

Wisconsin, like many other states in the United States, has seen a tremendous growth in incarcerations. According to numbers from the Department of Corrections (DOC), Wisconsin's state prison population reached an all-time high in 2007 (Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, 2019). Even though the US has been trying to actively reduce prison populations, by the end of 2017, Wisconsin was still incarcerating almost as many people as it was in 2007. As of 11/30/18, total inmate population (which includes state and county jails) was 23,402 people. The total number of people with probation and/or parole requirements at the end of 11/30/18 was 65,556 (State Department of Corrections, 2018).

So what does this mean for the labor market in Wisconsin?

Despite the very low unemployment rates, there are still a lot of people available and ready to work. Looking at the numbers above, many of these workers have been incarcerated or involved with the law at some point in their lives. This leaves them with a criminal background to accompany them while they are job searching.

Job searching is already stressful but job searchers with a criminal background face unique but not impossible challenges. Criminal background checks are used by many employers in their pre-employment processes so there should be an expectation that they'll have to confront their past while trying to find a job.

Tips while job searching with a criminal background

Do you have a criminal background and are looking for a new job? Here are some tips to keep in mind while job searching:

- **Be clear.** On many job applications, you will see a section where you're asked to list prior criminal convictions. Be sure to pay attention to what the employer is asking you to disclose. Do they only want to know about prior felonies? Are they only interested in all convictions that occurred in the past 7 years? Note what they are asking for and disclose only this information.
- **Be honest.** This could be the most important tip. Never leave this section blank on a job application. Many employers are more concerned that an applicant is honest about their past. Keep in mind – Wisconsin Circuit Court records are available online to the public in Wisconsin. Failure to be truthful will often result in automatic disqualification. A lengthy explanation of each conviction is not required.
- **Be prepared.** It can be challenging being forced to address your criminal history during an interview. Be prepared by having a short script prepared if you are asked to elaborate on your criminal background. You may have to explain your conviction(s). Show clearly that you've learned from your mistakes and cite what you've done since to

improve your life. Try to explain how and why you would be a good employee. Be confident but direct by giving facts and keeping it brief. If you need some tips and tricks on how to approach this, talk with your FSET Case Manager for help!

- **Communicate Employer Incentive Programs.** Many employers are not aware of the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) or Federal Bonding. If the opportunity arises, you could use these as marketing tools with the employer. Ultimately, companies are in the business to make money. If you can show them that hiring you helps them with that, this may open an opportunity for you.
- **Letters of Explanation.** If the application asks you to list prior convictions, you may want to attach a letter of explanation instead. In this case, you would put "see attached letter of explanation" on the application. Your letter should list your convictions, acknowledge your responsibility, explain how you have changed and list what steps you have taken to better yourself since that time. Again, if you would like some assistance in writing a letter of explanation, ask your FSET case manager for help!
- **Letters of Recommendation.** Letters of recommendation may help you as well while job searching. Some possible people you could ask are your probation officer, past employers, clergy, volunteer supervisors, education instructors or your FSET case manager.

With a little preparation while being proactive, finding a job when you have a criminal background can help tremendously. If you have any questions or would like more assistance with the advice listed above, do not hesitate to contact your FSET case manager.

References:

Formerly Incarcerated Organizers Hope New State Leadership Brings Criminal Justice Reform
<https://milwaukeeenns.org/2019/01/16/formerly-incarcerated-organizers-hope-new-state-leadership-brings-criminal-justice-reform/>, 2019

State Department of Corrections Data and Reports,
<https://doc.wi.gov/Pages/DataResearch/DataAndReports.aspx>, 2018