

How to Get a Job with a Criminal Record

Whether you've just been released from a lengthy incarceration or you had a minor scrape with the law when you were a kid, a criminal record can be an added source of anxiety in an already stressful job search. Depending on the severity of your offense(s), your criminal record may not affect your employment prospects at all, or it may make finding a job nearly impossible. Still, you have reason to be hopeful. While you may face some hurdles, you will eventually be able to find employment, regardless of your record.

Steps

1. Prepare while you are in prison. While [serving time](#) take advantage of opportunities to get your G.E.D., start or complete your college education, or get vocational training. Good preparation is especially important if you have been away from the outside world for an extended time, if you have limited job skills and experience, or if you will not be able to return to your previous area of employment (for example, if you were a bank teller and were convicted of theft, you probably will no longer be able to work in banking).
2. Take advantage of education or job training programs that may be available to you. Government agencies and non-profit organizations provide a host of opportunities for all job seekers to get more training or education. The experience and skills you develop in these programs can make a big difference in the success of your job search. There are also such programs targeted specifically to people who have recently been released from prison. These programs usually also help you find a job during the program and after completion.
3. Eliminate jobs for which your record will automatically disqualify you. Your record may automatically disqualify you for some positions, especially government jobs requiring security clearances, military jobs, positions with fiduciary responsibility (e.g., insurance or banking), and jobs working with children. If you avoid wasting time on jobs you cannot possibly get, you'll be able to focus on real opportunities and you'll be less likely to get discouraged. Most importantly, though, do your research. Don't just assume that your record will disqualify you from a certain job. You may be pleasantly surprised.
4. Be realistic. Honestly evaluating your qualifications is important for all job seekers. You need to find something that fits you and your skill level, and if you consistently apply for jobs for which you don't have the right skills, you'll quickly become discouraged. If you have a criminal record, you'll need to consider how that affects your opportunities, too.
5. Start small and work your way up. Understand that when a person sees your record, he or she may be reluctant to hire you for a position with a lot of responsibility. That same person, however, may be more than willing to give you a chance in another (usually lower-paid) position. In addition, it's important to understand that the biggest obstacle may be the gap in your employment history, not simply your conviction. If you want to return to your previous career, it's likely that business processes and tools may have changed substantially since you

- left your last position, so you'll probably need to take a step down to gain more training. Get your foot in the door, especially with a company or in a field that can lead to better opportunities in the future.
6. Learn about the employment laws in your state and/or country. In some countries (including the U.S.), employers generally cannot automatically disqualify you based solely on an arrest or even a conviction (if the nature of the crime is relevant to the job, however, they may lawfully base an adverse hiring decision on this). This is why applications that ask if you've been arrested or convicted of a crime usually have a disclaimer stating that a "yes" answer may not necessarily prevent you from being hired. Know your rights, and consult an attorney or make an Equal Opportunity Employment (EEO) complaint if an employer unlawfully discriminates against you.
 7. Be honest about your history. It can be tempting to lie when an application asks if you've been arrested or convicted of a crime. Avoid the temptation: not only is this dishonest, chances are the lie will be discovered. Most employers now conduct some sort of background check, and if they find that you have been dishonest on the application you will almost certainly not be hired. If you've already been hired and the lie is discovered later, you can be fired for it. In addition, lying on some applications (such as for military enlistment) is a criminal offense.
 8. Know what to answer on applications. Some states and countries now prohibit employers from asking about certain offenses, offenses that are over a certain number of years old, or arrests that did not result in a conviction. Your research on employment laws should help you know what questions you have to answer. In addition, be sure to answer only the specific question that is asked. For example, if the application asks if you've been convicted of a crime, you don't need to put down an arrest that did not result in a conviction. If a conviction has been sealed or expunged from your record, or if you pled guilty to an offense and completed a pre-trial diversion program (i.e. deferred adjudication) that resulted in no conviction, you may not need to report these either. Be aware, however, that when enlisting in the military or certain federal government positions, you must report all offenses, even those that have been expunged or sealed.
 9. Explain your answer if asked about convictions or arrests. Job applications and interviewers will give you an opportunity to explain the circumstances behind the offense or alleged offense. Be sure to take this opportunity if giving more information about the offense may be helpful.
 10. Try to get an offense sealed or expunged from your record. Ask your attorney, public defender, or parole / probation officer if you may be able to get the offense removed from your record so that you can legally and ethically answer "no" to conviction questions.
 11. [Employ yourself](#). If you're willing to work extra hard and you have marketable skills or abilities you may be able to make your own opportunities. You could start a yard maintenance business or provide contract IT services to companies, for example—you're limited only by your imagination. Think about what you're good at and what you like doing, and go for it. You'll probably need to have

another job while you're getting your business on its feet, but if your record has you stuck in dead-end jobs, you might as well take a chance.

12. Consider [joining the military](#). Some people think that the military will take just about anyone, while some think that you can't get in at all with a criminal record. In the U.S., they're both wrong. The military is selective, but depending on the type and number of offenses and the length of time since an offense, you may be able to get a waiver that will allow you to enlist. If you don't live in the U.S., your country's military may have more or less stringent policies. Before you enlist, consider the potential dangers of joining the military, but also consider the benefits. The military can provide job training and instill discipline if you have trouble motivating yourself.

Tips

- Do not get discouraged. You will find work eventually. And remember, when hunting for a job, batting average isn't important. All you have to do is to find one decent job. If you get that job on the 51st try, the 50 previous rejections don't mean squat. Remember, also, that the person who won't consider anything beyond your record probably isn't a person you'd want to work for, anyway.
- Especially if you've been incarcerated, there is nothing more important than a positive attitude. If you focus on your resentment of the system and feel upset or cheated by the system, it will in fact serve to "keep you down." If, however, you focus on the future and decide that you really want to succeed in the outside world, you will find that you have a lot of opportunity to get free or reduced-cost education, training, and career services to help you on your way.
- Your parole officer (P.O.) may be a great person, or he or she may be a jerk. Either way, the more pleasant and cooperative you are with your P.O., the easier things will be for you. Remember that your P.O. can be a great resource in your job hunt, and even if he or she isn't as helpful as you'd like, it's still a whole lot easier to deal with the P.O. a few times a month than to deal with correctional officers 24 - 7.
- Build your resume and get good professional references. Work hard and conscientiously in just about any position, and you can build experience and references that will make your criminal record less important to future employers. If you have to take an undesirable job, try to keep it in perspective. Do well in whatever job you have, and get education and training to help you move on.
- Sign up for some spiritual training or Bible study courses. Officials look kindly on this type of endeavor. When courses are completed successfully you could receive help with parole and re-entry into society. One such course is offered by Crossroad Bible Institute free of charge.

Warnings

- Do not resort to illegal activities, no matter how dire your circumstances are. Work hard and take whatever job is available if you have to, but don't risk getting sent back to prison.
- If you have recently been released from prison, your job hunt may be particularly difficult, but you cannot afford to get discouraged. One of your conditions of parole will likely be that you find a job. What's more, studies show that people who find full-time employment in the year after release from prison are far more likely to stay out of prison than those who remain unemployed.
- One of the saddest things in the world is seeing a guy come back to prison on a TPV (Technical Parole Violation). The fact is that there are a lot of things that other people can do without raising an eyebrow that will get you sent back. It's not fair, but it's reality. So, don't cut corners, ever. Don't even get close to violating your terms of parole or probation. You can get back to living like a normal human being when you get off paper.
- Unfortunately, some unscrupulous employers try to take advantage of people with a criminal record (particularly those on parole or probation). They know that you are likely to need a job more than most people, and that you may need to fulfill legal requirements. If an employer unfairly threatens to fire you or report you to your parole officer in order to get you to work for less money or to perform sexual favors, for example, you should report the behavior to your case supervisor.
- Lying to a military recruiter about your criminal history is a felony—don't do it.