



## DRUG ENFORCEMENT AND POLICY CENTER

# Applying for a Job with a Criminal Record in Ohio

Pete Leasure, Senior Research Associate, Drug Enforcement and Policy Center, Moritz College of Law, The Ohio State University

Employment is a fundamental necessity. While having a criminal record can make it difficult to get a job, securing employment is possible. This guide provides recommendations to help those with criminal history obtain employment. Recommendations are informed by research and experience<sup>1</sup> and are primarily intended for those who cannot seal or expunge their criminal history.

## Tips for those with criminal history

### **1. IF YOU ARE ELIGIBLE, GET YOUR RECORD SEALED OR EXPUNGED AND CONSIDER ACQUIRING A CQE**

Ohio allows some individuals with criminal history to have their criminal records sealed or expunged, and the range of eligible individuals has expanded over the years.<sup>2</sup> While there are a few exceptions,<sup>3</sup> in most instances, employers cannot question you about sealed or expunged convictions.

If you cannot have your record sealed or expunged, consider acquiring a Certificate of Qualification for Employment (CQE).<sup>4</sup> A CQE eliminates criminal history bans for certain occupations requiring licensure, gives a stamp of good character, and provides employers with negligent hiring immunity.

*For more information on Ohio criminal record relief options, including links to free legal resources, visit [go.osu.edu/ohio-rights-restoration](https://go.osu.edu/ohio-rights-restoration).*

---

<sup>1</sup> Experience insights come from an individual who has been navigating the job market with a criminal record consisting of multiple felonies and misdemeanors for approximately 15 years.

<sup>2</sup> See Ohio Revised Code Chapter 2953 for eligibility information. Available at, <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/chapter-2953>. Also note that the Ohio Governor can order convictions to be sealed for pardoned individuals. See <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revisedcode/section-2967.04>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-2953.33>.

<sup>4</sup> For information on Ohio's CQE, see <https://drc.ohio.gov/cqe>; <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-2953.25>.

## 2. DO NOT LIE ABOUT YOUR CONVICTIONS

Research has shown that some people with criminal history lie about their record in an effort to get a job.<sup>5</sup> While this approach is understandable, the benefits may not outweigh the negatives. For example, while you may initially secure a position by lying about your criminal history, your employer could conduct background checks at any point after you are hired, ultimately leading to termination. Further, research has shown that some of those who secure a position by lying about their criminal history constantly fear their record being discovered and may not seek advancement given this fear.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. DISCLOSE YOUR CRIMINAL HISTORY, EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT ASKED ABOUT IT, AND DO SO EARLY IN THE PROCESS

Some employers may not conduct background checks until after the employee is working, especially in temp-to-hire positions. Research has shown that some people with criminal history that were initially hired and working, were later terminated because of a subsequent background check.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, disclose your criminal history early in the process, even if you are not asked about it.<sup>8</sup> By doing so, you can avoid spending the time and effort to secure a position that may ultimately result in termination, and you will not have to worry about an issue arising at a later time.

One way to share your criminal history early in the hiring process is to submit a cover letter along with your resume or application. In your cover letter, state that you want to be upfront and honest, disclose your criminal history, and then list any positive things you have done since your convictions.<sup>9</sup> See the following for an example:

*Hello,*

*I am reaching out today because I saw your position posting and feel that I would be a great fit. I earned my high school equivalency certificate in 2011 and have accumulated a good range of work experience and skills. For example, I have worked in restaurant, stock/general labor, and office/customer service positions. Further, I am very adaptable and can quickly learn new procedures, programs, and equipment. I do want to be totally honest that I possess a criminal record. However, since those convictions, I have [LIST POSITIVE THINGS SINCE CONVICTIONS], so I am definitely eager to get back to work and keep things on a positive track. In conclusion, I am very excited about your posting and I really believe that I would make a great addition to your company. I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your Name Here]*

---

<sup>5</sup> See Augustine, D. (2019). Working around the law: Navigating legal barriers to employment during reentry. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 44(3), 726-751.

<sup>6</sup> See Augustine, D. (2019). Working around the law: Navigating legal barriers to employment during reentry. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 44(3), 726-751.

<sup>7</sup> See Augustine, D. (2019). Working around the law: Navigating legal barriers to employment during reentry. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 44(3), 726-751.

<sup>8</sup> See Leasure, P., Carver, M., Olsen, B., Bryner, H., Foster, S., Jara-Siza, J. K., Burns, E., & Ottey, J. (2022). "Must Pass a Criminal Background Check": Interpretations and Impacts of Ambiguous Criminal Background Check Statements.

<sup>9</sup> See Ali, A. A., Lyons, B. J., & Ryan, A. M. (2017). Managing a perilous stigma: Ex-offenders' use of reparative impression management tactics in hiring contexts. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(9), 1271 for additional information on how to frame your criminal history.

It is important to note that some research shows that taking responsibility for your convictions, rather than providing an excuse (“It was not my fault, I was at the wrong place at the right time”), can also lead to better outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, remember that individuals who are able to seal or expunge their criminal history may not need to disclose sealed or expunged records.

#### **4. PURSUE EDUCATION, TRAINING OR BEHAVIORAL PROGRAMING**

Some research has shown that increased education and job training can improve employment outcomes for those with criminal history.<sup>11</sup> Further, many employers require some level of education. Therefore, you should consider pursuing education or training opportunities. Free online resources provide courses or training<sup>12</sup> or can connect you with educational or training programs focusing on high school equivalency preparation, workforce development skills, computer literacy, and college preparation.<sup>13</sup>

Another tip is to consider pursuing behavioral programming such as cognitive therapy or substance use treatment, as it has been shown to improve employment outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

#### **5. CREATE A RESUME AND UTILIZE ONLINE AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

Make use of the online and community resources created to help job seekers. There are numerous online resources to help you create a resume, even if you have little or no education, training, or experience.<sup>15</sup> Some online resources present detailed job-hunting tips and strategies that include being mindful of your online presence (i.e., how you present yourself on social media), pursuing volunteer work or internships, learning job keywords to include in your resume, and simply reaching out to companies to introduce yourself and see if they may be hiring.<sup>16</sup> Other more comprehensive online and community resources can help you explore careers, find training or education, build your resumes and cover letters, and find jobs.<sup>17</sup> Some of these

---

<sup>10</sup> See Ali, A. A., Lyons, B. J., & Ryan, A. M. (2017). Managing a perilous stigma: Ex-offenders' use of reparative impression management tactics in hiring contexts. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(9), 1271.

<sup>11</sup> See Cundiff, P. R. (2016). Erasing the mark of a criminal record: Examining the effect of education on ex-offender employment. *Corrections*, 1(2), 127–138. doi:10.1080/23774657.2016.1175327; Formon, D. L., Schmidt, A. T., & Henderson, C. (2018). Examining employment outcomes of offender and nonoffender vocational program graduates. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 62(9), 2781-2800.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/learn/>; <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/training>; [https://support.google.com/a/users/answer/9259748?visit\\_id=637914945413901681-1281558441&hl=en&rd=1](https://support.google.com/a/users/answer/9259748?visit_id=637914945413901681-1281558441&hl=en&rd=1); <https://online.stanford.edu/free-courses>; <https://pll.harvard.edu/catalog/free>; <https://www.ohiohighered.org/sites/default/files/uploads/aspire/Statewide%20Virtual%20IETs%20flyer.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.ohiohighered.org/aspire>; <https://ohiomeansjobs.ohio.gov/job-seekers/build-your-career/tools-for-college-students>.

<sup>14</sup> See Denver, M. (2019). Criminal Records, Positive Credentials and Recidivism: Incorporating Evidence of Rehabilitation Into Criminal Background Check Employment Decisions. *Crime & Delinquency*. doi.org/10.1177/001128719833358.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/finding-a-job/can-you-get-a-job-with-a-criminal-record>; <https://www.indeed.com/create-resume>; <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/10-resume-writing-tips>; <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-coverletters/writing-a-resume-with-no-experience>; <https://www.monster.com/career-advice/article/resume-dilemma-no-degree>; <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/employment-gaps-on-resume>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/finding-a-job/job-hunting>.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.careeronestop.org/>; <https://ohiomeansjobs.ohio.gov/home>.

comprehensive resources are specifically focused on helping people with criminal history secure employment.<sup>18</sup>

## **6. ASK FOR REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Some research has found improved employment outcomes when family members, friends, and or previous employers are willing to vouch for your character and potential as an employee.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, individuals with criminal history should seek references and recommendations.

## **7. SEARCH FOR JOBS ONLINE AND IN PERSON**

Utilizing online job posting websites will allow you to submit more resumes and applications in a shorter period of time. However, research also shows that in-person contact with a hiring manager can increase your chances of being hired.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if it is reasonable considering your location and resources, it may benefit you to apply for jobs in-person as well as online.

## **8. APPLY TO JOBS THAT HAVE AMBIGUOUS CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECK STATEMENTS IN THEIR JOB POSTINGS**

Some employers may include unclear language in their job postings such as “must pass a background check” or “upon successful completion of a background check.” However, research has shown that the vast majority of these employers will still consider applicants with criminal history.<sup>21</sup> These statements generally do not mean that all of those with any form of criminal history are ineligible. Don’t let ambiguous criminal background check statements keep you from applying.

## **9. KEEP APPLYING**

While most research shows that criminal history has a negative impact on hiring outcomes, virtually all of these studies show that at least some employers may be willing to hire those with criminal history.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, while it may be discouraging to submit multiple applications with little or no response, keep applying.

---

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.careeronestop.org/ExOffender/default.aspx>; <https://ohiomeansjobs.ohio.gov/job-seekers/build-your-career/for-restoredcitizens>.

<sup>19</sup> See Denver, M., & Ewald, A. (2018). Credentialing decisions and criminal records: A narrative approach. *Criminology*, 56, 715-749.

<sup>20</sup> See Uggen, C., Vuolo, M., Lageson, S., Ruhland, E., & K. WHITHAM, HILARY. (2014). The edge of stigma: An experimental audit of the effects of low-level criminal records on employment. *Criminology*, 52(4), 627-654.

<sup>21</sup> See Leasure, P., Carver, M., Olsen, B., Bryner, H., Foster, S., Jara-Siza, J. K., Burns, E., & Ottey, J.(2022). “Must Pass a Criminal Background Check”: Interpretations and Impacts of Ambiguous Criminal Background Check Statements.

<sup>22</sup> See Ahmed, A. M., & Lång, E. (2017). The employability of ex-offenders: a field experiment in the Swedish labor market. *IZA journal of Labor Policy*, 6(1), 1-23.