The Consideration of Criminal Records in Occupational Licensing

A variety of professions, from trucking to barbering to positions in the health care field, require that individuals obtain licenses to practice in the United States. These occupational licenses are regulated at the state level, and in many cases, people who have been trained to or are seeking work in certain fields are ultimately prohibited from receiving the licensing they need because of their criminal records.

Nearly 10 million adults return to the community from jails and federal and state prisons each year in the United States, and they face significant challenges related to employment. Numerous studies have found that people require a combination of family support, community assistance, and economic opportunity to stay out of the criminal justice system. Access to employment is a critical component of this web of support, as a steady job provides financial resources and prosocial connections that build motivation.

As the field develops more knowledge about what works to reduce recidivism and promote job readiness, the National Reentry Resource Center, a project of The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, will continue to work with expert partners to provide education, training, and resources to policymakers who seek to implement effective legislation and policies.

What are Collateral Consequences?

When returning to the community after incarceration, people often face severe, unanticipated penalties beyond the court’s sentence, which are commonly referred to as “collateral consequences.”

NEW MEXICO’S LEGISLATURE enacted the Criminal Offender Employment Act, which finds that the public is “best protected” when people with conviction records are “given the opportunity to secure employment or to engage in a lawful trade, occupation or profession and that barriers to such employment should be removed to make rehabilitation feasible.”

Nationally, more than 45,000 collateral consequences restrict all aspects of civic life, including the right to vote and access to government benefits, housing, and student loans; the vast majority of these collateral consequences are employment-related. For example, in an effort to advance public safety and ensure high-quality services, states require licenses for particular businesses or occupations, such as for health care professionals, transportation specialists, and cosmetologists. Restrictions specific to these occupational licenses are one significant type of barrier to employment opportunities for people with criminal records.

Limited Access to Occupational Licensing

License applicants may be barred from their chosen profession no matter how long ago their conviction occurred or whether the offense has a demonstrable relationship to successful performance of the duties of the occupation. Studies that have examined recidivism have found that most repeat arrests occur within three years of the first conviction, and that after four to seven years, the risk of recidivism is greatly reduced.

As explained in the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidance on the use of conviction records in employment decisions, an automatic blanket exclusion from employment because of one’s criminal record may have a disparate racial impact, which violates federal civil rights law. Therefore, the EEOC recommends a job-related analysis of an applicant’s offense and an individualized assessment prior to any disqualification.

A nationwide survey of collateral consequences by the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers indicated that dozens of states have adopted laws generally limiting the consideration of criminal records by occupational licensing.
Lessons Learned from Louisiana and Ohio

Several states have passed laws aimed at creating a more uniform policy on the consideration of a criminal record across different occupational licensing boards. With similar standards in place across occupations, greater efficiencies in the implementation of the laws can be expected. In Louisiana, House Bill 295 (2012) prohibited licensing boards from denying a license based solely on an applicant’s criminal record. In Ohio, Senate Bill 337 (2012) allowed people to apply for a certificate of qualification for employment that lifts the automatic ban on obtaining a professional license and limits the extent to which a criminal record can be considered in licensing decisions.

Data collection is important for monitoring compliance and measuring outcomes. For example, for a law that prohibits blanket disqualifications and specifies certain criteria for considering a past record, the board should be required to report, at minimum, the following: the number of applicants with criminal records; the number of people denied licenses based on their records; and the type of record that was the basis for the denial. For the Florida policy, each licensing board is required to file a report every four years detailing the criminal records-based restrictions on occupational licenses. Other states have enacted similar requirements for individual licensing boards. Collecting this information may require additional expenditures, depending on the type of data-collating infrastructure that already exists. Absent such information, however, policymakers would lack the ability to gauge the success and outcomes of the new law.