



# How Community Partnerships Can Help Formerly Incarcerated People Find Jobs

Written by [Linda Bell](#)

Over 30 years, Na'im Al-Amin would spend time in juvenile detention, the county jail and be sent to prison three times.

After his second release from prison, he was determined to make a change. Al-Amin attended and graduated from Kansas State University, received three degrees and had ambitions of becoming a lawyer. But because of his record, he couldn't find a job.

"The only thing that the employers focused on was the fact that I had a felony conviction for marijuana," he says. "Even though I had the degree work and I hadn't had any more interactions with the police over six years, they wouldn't give me the

opportunity. I would essentially revert to a scarcity mindset and start back selling drugs.”

Nearly two million people are behind bars in the United States, the highest incarceration rate in the world. Once released, formerly incarcerated people experience many difficulties reintegrating into society, including securing a quality job. Without effective programs and support from the communities they return to, ex-offenders are likely to end up back in prison. Community partnerships can play a significant role in preventing recidivism by taking five specific actions.

## Identify High-Quality Jobs

Over [600,000 people transition](#) from prisons to the community each year. Of the more than [50,000 people who exited](#) federal prisons in 2010, 30% were not able to find jobs four years after they were released.

The formerly incarcerated people who do find employment often secure low-paying positions. Research shows that community partnerships and programs that provide training and placement services into high-quality jobs with upward mobility are the most effective in reducing recidivism rates.

“If they don’t have meaningful employment and if they’re working at a minimum wage job that undervalues their contribution, they end up being short on money,” says Dwight Tostenson, CEO and co-founder of the [Redemption Project](#), an organization dedicated to reducing the chance of recidivism.

“They have to pay their bills somehow. So, they tend to go back to doing what they know how to do best, which is a life of crime. This then puts them right back into the system again,” he adds.

For formerly incarcerated [Black and Hispanic people](#), the problem of finding employment is even more acute. Compared to white men, [one study found](#) that people of color with a criminal record were less likely to get contacted for an interview or offered a job. In the hiring process, white men with criminal records are typically looked at more positively than black men without any criminal records.

“If companies are saying we’re going to respond to systemic racism and address these issues, it’s difficult for that to happen and to have a more diverse workplace without taking into account the impact that mass incarceration has, especially on Black and brown people,” says Aedan Macdonald, Director of Justice Through Code at Columbia University.

## Manage Community Reentry

Of the more than [400,000 prisoners released in 2005](#), 68% of them were arrested within three years. The communities that most former prisoners often return to are poor, disenfranchised neighborhoods with high crime.

“If we look at the impact on communities of color, there’s a very clear link between living in poverty and lifetime likelihood of incarceration in this country,” says Macdonald.

Community-based organizations and partnerships can play a critical role in prison reentry. They are the connection to community services for individuals still incarcerated and can provide services once they are outside the prison.

In Al-Amin’s third and final prison sentence, he designed the services he wished were waiting for him after he was released. In his prison cell, he wrote a business plan for [SWAGG INC](#), which stands for Serve Witness And Give Guidance, Inspiration Never Ceases.

The goal of the non-profit organization is to end recidivism in Kansas City through community partnerships with organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters Kansas City and the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce. SWAGG INC focuses on reentry planning, providing clients with services one year before release including employment, education and entrepreneurship support.

“The reentry piece solves for housing, transportation, mental health service, entrepreneurial development, education, and also employment etiquette,” says Al-Amin. “We’re managing that relationship with our clients to help them discharge successfully.”

## Offer Wrap-Around Services

[Formerly incarcerated people](#) struggle to reintegrate into their communities because they can’t secure a job, but that’s only one of the many issues they may face. Quality healthcare, education, mentorship and social services are among the barriers. Helping former prisoners secure and maintain employment requires a multi-pronged approach.

“Meaningful employment does drastically reduce the rate at which individuals recidivate,” says Tostenson. “There’s a lack of employment and drug addiction. It can be transportation or lack of housing. All of those things play a role in recidivism.”

Patrice Funderburg, Executive Director of [The Center for Community Transitions](#) says developing wraparound services can ensure that formerly incarcerated people have the most significant possibility of success.

“Many folks have experienced long time incarceration and so they aren’t digitally literate,” she says. “They aren’t financially literate. They may not understand the online

job application. There may be health concerns, almost 40% of individuals that have had any experience in incarceration, have some history of mental health. Many are not literate from an educational standpoint.”

## Tap People with Lived Experiences

The strength of community partnerships is that they operate in the neighborhoods where formerly incarcerated people live. Funderburg notes that they tend to be staffed with individuals who have been incarcerated or are close to someone who has.

“Community partnerships are important because they are the closest to the solutions, they are the closest to the day-to-day interactions,” she says. “They are the closest to the barriers that an individual who has experienced incarceration or who has a felony conviction on their record – they understand.”

Stanley Richards is one of those people that leads from experience.

Beginning at a young age, Richards cycled in and out of jail and prison. During his final incarceration, he committed his life to advocating for people impacted by the criminal justice system.

He is now the Deputy CEO of [The Fortune Society](#). The New York-based organization offers a suite of services including the Employment Services program. The program provides formerly incarcerated job seekers with the skills necessary to obtain employment and thrive in the workplace like job placement assistance and readiness workshops.

“We consider ourselves a one-stop-shop place,” he says. “No matter what door someone enters in, they can have access to our Fortune community. People can be in a community that is safe and they can find who they are through our services and community engagement.”

## Partner with Second Chance Employers

With an unemployment rate of 27%, formerly incarcerated individuals are a talent pool that is often untapped and underutilized by employers. Only [5% of hiring managers](#) say they are actively recruiting people with criminal records.

“We are not asking an employer to do us a favor,” says Richards. “What we’re asking employers is to give our participants a fair shake. We know that our participants are skilled, energetic, committed people who can add to an employee’s capacity and add to the workforce.”

JP Morgan Chase and Gap Inc. are among the second-chance employers committed to looking beyond someone's criminal record by partnering with community-based organizations like the Fortune Society and the Center for Employment Opportunities. Because of the current worker shortage, more companies are giving ex-offenders a second look. While the data is promising, there's still a long way to go.

"We want to try to change the policies that impact so many people who are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system and educate the public around the potential of formerly incarcerated people," says Richards.

"Today's market is a huge opportunity for corporations to step forward and engage organizations like Fortune that can provide qualified, hardworking, committed individuals who happen to be formerly incarcerated into the world of work," he adds.