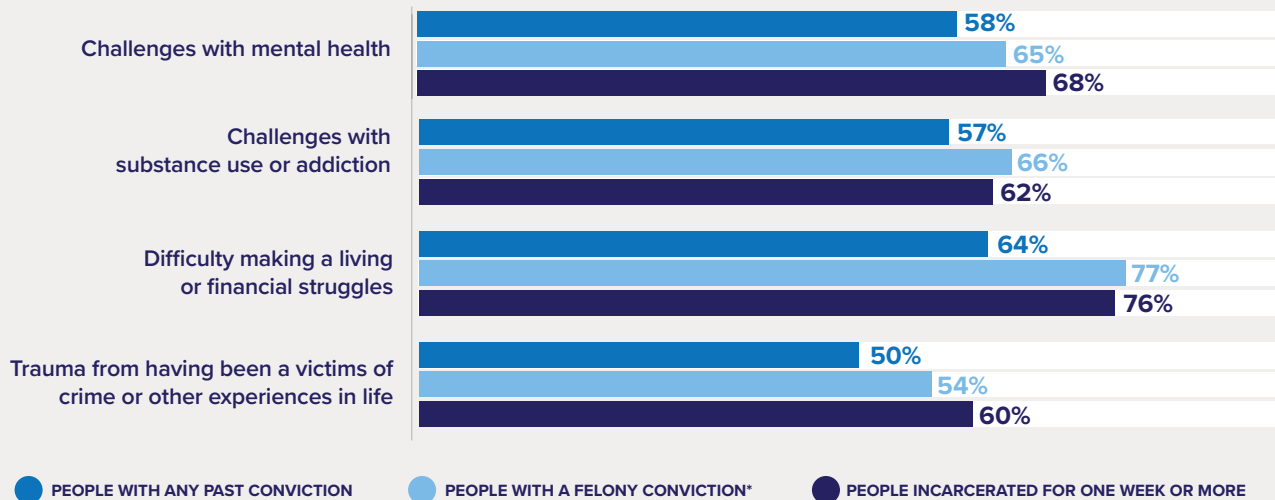
When people facing crisis are disconnected from access to support and pathways to stability, they often become vulnerable to experience preventable harm — including becoming a victim of crime or committing a crime and cycling in and out of the justice system.

People with records often face multiple crises prior to arrest, including chronic unemployment, housing instability, or limited options for resolving substance use disorder or unaddressed trauma, isolation and hopelessness. People with a felony conviction cite experiencing these crises at the highest rates. Of people with records surveyed:

**MORE THAN 3 IN 4** people with a felony conviction (77%) said difficulty making a living or financial struggles were a factor in their arrest\*

*For each of the following, please indicate how much it was a factor in your arrest, if any.*

### THIS WAS A FACTOR IN ARREST:



The 2023 National Survey of People with Records reveals that these factors often worsen after incarceration or conviction. In other words, justice system intervention either did not effectively address or even exacerbated these underlying drivers. In the survey:

- Of people with a past conviction who cited challenges with mental health as a factor that led to their arrest, **nearly twice as many** said that the experience of being convicted or incarcerated made these issues worse compared to those who said they got better (**48%** worse vs. **26%** better).
- Of people with a felony conviction who cited challenges with mental health as a factor that led to their arrest, **nearly twice as many** said that the experience of being convicted or incarcerated made these issues worse compared to those who said they go better (**56%** worse and **30%** better)\*
- Of people with a past conviction who cited financial struggles as a factor that led to their arrest, **twice as many** said the experience of

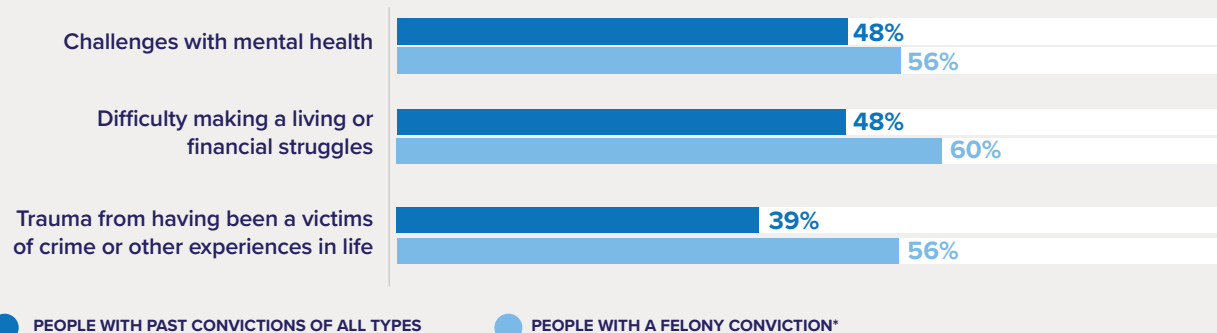
being convicted or incarcerated made these issues worse compared to those who said it got better (**48%** worse vs. **25%** better)

- **Three times as many people** with a felony conviction who had cited financial struggles as an issue that led to their arrest said their conviction or incarceration made financial struggles worse compared to those who said they got better (**60%** worse vs. **19%** better)\*
- Of people with a past conviction who cited trauma from victimization or other experiences as a factor that led to their arrest, **1.4 times as many** said that the experience of being convicted or incarcerated made these issues worse compared to those who said they got better (**39%** worse vs. **28%** better)
- Among people with a felony conviction who cited trauma from victimization or other experiences as a factor that led to their arrest, **more than twice as many** said that these issues got worse compared to those who said they got better (**56%** worse vs. **24%** better)\*

**MORE THAN 1 IN 2** people with a felony conviction (**56%**) said challenges with mental health were made worse\*

*For each of the following, please indicate if your experience being convicted or incarcerated made these issues better, worse, or had no effect*

**BEING CONVICTED OR INCARCERATED MADE THESE ISSUES WORSE:**



*In general,  
what do  
you think is  
the biggest  
cause of  
most crime?*



## SUCCATTI, CALIFORNIA

I've lived with abuse my whole life. I was a victim of child sexual abuse, rape, and severe domestic violence. I had to move states to ensure my safety.

In 2003 I lost my job while out on disability. I was newly pregnant with my third child and terrified that I would not be able to feed my children. Someone asked me if I would be open to making quick cash by selling drugs, and out of desperation, I agreed. When my third child was 18 months old, I was arrested in Arkansas.

At the same time, unbeknownst to me, I was suffering from a pituitary adenoma — a brain tumor that doctors later said caused me to lose my ability to reason. I underwent emergency brain surgery while out on bail from the arrest and went through the entire ordeal with only the help and support of my mother. Nine months later, the state of Arkansas locked me up.

When I came home from serving my time, I couldn't get a job, was banned from low-income housing, and couldn't even get food stamps or financial cash aid due to arcane laws that basically prevent the formerly incarcerated from starting over on solid footing. Today, I've been on parole for 11 years. But I am still not done being punished by the system — with parole requirements creating more barriers to success.

Through all of this, the biggest thing I have come to understand is that trauma is the basis of just about anything someone is going through. I battle depression on a regular basis, but I make it my business to get sunlight, pray and do my best not to give up because it isn't about me. It's about my kids.





# WHAT ARE PEOPLE WITH RECORDS' EXPERIENCES BEING VICTIMS OF CRIME?

**People with records are nearly twice as likely to be victims of crime compared to people without records — and most don't receive support they need in the aftermath**

People with records are much more likely to become victims of crime than people without records. The 2023 National Survey of People with Records found that of those sampled:



**9 out of 10**

people with a record (**91%**) have been a victim of a crime, compared to less than half of people who do not have a record (**44%**)

**Nearly 1 in 2**

people who were a victim of crime before their first arrest (**49%**) cite trauma from having been a victim of a crime as a factor that led to their arrest.



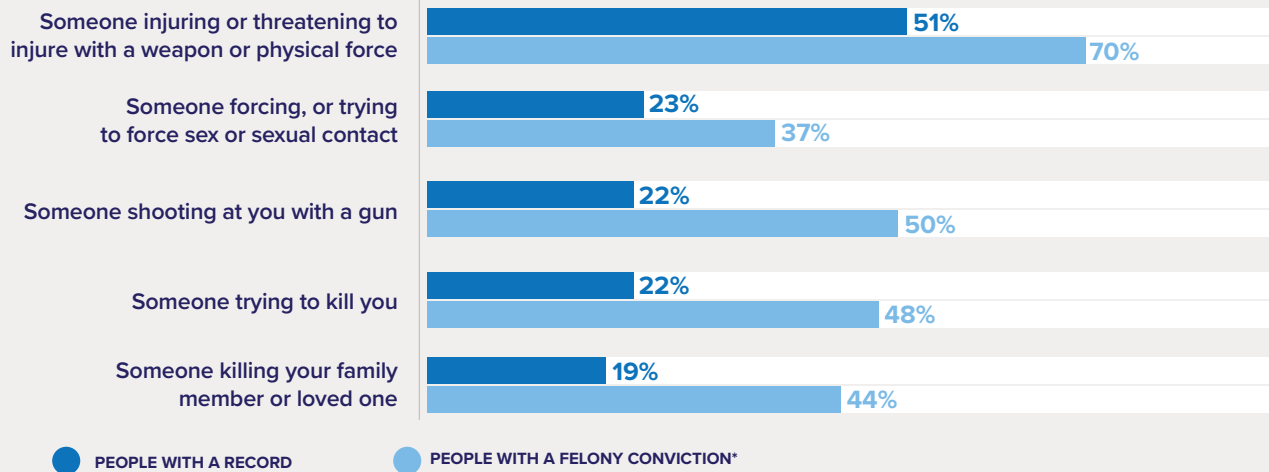
- **Nearly 2 in 3 people** who have been a victim of a crime (**65%**), were victims before their arrest
- **More than 1 in 3** people who have been a victim of a crime (**37%**), were victims both before and after their arrest
- **More than 1 in 3** people who have been incarcerated in jail or prison for one week or longer (**35%**) were victimized during their incarceration

The 2023 National Survey of People with Records also found that people with records are often victims of violent crimes – and that people with a felony conviction experience these crimes at even higher rates.

**1 IN 2** people (59%) who have had a felony conviction have personally experienced being shot at with a gun\*

Here is a list of types of crime. For each, please indicate if it is something you personally have experienced.

**YES, THIS TYPE OF CRIME WAS PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED**



Being a victim of crime can have long-term consequences, including severely detrimental impacts on survivors’ financial, physical, and psychological well being. These impacts are even more significant for people who have experienced repeat victimization or who have been the victims of serious or violent crimes – which is disproportionately the case for victims with records. Given this, victims with records often have significant need for help following victimization.

With proper support, the consequences of victimization can be addressed and people harmed by crime and violence can recover and thrive. But according to results from the 2022 National Survey of Victims’ Views, a nationwide survey of victims regarding their experiences with the justice system and public safety policy preferences, more often than not, these needs go unmet. Survivors who responded to the 2022 National Survey of Victims’ Views who

reported having records were more likely than people without records to have wanted help that they did not receive:

- **Nearly 4 in 10 (37%)** would have wanted but did not receive counseling or mental health support, while **fewer than 3 in 10 (28%)** received it



- **More than half (53%)** would have wanted but did not receive help understanding and navigating the civil and criminal courts following their victimization, while **only about 1 in 6 (17%)** received this help
- **1 in 3 (33%)** would have wanted but never received emergency or temporary housing, while **only about 1 in 12 (8%)** received it

People with records commonly owe substantial fines, fees, or restitution associated with their record. But the overwhelming majority of people with records who had been victimized did not receive help from these systems when they themselves were

victimized. According to the 2023 National Survey of People with Records:

- **Nearly 6 in 10 people** with a past conviction (**59%**) reported that they have struggled with fines and fees following their arrest or conviction
- **Nearly 4 in 10 people** with a past conviction (**37%**), and more than half of people with a felony conviction (**52%\***) said that following their incarceration or conviction, they had difficulty getting help after being a victim of crime
- **About 1 in 9 people** with a past conviction who were victims of crime (**11%**) were ever paid restitution for a crime committed against them

## VALERIE, PENNSYLVANIA

I was born a heroin addict and sold by my own mother on the black market. An adult who molested me and my sisters shot my sister four times when I was nine, then he hung himself. I was on drugs by age 10 and in the juvenile justice system by 12.

My home was a war zone. I had been raped, stabbed and beaten with cinder blocks before I was locked up at 18 in the county jail, where I was finally put into a drug program. Then I was sent to state prison.

I read my bible night and day, started going to every class I could and got my GED. I left prison at 24 and stayed out for eight years. But when my brother died, I relapsed and was sent back. I wrote two books while there. When I was released, I had no support or place to go. Everyone I knew was still on drugs, and my mother, sisters, and brother had all died.

I was provided housing in a halfway house for 13 months. When I left, I couldn't find a permanent place to live due to my record, until a friend co-signed for me. Not everyone has such a person in their lives.

I walked into business after business looking for a job without even knowing how to fill out an online application or having a phone. Finally, a moving company let me prove myself despite my record. The barriers to housing and employment, which are vital for people with records to succeed, are almost insurmountable and demand superhuman endurance and fortitude.

Now I am a minister, work at a shelter, deliver food at night and I volunteer in prisons to help people get sober and heal.



## MAGGIE, TEXAS

I grew up in a chaotic home. One day in high school, a football player gave me a ride home and offered to smoke marijuana with me. He raped me in front of my house. When making the police report, I was told that it was consensual because I agreed to smoke with him.

Facing my rapist and his friends every day was too much to bear, so I dropped out of high school and left home at the age of 16. I ended up on the streets and began a 20-year journey with addiction.

I received a two-year prison sentence with my first felony. After that, my employment opportunities were limited to fast food. I was lucky if I could end my day with \$20 cash.

My last arrest in 2016 was for possession of less than a gram of drugs. Through my battle with addiction I lost everything, including custody of my three children. I was tired of the revolving door and I had to get clean, somehow.

I was released from prison and admitted straight to a rehabilitation center. This program gave me the support I needed to change my life. I had counseling, food and housing for 18 months. Volunteers taught us how to dress, shop on a budget, financial literacy and resume writing.

My resume was rejected 144 times in three months. But the support of the counselors, volunteers and other women in the program helped me to keep fighting.

Some of us don't make it. Every day, I see people fight for housing and employment. You have to have some sort of safety net when getting out and struggling to overcome these barriers.

They say if they did the crime they should do the time. Well, I have done my time. In fact, I did more time than most people I got arrested with, who were white. The racial disparities in my sentencing were very clear.

But when does the time end, if it doesn't end when you are released and finish probation or parole? When is our time truly done?



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Advancing safety must include effective strategies to hold individuals who commit crimes accountable and stop cycles of violence, as well as strategies to provide people with records pathways to recover from the physical, emotional, and financial consequences of justice involvement.

When people living with past convictions are ineligible for jobs, housing, loans, and more — long after their sentences are completed — attaining stability and reintegration is nearly impossible. This

has lifetime impacts on families, communities, the economy, and public safety.

Despite strong public support for redemption, countless barriers remain in place that prevent second chances — or even prevent crime in the first place. Given the enormous number of barriers to stability people with records face, what we know about the drivers of crime, and the persistent pursuit of incarceration-first approaches to public safety, we offer the following policy recommendations:

## **1** **Sunset Policy Framework: enhance record sealing and reduce economic barriers**

Every state should enact sunset policies: a clear and accessible process for sealing criminal records after a person has served their time and been crime-free for a set period of time. The Sunset Policy Framework aims to strike a balance between justice, safety, and economic growth by encouraging states to adjust and expand their current record change systems to ensure fair access for all. The Framework focuses on judicial efficiency and cost effectiveness by incorporating measures such as automation to improve the record sealing process.

With an emphasis on personal responsibility, the Framework proposes that individuals who have completed their sentences and maintained a crime-free period should be considered rehabilitated and eligible for record sealing. Recognizing the challenges of automating record sealing for certain offenses, the Sunset Policy Framework recommends alternative strategies, such as a streamlined petition process. Drawing inspiration from the successes in other states, the Framework seeks to provide practical solutions for record sealing that maintain public safety.

The Framework suggests that the federal government support states during this transition by offering incentives and financial assistance to upgrade their data and information systems, thus enabling the implementation of improved record change systems. This assistance could be provided through a range of existing grant programs, carefully tailored to meet the unique needs of each state.



## 2

### Redemption and reentry for all

Everyone familiar with the process of exiting the justice system, from corrections officials to individuals who have served incarceration terms, agrees that reentry programs are crucial to safe and effective release.

Despite the clear public safety benefits of reentry, too many people leave the justice system without those links to employment, safe or stable housing, or other basic life support. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people return to communities from state and federal prisons.<sup>21</sup> When someone is released from prison, they face over 40,000 laws, policies and practices that severely limit their eligibility to reintegrate, including prohibitions on employment, housing, and education.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, this impacts reentry success. Sixty-eight percent of people released from prison are arrested for a new crime within three years of release, and 45 percent are re-convicted.<sup>23</sup> However, when people returning to the community from prison can access reentry support and obtain access to meet basic life needs such as housing and employment, that means reduced risk of recidivism.

Federal law still allows states to prevent people with past convictions from enrolling in food stamp and cash assistance programs, despite the fact that these programs are often critical to helping people attain or maintain housing, and prevent homelessness. Lifting this barrier to reentry would improve stability for people exiting the justice system.<sup>24</sup>

When people leaving the justice system have a “warm” hand off to programs that offer basic stabilizing support — from safe places to live to reentry jobs and a supportive community — people succeed and community safety improves.

## 3

### Reallocate resources to prevent crisis from becoming crime

Federal policymakers must direct funding to support new safety solutions in states and local jurisdictions that prioritize prevention, treatment, and recovery services over spending on incarceration.

New dollars can build new, smarter safety approaches, such as emergency mental health crisis response, community-based and hospital-based violence prevention, trauma recovery for victims and children exposed to violence, and removing bans on eligibility for aid for people with past convictions.

Federal, state and local policymakers also need to use incentives to reallocate resources to new safety priorities. Policymakers should build incentives into funding streams for safety, rewarding approaches that reduce unnecessary incarceration, and expand community-based violence prevention, trauma recovery and victim services, mental health and addiction treatment, and reentry.

# 4

## Ensure that people with records can access crime victim services

Decision-makers must confront the fact that people with records often have the shared experience of crime victimization. They should not be excluded (formally or informally) from crime victim support services, including civil legal services to support recovery, trauma recovery services, [victim compensation](#), and legal protections to prevent job and housing loss while recovering from being the victim of a crime.

As demonstrated in the 2023 National Survey of People with Records, the majority of people with records experienced crime victimization before they ever had contact with the justice system — and in fact, trauma from their crime victimization was often cited as a contributing factor to their arrest and conviction.

This indicates that the breadth and depth of victim support must be expanded to more effectively promote safety in all communities — including awareness of the services and ease of access to them.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Alliance for Safety and Justice commissioned *Voices of Redemption: A National Survey of People with Records* to fill in gaps in knowledge about who people with records are, how criminal justice and public safety policies impact them, and their views on what drives safe communities.

David Binder Research conducted the interviews in English and Spanish in March and April, 2023. The research survey was administered both by telephone — landlines and mobile phones — and online. Respondents were contacted through random digit dialing, by phone or text, or recruited from an online survey panel. These findings reflect the opinions of a broad and diverse nation: All ages 18+, all racial and ethnic groups, and all geographic locations are represented.

These efforts were part of a comprehensive survey methodology that ensured the results are

representative, demographically and across political affiliation, of the entire U.S. population.

While David Binder Research informed people that their personal information is kept confidential and used for research purposes only, we anticipate that respondents may have under-reported their victimization and their experiences with arrest, conviction, or incarceration in this survey. The overall margin of error for *Voices of Redemption: A National Survey of People with Records* is  $\pm 1.5$  percent, while the margin of error for the 554 respondents who were arrested is  $\pm 4.2$  percent, for the 505 who were arrested and victims of crime it is  $\pm 4.4$  percent, for the 372 who were convicted or incarcerated it is  $\pm 5.1$  percent. The margin of error is larger for subgroups, and small samples of 100 or fewer interviews are indicated (\*) throughout.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction (“NICCC”). (2019). Retrieved from <https://niccc.csgjusticecenter.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Karamagi, C., Teji, S., & Vishnu Sridharan., V. (2018). Repairing the Road to Redemption in California. Oakland: Californians for Safety and Justice. Retrieved from <https://safeandjust.org/interactivereport/repairing-the-road-to-redemption-incalifornia/>

<sup>3</sup> Vallas, R., Boteach, M., West, R., & Odum, J. (2015). Removing Barriers to Opportunity for Parents With Criminal Records and Their Children: A Two-Generation Approach (p.1). Washington: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/09060720/CriminalRecords-report2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Alliance for Safety and Justice (2021). Toward Stability and Safety: Experiences of People with Old Criminal Records. <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Convictions-Brief.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Brennan Center’s Report explains potential duplication in its estimation of the number of people with a misdemeanor conviction. It states, “some of the 46.8 million people identified using this model may have also spent time in prison, or been convicted of a felony, before or after incurring their misdemeanor conviction. This double counting risk is unavoidable.” Therefore, they use the estimated 45 million instead. <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Convictions-Brief.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Craigie, T., Grawert, A., Kimble, C., & Stiglitz, J. (2020, September 15). Conviction, imprisonment, and lost earnings: How involvement with the criminal justice system deepens inequality. Retrieved from Brennan Center for Justice website: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/conviction-imprisonment-and-lost-earnings-how-involvement-criminal> <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Convictions-Brief.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Shannon, S.K.S., Uggen, C., Schnittker, J., Thompson, M., Wakefield, S., & Massoglia, M. (2017). The growth, scope, and spatial distribution of people with felony records in the United States, 1948–2010. *Demography*: 54, 1795–1818. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-017-0611-1> <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Convictions-Brief.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Analysis of OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Trends in arrest rates by race for All offenses (rates are per 100,000 in age group). Available: [https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/ucr\\_trend.asp?table\\_in=2](https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/ucr_trend.asp?table_in=2). Released on July 08, 2022. *Note: These data do not account for Latino identity, which means that disparities are underrepresented in these figures, as the white category includes a higher percentage of people who may identify as Latino.*

<sup>9</sup> Analysis of OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Trends in arrest rates by race for Drug abuse violations (rates are per 100,000 in age group). Available: [https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/ucr\\_trend.asp?table\\_in=2](https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/ucr_trend.asp?table_in=2). Released on July 08, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2021). Racial/Ethnic Differences in Substance Use, Substance Use Disorders, and Substance Use Treatment Utilization among People Aged 12 or Older (2015-2019).

<sup>11</sup> Shannon, S.K.S. et. al. (2017). The Growth, Scope, and Spatial Distribution of People with Felony Records in the United States, 1948-2010. *Demography*, 54:1795-1818.

<sup>12</sup> Craigie, T., Grawert, A., and Kimble, C. (2020). Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings: How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Deepens Inequality. Brennan Center for Justice.

<sup>13</sup> Craigie, T., Grawert, A., and Kimble, C. (2020). Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings: How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Deepens Inequality. Brennan Center for Justice.

<sup>14</sup> Craigie, T., Grawert, A., and Kimble, C. (2020). Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings: How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Deepens Inequality. Brennan Center for Justice.

- <sup>15</sup> Council of State Governments (2018). National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction (“NICCC”). Retrieved from: <https://niccc.csgjusticecenter.org/> <https://wesharesafety.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/National-Safety-Gaps-Report-20220721.pdf>
- <sup>16</sup> Karamagi, C, Teji, S, & Vishnu Sridharan, V (2018). Repairing the Road to Redemption in California (p.2). Retrieved from Californians for Safety and Justice: <https://safeandjust.org/interactivereport/repairing-the-road-to-redemption-in-california/> <https://wesharesafety.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/National-Safety-Gaps-Report-20220721.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> Stelle E. Removing Barriers to Work. (August 15, 2018). Commonwealth Foundation, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/policyblog/detail/removing-barriers-to-work-for-ex-offenders> <https://wesharesafety.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/National-Safety-Gaps-Report-20220721.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> National Reentry Resource Center (2023). National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction. Retrieved from: <https://niccc.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/consequences>
- <sup>19</sup> Center for Community Alternatives (2020). The Use of Criminal History Records in College Admissions: Reconsidered. Retrieved from: <https://communityalternatives.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/use-of-criminal-history-records-reconsidered.pdf>
- <sup>20</sup> This includes only people who reported that they have not themselves completed a process to remove or clear a conviction from their record. Over the last several years, several states have adopted policies that allow some people to have their records automatically cleared. These policies are largely new, but it’s possible that some small number of this group of respondents may have had a record automatically sealed or expunged.
- <sup>21</sup> In the years 2019, 2020, and 2021, an average of 534,000 people returned home from prison each year. Using an average across three years accounts for sharp declines in admissions in 2020 due to Covid which likely contributed temporarily to substantial declines in releases in 2021, but admissions began to rise again in 2021. See Carson, A (2020). Prisoners in 2019. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>; Carson, A. (2021). Prisoners in 2021 – Statistical Tables. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/p21st.pdf>
- <sup>22</sup> National Reentry Resource Center (2023). National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction. Retrieved from: <https://niccc.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/consequences> <https://wesharesafety.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/National-Safety-Gaps-Report-20220721.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> Alper, M, Durose, ME, & Markman, J (2018). 2018 Update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005-2014). Retrieved from the U.S. Justice Department, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf> and Durose, M. R., Cooper, A. D., & Snyder, H. N. (2014). Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010 (Vol. 28). Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>. <https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Alliance-for-Safety-and-Justice-Scaling-Safety-Report-July-2022.pdf>
- <sup>24</sup> A 2017 paper from Harvard University’s Olin Center for Law, Economics and Business found that people sentenced to prison for crimes who are released with full access to public benefits are 10 percent less likely to return to prison within a year. Yang, C. S. Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism? Retrieved from American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings 2017: [http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/olin\\_center/papers/pdf/Yang\\_920.pdf](http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/olin_center/papers/pdf/Yang_920.pdf) <https://wesharesafety.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/National-Safety-Gaps-Report-20220721.pdf>



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