

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/its-time-to-leave-punishment-at-the-prison-gate>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

At a time when politicians and economists of every stripe and persuasion are decrying the lack of opportunity, wage stagnation, and growing income inequality that seem to characterize the United States in 2015, few seem to fully appreciate the mountain of state laws that ensure those facts remain for those Americans with a criminal record.

Despite recently proposed bipartisan federal legislationsuch as the re-introduced[REDEEM Act](#)that aims to remove some of these barriers to success, and Apples decision to[reverse course](#)and no longer ban construction workers with felony convictions from the construction site of its new headquarters, some 70 million of our fellow Americans deal with significant hurdles every day. Those hurdles are the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction.

Veras Center on Sentencing and Corrections recently published[a report on collateral consequences](#)that makes several key points: first, it demonstrates the breadth and bewildering complexity of the laws, which have been promulgated in every state, that make a criminal conviction a life-changing event never to be shaken or concluded; second, it describes, through representative examples, the limited efforts made in states in recent years to roll back or mitigate the consequences; and third, it lays out all of the ways that these efforts fall short. This dispiriting overview flies in the face of all the talk over the last 15 years about the importance of reentry, the need for second chances, and the value of redemption. How can you redeem your life, start on a second chance to get it right, if you cant get an education or job, rent a place to live, or even exercise your franchise and vote?

While Veras report is directed at state and local policymakers who want to learn more about the kinds of changes made by their colleagues in other parts of the countryboth their promise and limitationsthere are other resources available online that provide comprehensive catalogues of these laws to help lawyers and judges advise criminal defendants on the consequences of convictions and to help those with records on how to seek relief. The[American Bar Association](#)uses a map which describes the consequences of different offenses by state; the[Collateral Consequences Resource Center](#), which also uses a map to list the various barriers by state, also includes information on recent reform activities in each state; for New York lawyers and advocates, Columbia Universitys Law School maintains a[web-based resource](#)for the consequences of convictions in the state. Specialized resources on employment can be found on the National Employment Law Project[website](#); and to spur on reform efforts nationwide, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers has issued a[road map](#)to restore rights and status after arrest or conviction.

However, even ardent advocates of services and supports for those leaving prison or jail will fall short of their goals if they fail to push for the legal and policy changes needed to remove the collateral consequences of criminal conviction. Legislators that speak with feeling about redemption and the virtue of a second chance will be found wanting if they continue to refuse Pell grants to ready and willing students in prison, deny those who have served their time the right to vote, restrict licensing for far too many categories of employment, and permit public colleges to deny admission to those with criminal records. Its time to leave punishment at the prison gate.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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