

I lay restless in my grandma's small apartment where I occupied the let out couch indefinitely. I lay on my back agitated, staring up at the ^{cracked,} white plaster ceiling. I sat up in the dark hugging my knees tightly against my chest, trying to guard against the silent anxiety creeping into my gut. I rocked myself back and forth how a mother does when she tries to calm her baby. It didn't work. I threw myself back into the lumpy mattress in frustration.

There was an ominous feeling beginning to settle over me. I wasn't going to make it. I had been "home" from the joint for seven months and had only ^{managed to stay} ~~been~~ employed for two of those.

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My first couple weeks out, a grocery packing warehouse called the dice on me, despite my record. The only problem was it was a train trip and two bus rides out in the suburbs. It seemed like I spent more getting to and from work than I actually earned at work. After a few absences and tardies they let me go.

After that, the door of opportunity slammed shut in my face over and over again. Temp agencies wouldn't even hire me. I began to cringe everytime I had to check the "dreaded box"; "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" ☐ Yes ☐ No

Everyone was growing impatient; my Parole officer was threatening to violate me and send me back to jail; my grandma was threatening to throw me out; and my pregnant girlfriend ^{wanted} ~~needed~~ to know what my plan for our baby's future was. I was beginning to feel desperate.

I had saw a commercial for Job Corps earlier that day. "Free job training and career opportunities" is what they were offering. I saw a way out. An escape from this suffocating environment and a legit way to elevate myself financially. I

A representative answered and began asking me a series of questions. Everything looked promising; I was old enough, I had a high-school diploma. But I never made it past the third question. "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" My heart sank in unison with the phone into the receiver.

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~~the narrative~~ This is the aftermath of the war on drugs and mass incarceration where one can be legally barred from employment, housing assistance, professional licenses where one can be self-employed, voting, jury service etc. Some of the most fundamental rights of a citizen. The ~~data~~^{every} scary thing is, that the narrative above is that of 1 in ³¹ adults who are behind bars, on probation or on parole. To put that in even ~~more~~ greater perspective, is the ~~the~~ North Lawndale neighborhood on the Westside of Chicago, where 70% of that community is ex-offenders.

Employment satisfies a basic human need to be self-sufficient, to support one's family, and to feel purposeful and ~~like a contributing member~~ valuable. It helps instill self-esteem and to lower the chances for re-offending. How are the hundreds of thousands being released from prisons every year, be able to move forward when the invisible hand is holding them back?