

With a Criminal Record, it's One Strike and You're Out

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Ronald Lewis was standing on a street with his brother, who was selling drugs. When police were approaching, Lewis warned his brother. Both were arrested. That minor, almost reflexive reaction led to Lewis sharing a drug possession charge with his brother as well as charges of being an instrument of a crime.

His lawyer advised him that he could win a trial.

Lewis, now 35, feels he is paying again for his past mistake.

"I paid that lawyer \$10,000...I didn't know what [the deal] entailed. I didn't know the impact it would have on my life," he says. After going through the criminal justice system, Lewis entered a vocational program and earned an engineering license.

He says, "I thought life would begin for me...but I have had so many doors slammed in my face, I know what wood tastes like."

According to a new report

The report, titled, "One Strike and You're Out: How We Can Eliminate Barriers to Economic Security and Mobility for People with Criminal Records," paints the picture with an array of numbers:

Ninety-five percent of people who are incarcerated at any level will be released.

Each day, this is the case for more than 600,000 Americans who served time in prison.

Each year, nearly 12 million people move through local jails.

As of 2012, more than 4.7

percent of landlords, and 66 percent of colleges use criminal and credit background checks to screen applicants.

By 2012, the Federal Bureau of Investigations released six times as many background checks for employers as it had the previous decade. The federal law that regulates the criminal and credit background-check industry was enacted in 1970, before the Internet; it generally applies to credit screening, as opposed to criminal records.

Thus, millions of people who have been arrested – even for exercising their constitutional right to protest – and were never convicted or incarcerated, still carry the stain of having criminal charges come up in a background check.

"Even a minor criminal record can serve as an intractable barrier to employment as well as utter basics such as housing, such as building good credit, education, job training, and more," said Rachel Vallas, co-author of the report.

Low-income and people



PHOTO COURTESY RONALD LEWIS

Ronald Lewis still faces challenges from a brush with the law 10 years ago.

of color with criminal records are often most likely to fall into a cycle of poverty as a result of their records. The transgression, plus a common lack of skills and/or education, often merge to bar them from

employment, and then from the social safety net that keeps people from sliding into deep poverty.

In addition to the employment challenges, difficulties

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Research cited in the CAP report estimates that 87 percent of employers, 80 percent of landlords, and 66 percent of colleges use criminal and credit background checks to screen applicants.

Later, that advice became a plea offer. Without being tried, Lewis accepted a B-class misdemeanor conviction, served no time in prison, and was released from probation early for steady compliance.

That was 10 years ago.

from the Center for American Progress (CAP), as many as one in three Americans has a criminal record. Despite being commonplace, this status can cause lifelong socioeconomic challenges.

million Americans were on probation or parole. Most will be confronted with their record as they attempt to rejoin society.

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