

I've done my time. I want to work. Why will no one hire me?

My criminal record doesn't tell my whole story. It's time for employers to look beyond the background check and see the potential in the job seeker before them.

By **George Halfkenny with Nomi Sofer** Updated February 9, 2023, 12:01 a.m.

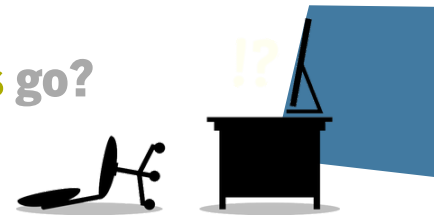


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I am 52, and my entire life has been shaped by mass incarceration.

When I was 8 years old, in 1978, I threw a chair in my third-grade class. A few days later, I was locked in a cell by a probation officer who slammed the door and walked away. I was terrified. A relative had abused me over the weekend. In school on Monday, no one seemed to notice that something horrible had happened, so I tried to get my teacher's attention.

How would I have been treated had I been a white child in a well-off suburb? I can't know. I was a Black boy from Dorchester and was treated as a juvenile delinquent.

Today I know that my life was framed by social forces much larger than my family and my behavior. I was born in 1970, as the [era of mass incarceration](#) launched. In 1970, the United States incarcerated [196,441](#) people; the racial distribution roughly matched that of the US population.

By 1978, when I was first locked up, the United States was in [full backlash](#) against 1960s civil rights gains. Fear was channeled into the new Jim Crow: a system of “crime control” that scapegoated poor Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous boys and young men, funneling us into jails and prisons at a frightening rate. Today, there are [nearly 2 million](#) incarcerated people in this country. They are [disproportionately](#) Black, Hispanic, or Indigenous men born into poverty.

As a teen, I was in and out of Boston’s foster care and juvenile “justice” systems. Like so many around me with complicated families and no support, I got involved with drugs, selling them to pay for my addiction. I now know that I was self-medicating to cope with trauma.

But the world around me didn’t see a troubled young man who needed help — it saw me as the trouble.

In the late 1980s, I earned my GED in prison and started college courses. Then, in 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act](#), which withdrew Pell grant support — college funding for low-income students — from incarcerated people. My chance of earning a college degree evaporated. And not just mine. Until 2015, when the Obama-Biden administration established the Second Chance Pell Experiment, restoring Pell monies to the incarcerated, millions of us who had been locked up had already been left behind.



George Halfkenny in a still from a documentary film, "Voices of Reentry." CHRIS PORTAL/VOICES OF REENTRY

I’ve been out of prison for six years, but with a criminal record and no college degree, even in an economy desperate for workers I can’t find a good job.

I have moved furniture, sold cars, washed dishes, and done countless other poorly paid gigs with no future and no benefits. A few years ago, I was working as a valet at a Fenway hotel and was recruited for the in-house management training program. It would have provided a career path and opportunities for growth. I was so excited. But then they ran the background check, and not only was my invitation to the program withdrawn, I lost my valet job.

This kind of setback is devastating, and it keeps happening. Repeated rejection crushes the hard-earned self-worth I’ve cultivated and can drive me to make choices I know are bad for me.

I love film and once wanted to make films. At this point, I would settle for a good-paying job with growth opportunities and leadership potential where my talents and decades of lived experience could be recognized.

Even if I could get a good job, it's nearly impossible to find housing. Thanks to a [1988 amendment](#) to the Fair Housing Act championed by Senator Strom Thurmond, landlords can legally discriminate against anyone with a drug conviction. That puts a lot of us [on the streets](#).

I have lived in homeless shelters and rented rooms, slept on friends' couches and in the back room of a store where I worked. So far, I haven't been able to find a place to rent, because rental applications include a background check, and landlords always choose a tenant who appears less risky on paper. I have never signed a lease.

But I have hope. In my 40s, I became a restorative justice practitioner and co-founded a [nonprofit](#). I am proud of the work I do. In restorative justice circles, people come together to share the harm that they have done and that has been done to them. That's how I learned that my choices were driven by pain and trauma, and it's how I came to understand how my behavior hurt others.

If I could learn, so could my country. We could start repairing the harm of an era of mass incarceration. [State legislatures](#) could knock down rules that keep formerly incarcerated people from being [licensed](#) for things like cutting hair, working as a nurse's aide, or becoming a home inspector. They could regulate the [background check industry](#), which profits off of [misleading](#) information.

In addition, states could follow California's example and [automatically seal](#) most criminal records after a period, making it easier for people like me to find a job. And the new Congress could repeal the Thurmond amendment to the Fair Housing Act, giving me and millions of others a chance of finding a place to live.

At 8, I was a hurt little boy, not a delinquent. I was funneled into a system where my pain was answered with punishment. I want this country to turn the corner and live up to its potential, where a hurting child is met with a [culture of care](#) and support — no matter what his background might be.

George Halfkenny works to repair the harms of incarceration and addiction. He is a certified peer specialist and the co-founder of Thrive Communities in Lowell, a nonprofit that uses a restorative justice model to support formerly incarcerated people.

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