



## Paying Time After Time: The Costs of Criminal Record Stigma

Submitted by: *Elaina R. McWilliams and Bronwyn A. Hunter*

In 2018, researchers from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County invited members of a nationwide Facebook Group to complete an online survey if they were

over 18 and had a felony and/or misdemeanor conviction. In the survey, we asked about 1) whether they believed that most people have negative attitudes toward people with criminals



Figure 1 Photograph by Eric Fischer. CC 2.0

records ("perceived stigma"); 2) whether they had negative attitudes toward themselves because they had a criminal record ("internalized stigma"); 3) whether they had experienced discrimination due to their criminal records; 4) whether they withdrew or kept their criminal records a secret to cope with the stigma they perceived around them; and, 5) their present-day quality of life.

“These findings point to the importance of reducing criminal record stigma and discrimination, so that individuals with criminal records have more opportunities to enhance their quality of life without having to withdraw from society or keep their record a secret.”

### Highlights

**Perceived stigma is common among people with criminal records.**

**This stigma can lead someone to keep their past a secret.**

**We can reduce criminal record stigma and discrimination to provide work and social opportunities and enhance quality of life post-incarceration.**

One hundred and ninety-eight people shared their experiences in our survey. This group of respondents included 116 men and 82 women who reported a diverse array of racial and ethnic backgrounds. They resided in 182 unique zip codes across 27 states. This study explored the many ways that criminal record stigma can impact people's day to day experiences. We invited them to share about their experiences of discrimination, how they see themselves, how they cope, and how they feel about their quality of life.

Our findings illustrate the prevalence of criminal record stigma and discrimination. Individuals may withdraw or keep their record a secret to protect themselves from judgement and mistreatment. Our findings also suggest that criminal record stigma can lead to decreased quality of life for individuals with criminal records, and that their quality of life may particularly be hindered when they feel the need to keep their criminal record a secret.

### ***Results***

- It was common for participants to feel that the general public looked down on people with criminal records and to have personally experienced multiple forms of criminal record-based discrimination.
- Survey participants did not see themselves as flawed just because they had a criminal record.
- Criminal record stigma was linked to decreased quality of life among our participants.
- Withdrawing from other people because of having a criminal record was also linked to decreased quality of life.
- Participants who felt they had to keep their record a secret in response to criminal record stigma reported decreased quality of life.

### ***Conclusions***

Anti-stigma campaigns are needed to counter the criminal record stigma that our participants perceived and reduce the discrimination they encountered. Furthermore, laws should protect individuals from stigma-related rejection. This will reduce their need to use secrecy when seeking new opportunities to re-engage with their communities.

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?**

Community psychologists attend to ongoing interactions between individuals and their environment, and to how these interactions impact individual and collective wellbeing. This study demonstrated that negative societal attitudes toward individuals with criminal records and individual attempts to cope with these attitudes can impact individual quality of life.

## What Does This Mean For?

**Practice:** Individual-level interventions may provide immediate support to those facing current criminal record stigma. Such intervention could enhance access to social supports and provide educational and occupational programs that assist individuals with economic advancement.

**Social Action:** Community and policy-level interventions such as anti-stigma campaigns are essential for decreasing societal stigma and preventing its negative impacts.

**Research and Evaluation:** This study is one of the first to apply stigma theories to criminal record stigma. More research is needed to enhance the precision of its findings and capture the experiences of individuals with criminal records. A multi-faceted research agenda—one that both looks deeper into and beyond individual-focused theories—will be necessary to decrease the impact and prevalence of criminal record stigma. This would involve longitudinal investigations into the mechanisms by which criminal record stigma impacts individual quality of life, as well as empirical efforts to identify the mechanisms that perpetuate criminal record stigma and discrimination at the societal level.

[Download infographic poster of this study here.](#)

Original Citation: McWilliams, E. R. & Hunter, B. A. (2020). [The Impact of Criminal Record Stigma on Quality of Life: A Test of Theoretical Pathways.](#) *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12454>

Terms of use: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#) It is attributed to the authors and the original version can be found here: <https://www.communitypsychology.com/paying-time-after-time/>