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# Eliminating Barriers to Reentry for Returning Citizens:

## A 50 State Examination of Reentry Practices

## **Introduction**

Since 2002, the United States has had one of the highest rates of incarceration (531 per 100,000) among developed nations (World Prison Brief, 2023). Today, every U.S. state incarcerates more people per capita than other developed countries, on average 300 per 100,000 (Widra & Herring, 2021). Despite the decriminalization of crimes such as drug offenses, Blacks remain overrepresented within the U.S. carceral system. Approximately 32% of individuals incarcerated in 2022, both state and federal, were Black (Carson, 2023). In addition, when sentenced, Black men receive longer prison sentences than their white counterparts for similar offenses (Williams et al., 2019). However, criminal justice disparities are not limited to imprisonment rates. The United States Department of Justice records that more than 650,000 incarcerated individuals are released from prison every year. Stigmatization, limited education and employment opportunities, housing, and access to government assistance often complicate successful integration. Within three years of release, approximately two-thirds of those reentering society will likely be rearrested, with Black men having higher recidivism rates (Williams et al., 2019). The inequities formerly incarcerated Black people face when reentering communities is a critical policy issue. This case study examines barriers returning citizens encounter, current state and federal reentry practices/legislation, and policy solutions to ensure returning citizens adequately acclimate to their communities.



## **The Impact of Drug Policies and the Road to Mass Incarceration**

In 1951, Congress enacted mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug offenses with the passing of the Boggs Act (Gill, 2008). The Boggs Act enforced two-to-five-year minimum sentences for first offenses (Gill, 2008). By 1956, the Narcotics Control Act of 1956 (or the 1956 Boggs Act enhancements) was passed, increasing the Boggs Act's minimum prison sentences for drug crimes. By 1970, Congress removed mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses (Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970), as the laws were not effective and only impacted small-time drug dealers and addicts (Gill 2008; Kitwana, 2008). The public support for the War on Drugs in the 1970s, gave Congress the incentive to push through harsh drug enforcement initiatives (Nunn, 2002). Since the implementation of the War on Drugs, coined by President Nixon as a federal campaign over drug abuse prevention and control, aspects of reentry have changed for returning citizens due to the modifications to sentencing policy, specifically departing from the use of indeterminate sentencing (e.g., range of years; Brown, 2010). By the mid-1980s, mandatory minimum

sentences returned and were passed in all 50 states, with 24 states enacting three-strikes laws, 40 states requiring offenders to serve a minimum of 50% of prison terms (i.e., truth in sentencing), and other states requiring violent offenders to complete 85% of sentences (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). These changes in



sentencing laws generated larger prison populations and longer prison sentences—mass incarceration (Nunn, 2002). As a result of mass incarceration, parole officers' caseloads increased (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). The increase in caseloads, the shift from a rehabilitation to a law enforcement punitive model, and the use of surveillance technology (e.g., electronic monitoring), introduced an increased ability for the detection of parole violations, which, in turn, increased recidivism (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). For example, by 1985, 70% of returning citizens successfully completed supervision; yet, by 1997, the rate of completion decreased to 44% (Travis & Petersilia, 2001).

## **What Challenges/Barriers do Returning Citizens Face?**

The historical context of the War on Drugs and the era of mass incarceration has disproportionately affected Black communities contributing to high recidivism rates. The effects of these historical policies remain and exacerbate the barriers individuals with prior criminal legal system involvement encounter today. These barriers include:

- Difficulties in securing housing,
- Weak social support from loved ones,
- Limited vocational and educational skills,
- Neglected substance-use and mental disorders,
- Stigma of having a criminal record,
- Heightened financial burdens,
- Restrictive voting rights,
- And lack of identification post-release (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Bushway & Apel, 2012; Evans, 2014; Raphael, 2011; Williams et al., 2019).



## **CRIMINAL RECORDS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Employment skills are connected to recidivism. For example, returning citizens who found employment upon their release desisted from criminogenic activities for approximately 31 months compared to those who remained unemployed and recidivated at a faster rate of 17 months (Tripodi et al., 2017). Payne and Brown (2021) note in their study that reentry programs have limited availability and services centered around employment, particularly for Black men. Study participants argued that service providers were not aggressively advocating and helping individuals with employment opportunities, with some relying on themselves to counterbalance the inability of these programs to help returning citizens (Payne & Brown, 2021).

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act makes it unlawful for an employer to discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin (i.e., protected classes). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) states that the use of one's past arrest and conviction to preclude/disqualify employment violates Title VII, as it has disparate racial impact (EEOC, 2012; Swanson et al., 2014). However, approximately, 83% of human resource professionals used criminal history checks as a part of pre-hiring screening in 2021, an increase of 5% from 2018 (Society for Human Resource Management, 2021). Discriminatory hiring practices make securing adequate employment difficult for Black returning citizens. Many corporations refuse to hire individuals with felony criminal records, particularly in the health and education fields (Thompson, 2008; Wun, 2016). Black men with criminal records are less likely to be hired for entry-level jobs than similarly situated white and Latino counterparts (Pager, 2009). Further, white and Latino men are more likely to secure employment than Black men without a criminal record (Pager, 2003; 2009). This concept reflects the perception of Black men as innate and criminal, which further alienates this population when reentering society (Payne & Brown, 2016; 2021).

## **VOTING RESTRICTIONS**

Voting is a pivotal component of the re-entry and rehabilitation journey. In the United States, approximately 4.6 million convicted individuals experience voting disenfranchisement, which hinders participation in the democratic process and creates challenges for reentry (Uggen et al., 2022). This practice disproportionately impacts the Black community, as Black individuals experience a disenfranchisement rate that is 3.5 times higher than that of non-Blacks (Uggen et al., 2022). Denying previously incarcerated individuals the right to vote represents a lingering form of punishment after completion of sentences and reentering society (Uggen et al., 2022). This right provides returning citizens with the sense of participatory action and contributes to building a positive

identity as community members (Budd & Monazzam, 2023). In turn, restoring voting rights reduces recidivism rates (Budd & Monazzam, 2023). While there has been a decrease in the number of previously incarcerated individuals denied the right to vote between 2016 and 2022, twenty-five states still uphold legislation that restrict this right following an individual's release (Felon Voting Rights, 2023).

### **SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Returning citizens rely heavily on family kinship and social support networks to meet basic emotional and physical needs, such as food, shelter, and transportation (Mills & Codd, 2008; Schroeder et al., 2007). For individuals with a history of substance use, emotional support from immediate family helps with relapse (Petersilia, 2003). Additionally, during incarceration, individuals whose family members consistently visited were more likely to have promising outcomes post-release (Browning et al., 2001; Holt & Miller, 1972). Further, formerly incarcerated individuals who play the role of a parent within a traditional household, such as a father or mother, similarly have positive outcomes (Visher, 2013). Incarceration and reentry impacts families and communities, especially children, as often these individuals are parents. Parent-child contact is critical for the well-being of both individuals and encourages strong connections, which is particularly imperative concerning Black men who are often sentenced to long terms (Browning et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2019).

### **HOUSING AND GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE**

Evidence shows that 10% of individuals released from prison face housing instability (Lake, 2021). Barriers such as background checks, eviction and housing forfeitures, denials based on criminal records, and housing unaffordability make it difficult to secure adequate permanent housing (Lake, 2021). The absence of a stable residence carries further repercussions including difficulties securing employment, accessing vital government assistance programs, obtaining healthcare, and accessing healthy foods. For example, formerly incarcerated individuals are twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity than the general population (CLASP, 2012). Governmental services, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid, are essential to the successful reentry of those impacted by the criminal justice system. The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation conducted a 50-state analysis that explored welfare benefit bans for people with prior felony drug convictions (Neal & Hopkins, 2023). The analysis revealed that upon release, individuals

are barred from obtaining approval for TANF and SNAP and enrolling in Medicaid. Nearly half a million individuals with prior felony convictions are impacted by full-state bans (Neal & Hopkins, 2023). The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) allows states to place bans and other restrictions on TANF and SNAP for people with drug-related felony convictions without applying these restrictions to other types of convictions (Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP], 2012). TANF and SNAP are essential programs that can reduce the depth of poverty and the likelihood of being food insecure by 30% (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [CBPP], 2022; Lombe & Nebbitt, 2021). Additionally, SNAP is associated with improved health and reduced healthcare costs (Lombe & Nebbitt, 2021). Access to these programs reduces some financial barriers, aiding returning citizens (Lombe & Nebbitt, 2021).

### **SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL ISSUES**

Returning citizens, who are more likely to experience infectious and chronic health conditions, substance use disorders, behavioral health issues, and severe mental illness, need Medicaid services (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2023a). Access to healthcare coverage can significantly enhance health outcomes and reduce recidivism (Albertson et al., 2020). However, state policies that involve termination and waiting periods for Medicaid enrollment among incarcerated individuals create obstacles for returning citizens in accessing these essential resources (Albertson et al., 2020; Baumrucker, 2023). The inability to meet basic needs such as food, healthcare, and housing inhibits successful reintegration into society (CLASP, 2023).



## **Methodology**

States have jurisdiction over carceral and reentry practices, resulting in a spectrum of reentry initiatives and varying degrees of successful reintegration nationwide. Therefore, critically evaluating each state's reintegration policies and programs is imperative to identify and promote best practices, ensuring all individuals returning to their communities are afforded the best chance for successful reentry. This case study assesses all 50 states and the District of Columbia's (D.C.) reentry initiatives. This study examines state and federal re-entry practices, highlights effective approaches, advocates for broader adoptions of these practices, and ultimately enhances the prospects for successful reintegration nationwide. This study acknowledges the intricate interplay of historical factors, particularly the enduring impact of the War on Drugs and the recent decriminalization of drug offenses, which disproportionately affect the Black community. It focuses on evaluating the current landscape of state and federal legislation and practices concerning returning citizens. The methodology includes:

- Data collected from public sources, which include information from state Departments of Corrections and various legislative resources.
- An assessment of data points, examining the legal and policy frameworks pertaining to critical areas of reentry, including voting rights, employment opportunities, criminal records, and the utilization of personal identification for returning citizens, both at the state and federal levels.

## **Findings**

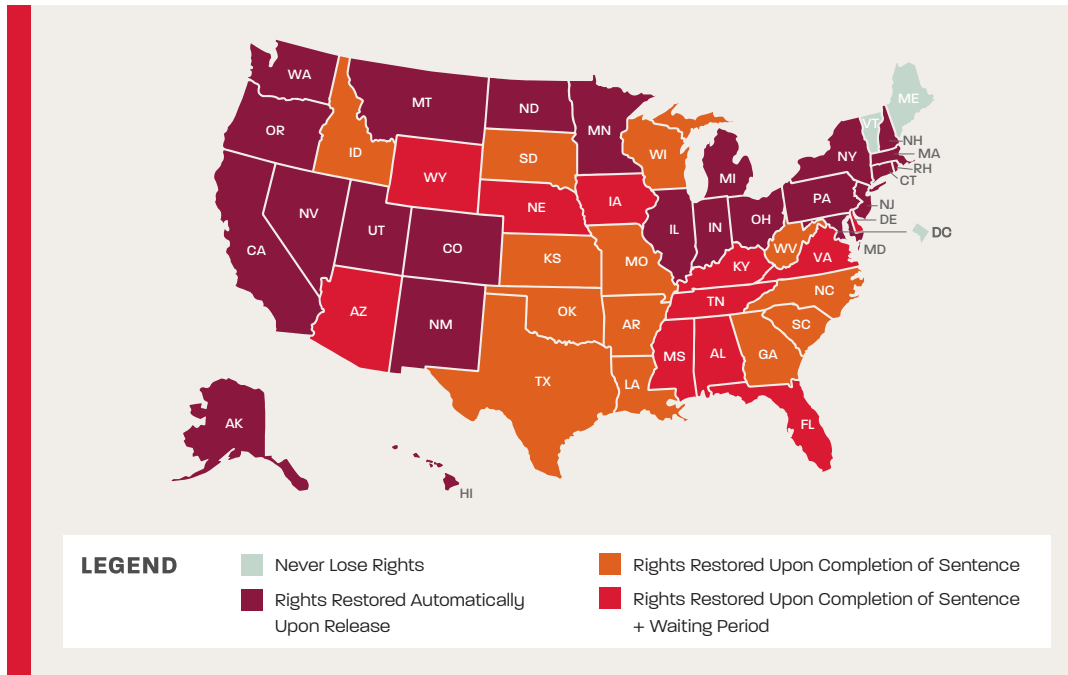
### **VOTERS' RIGHTS**

Returning citizens have voting restrictions that can be categorized into four main areas: 1) never loses rights; 2) automatic restoration upon release; 3) upon completion of sentence; and 4) upon completion of sentence with an additional waiting period (NCSL, 2023b).

Figure 1 displays the varying voting rights restoration practices for all 50 states and D.C. Individuals in D.C., Maine, and Vermont never lose their right to vote. In 23 states, returning citizens automatically have their voting rights restored; however, individuals in Maryland who have convictions related to buying or selling votes can only have their rights restored via pardon (NCSL, 2023b). In 14 states, returning citizens must complete their sentences, which can indicate finishing community supervision (i.e., parole, probation), paying fines, and restitution before automatically restoring their rights (NCSL, 2023b). In 11 states, returning citizens lose their voting rights permanently for certain crimes (usually sexual and violent crimes), require a pardon, complete a waiting period after sentence completion, or require additional measures to be taken before rights restoration (NCSL, 2023b).



**FIGURE 1. STATES VOTING RIGHTS RESTORATION FOR RETURNING CITIZENS**



**SNAPSHOT: FLORIDA AMENDMENT 4**

On November 6, 2018, Floridians passed the *Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative*, marking the 4th amendment to the state constitution (MyFlorida, 2023). This initiative granted voting rights to previously incarcerated individuals upon the completion of their entire sentence (MyFlorida, 2023). However, the landscape shifted in 2019 when Governor Ron DeSantis signed Florida Senate Bill 7066 (SB 7066) into law (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023). This legislation stipulated that convicted felons must fulfill “all terms of sentence,” including full payment of restitution, fines, fees, and costs associated with their conviction before regaining voting rights (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023). Legal challenges emerged against SB 7066, arguing that this requirement violated the constitution (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023). On September 11, 2020, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Florida’s authority to mandate the payment of fines and fees as a prerequisite for reacquiring the right to vote (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023).

## PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

Many past offenders, post-release, must have forms of identification to properly reintegrate in the community, particularly for employment. States' Department of Corrections collaborate with other federal agencies to assist returning individuals with obtaining personal identification, such as state-issued identification cards, drivers' license, social security cards, birth certificates, and inmate or temporary cards that help with retrieving state identification cards (NCSL, 2023c; see Table 1). Some states, such as Alaska, Montana, Washington, and Wisconsin, require the incarcerated individual to pay fully or partially to obtain their identification cards. While incarcerated, Montana and New Jersey's Department of Corrections provide information to offenders on how to receive aid or obtain their personal documents, however, the individual is responsible for payment and retrieving these documents.



**TABLE 1. STATE ASSISTANCE WITH PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION ATTAINMENT**

STATE	SOCIAL SECURITY	BIRTH CERTIFICATE	STATE ID	DRIVER'S LICENSE	TEMPORARY/ NON-DRIVER CARD
Alabama	●	●			●
Alaska			●		
Arizona	●	●			●
Colorado	●	●	●		
Connecticut	●	●	●	●	
Delaware			●		
District of Columbia					●
Florida		●	●		
Georgia			●		
Idaho	●			●	●
Indiana					●
Kansas					●
Maine	●	●	●	●	
Massachusetts			●		
Michigan					●
Minnesota		●	●		
Mississippi			●	●	
Missouri	●	●	●		
Nebraska		●			
Nevada					●
New Jersey	●	●			●
New York	●	●			●
North Carolina	●	●		●	
Ohio					●
Oklahoma				●	●
Oregon					●
South Carolina	●	●	●	●	
Washington					●
Wisconsin			●		

## **CRIMINAL RECORD AND EMPLOYMENT**

Since 1998, thirty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted “Ban the Box” legislation. This legislation restricts public and private employers from inquiring about an applicant’s criminal record during the initial job application process (Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2023). However, the extent of these restrictions can vary by state. Some states limit the scope of “Ban the Box” to specific job categories, such as executive branch positions or jobs directly related to an applicant’s criminal history (Avery & Lu, 2021; Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2023). “Ban the Box” legislation does not entirely prohibit employees from later asking about criminal records or conducting background checks as part of the hiring process (Avery & Lu, 2021; Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2023). In contrast, 13 states have no regulations in place regarding the inclusion of criminal history questions on job applications (See Table 2; Avery & Lu, 2021; Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2023). New York and Florida stand out as states with broader restrictions unrelated to “Ban the Box.” New York prohibits discrimination based on an applicant’s criminal record for public and private employers and licensing agencies (Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2023). Whereas Florida does not limit application-stage inquiries of criminal history, and public employers may disqualify job applicants if their convictions “directly relate” to the job (Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2023).



**TABLE 2: STATE EMPLOYMENT APPLICATION RESTRICTIONS**

BAN THE BOX (PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EMPLOYERS)	BAN THE BOX (PUBLIC EMPLOYERS ONLY)	EMPLOYMENT RESTRICTIONS	NO REGULATIONS
California	Arizona	Florida	Alabama
Colorado	Delaware	New York	Alaska
Connecticut	Georgia		Arkansas
District of Columbia	Indiana**		Idaho
Hawaii	Kansas**		Iowa
Illinois	Kentucky**		Michigan
Maine	Louisiana		Mississippi
Maryland	Missouri*		Montana
Massachusetts	Nebraska		South Carolina
Minnesota	Nevada		South Dakota
New Jersey	New Hampshire		Texas
New Mexico	North Carolina*		West Virginia
Oregon	North Dakota		Wyoming
Rhode Island	Ohio		
Vermont*	Oklahoma**		
Washington	Pennsylvania		
	Tennessee		
	Utah		
	Virginia		
	Wisconsin		

\*Not allowed to inquire unless crime pertains to job or triggers disqualification

\*\* Ban the box laws only apply to state executive branch, state agencies, or classified service jobs

### FEDERAL LEGISLATION

Federal legislation has played a crucial role in supporting the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals. These policies influence employment prospects, Medicaid access, and educational benefits. One notable example is the 2015 enactment of the Second Chance Pell Experiment, a reform that provided Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals for postsecondary education (Federal Student Aid, 2023). Subsequent expansions by the Department of Education boosted participation among colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Additionally, the act aided those with default loans by offering a “fresh start” (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Under this experiment, approximately 40,000 students received Pell Grants through the 2021-2022

award year (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Simplification Act of 2020 expanded eligibility by reinstating Pell Grant access for eligible confined or incarcerated individuals in prison education programs (PEPs) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The Second Chance Pell experiment concluded on June 30, 2023; on July 1, 2023, an estimated 760,000 individuals became eligible for Pell Grants through PEPs (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

In 2019, Congress passed the Fair Chance to Compete for Jobs Act, which marked progress for reentry and employment policy (Hartman, 2021). The law reformed hiring practices by prohibiting federal employers and private-sector federal contractors from inquiring about an applicant's arrest and conviction record until they make a conditional offer of employment (Hartman, 2021). The change promotes fairness and reduces barriers to employment for individuals with criminal records. However, federal law still disqualifies individuals with specific convictions from working in sectors, such as banking and transportation, and in various state-licensed positions within healthcare and education (Collateral Consequences Resource Center, 2020). Implementing similar Ban the Box policies enhanced employment opportunities for individuals with convictions, bolstered public safety, and reduced recidivism rates (Hartman, 2021). Moreover, the Second Chance Reauthorization Act of 2018 is another influential component of federal policy. It authorizes allocating federal grants to various entities, including government agencies and nonprofit organizations (National Institute of Justice, 2022). These grants are designated to support formerly incarcerated individuals as they transition back into communities. This approach encompasses comprehensive services, including employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing support, family programming, mentoring, and victim assistance (National Institute of Justice, 2022).

Currently, the 2023 Reentry Act, a bipartisan endeavor introduced on March 30, 2023, is under consideration in both the House of Representatives and the Senate (H.R.2400; S.1165). This legislation enables states to reinstate access to critical healthcare services, encompassing addiction and mental health treatment, through Medicaid for incarcerated individuals up to 30 days before release (Tonko et al., 2023). This provision streamlines the transition to community care, reduces the risk of overdose fatalities, and addresses a critical need in the reintegration process (Tonko et al., 2023). The Clean Slate Act of 2023, introduced as H.R. 2930 on April 27, 2023, proposes a comprehensive framework for sealing records related to specific federal criminal offenses. Under this legislation, courts would automatically seal records pertaining to minor drug possession, nonviolent marijuana crimes, or non-conviction arrests. Additionally, the Democracy Restoration Act (a bill to address the restoration of voting rights) initially included in broader democracy reform bills in 2019 and 2021, was reintroduced as standalone bills (S.1677 in the Senate on May 18, 2023, and H.R. 4987 in the House on July 27, 2023).

Millions of individuals who have been released from prison but remain disenfranchised are the focus of this federal legislation, which aims to restore their voting rights in federal elections (Brennan Center for Justice, 2023). Collectively, these legislative actions acknowledge the complexity of the challenges faced by returning individuals and emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to reintegration. By addressing various aspects of returning citizens' needs, these initiatives aim to improve the prospects for successful reentry and reduce the risk of recidivism.

## **Policy Recommendations**

State and federal legislation, or the lack thereof, has made reintegration difficult. Reforming current legislation and implementing new initiatives will benefit Black returning citizens. Therefore, policymakers should consider this comprehensive set of policy recommendations aimed at addressing these intricate challenges:

1. **Add previously incarcerated individuals to the federal Fair Housing Act as a protected group.** In 2016, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued a memorandum addressing housing disparities among previously incarcerated individuals. The memo discourages landlords from denying housing based solely on a criminal record. In addition, it offers guidance on determining whether a housing provider's use of criminal history has a discriminatory effect in violating the Fair Housing Act. HUD's recommendations emphasize that housing providers can establish rules or procedures based on criminal history. Still, they should do so judiciously and in line with nondiscriminatory objectives. While these guidelines are in place, they do not prohibit property owners from rejecting applicants due to their criminal history. Designating previously incarcerated individuals as a protected group could reduce housing disparities and simplify the navigation of HUD's guidelines for landlords.
2. **Allow incarcerated individuals to maintain voting rights.** Only three states allow incarcerated individuals to retain voting rights during incarceration. Maine, Vermont, and the District of Columbia allow incarcerated individuals to vote via absentee ballots. Maintaining the right to vote can reduce recidivism rates, aid community integrations, improve public safety, and increase returning citizens' engagement in the democratic process.
3. **Register individuals to vote before release.** Correctional facilities can simplify the reintegration process by providing incarcerated individuals with the voting registration form and assisting them in registering to vote before they are released.
4. **Provide individuals with state IDs or temporary non-driver IDs upon release.** Implementation can occur at state and federal levels through legislative measures and collaboration with relevant agencies, including correctional facilities and Departments

of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Correctional facilities can provide returning citizens with state IDs or partner with DMVs to exchange temporary IDs for state IDs. Federal support can also be provided through grants or incentives to encourage states to adopt and implement such policies, further fostering reintegration and enhancing public safety.

5. **Adopt public and private “Ban the Box” legislation.** Studies have shown that implementing “Ban the Box” legislation increases employment among previously incarcerated individuals (National Conference of State Legislators, 2021). States can reduce recidivism rates and improve stability by mandating that public and private sector employees do not inquire about criminal history.
6. **Pass the Reentry Act.** This bipartisan legislation was introduced during the 118th Congress (2023-2024) by representatives Paul D. Tonko (D-NY), Mike Turner (R-OH), John Rutherford (R-FL), and David Trone (D-MD), and Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Mike Braun (R-IN) and would enable states to reinstate access to critical healthcare services through Medicaid for incarcerated individuals up to 30 days before release.



7. **Increase the use of public health approaches for substance use disorders among returning citizens.** It is imperative to shift towards more public health and risk reduction approaches when addressing returning citizens with substance use disorders, placing a strong emphasis on evidence-based practices. By adopting a public health approach, it becomes possible to alleviate the high rates of imprisonment and the lengthy sentences faced by individuals struggling with substance dependency, as well as those with non-possession offenses. Substance use plays a significant role in all phases of the criminal justice process, encompassing arrest, pretrial proceedings, trial and plea bargaining, and sentencing. For instance, substance use, or addiction should not be a determining factor in a defendant's eligibility for bail or the severity of their sentence. The implementation of zero-tolerance drug policies in relation to community supervision through probation or parole is counterproductive, contributing to the issue of mass incarceration.



**8. Reform pretrial risk assessment tools.** The use of risk assessment tools is crucial for judicial discretion. However, reforming pretrial risk assessments is especially critical, mainly when these assessments include consideration of substance use. Generally, pretrial assessments use substance use as a risk factor for criminality/dangerousness (Arnold Ventures, 2017; Scott, 2021). One notable example of the reformation of pretrial assessment tools is the Arnold Ventures Foundation’s Public Safety Assessment (PSA), which refrains from incorporating a history of drug use as a risk factor (Arnold Ventures, 2017). This approach recognizes that substance use is not a determining factor for criminality.

## **Conclusion**

Over the years, the United States has grappled with the challenges faced by returning citizens, particularly Black individuals, who are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system. These challenges encompass difficulties securing housing, employment, voting rights, personal identification, and access to crucial government assistance programs. These barriers determine whether individuals successfully return to society or if they return to the penal system. Historical factors, such as the War on Drugs and mass incarceration, have exacerbated these issues, creating a cycle of reincarceration and perpetuating systemic disparities. To reduce recidivism rates and end the cycle of punishment, previously incarcerated individuals need resources that enable stability. Proposed are several policy suggestions and legislative initiatives at both the state and federal levels to address these barriers and promote successful reintegration:

- Protection of housing rights.
- Maintenance of voting rights while incarcerated.
- More state collaborations with federal agencies for identification cards.
- Pass the Reentry Act of 2023.
- Increased use of Ban the Box legislation nationwide.
- Public health approaches for substance use disorders.
- Reformation of risk assessment tools.

While federal legislation significantly impacts the reintegration process, states retain jurisdiction over the services and resources they offer returning citizens. Therefore, it is imperative for states to proactively take the necessary steps to enhance and expand the quality of these services. By addressing the challenges posed by the criminal justice system and providing comprehensive support to formerly incarcerated individuals, a more equitable and just society that offers every citizen the opportunity for a second chance and a fresh start is possible.

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