

EMPLOYER EVENT
Economic Opportunity, Racial Equity & the Criminal Justice System
A private sector perspective on second chance hiring and more
August 10, 2021

On August 10th, 2021, Georgia Justice Project co-hosted an invitation-only, virtual event for employers with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta on the intersection of workforce development and the criminal legal system. The goal was to give attendees (70 people representing 29 companies) data as well as practical strategies to engage with issues of economic opportunity and racial equity—from both a hiring and a policy perspective.

The event was part of the continuing conversation with employers that [Georgia Justice Project](#) (GJP) has facilitated for many years to learn from companies and get their input on potential policy solutions. Most recently, GJP worked with the business community to successfully advocate for [two pieces of legislation](#) that became effective this year that remove significant barriers to opportunity for individuals with prior criminal justice involvement -- SB 288 greatly expanded expungement in Georgia and SB 105 allows those who have succeeded on probation to terminate their probation sentence after three years. These changes to the law affect over 1 million Georgians and allow many to get back to work and thrive.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta works to foster a more inclusive economy and maximum employment. Making the economy work for everyone includes exploring how the overrepresentation of people of color and Indigenous people in the criminal justice system compromises the performance of the overall economy. The Atlanta Fed promotes economic mobility, which means ensuring everyone has a reasonable chance of improving their income and achieving their full economic potential.

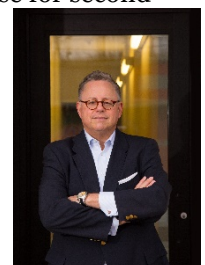
Key takeaways from the event:

- Second chance hiring plays an important role in addressing Georgia’s and our nation’s workforce shortage
- Companies should review their screening policies to remove unnecessary exclusions
- Non-profit partners can help second chance hiring efforts be successful
- Our criminal legal system, so tainted by racism, must be acknowledged in policy and practice to achieve racial equity in hiring

FEATURED SPEAKERS

Chappelle Davis, Senior Vice President & Chief Diversity Officer at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and **Doug Ammar, Executive Director of GJP**, welcomed participants and set the context: the economy works best when everyone is given an opportunity to participate and achieve their potential. [Georgia has the highest rate of correctional control](#) (people in jail, prison or in probation or parole) in the country. Racial disparities at each step of the legal process—policing, arrests, charging decisions, diversion access, sentencing, and reentry--make the consequences of a criminal record and barriers to employment greater for communities of color.

[Jeffrey Korzenik](#), Chief Investment Strategist for Fifth Third Bank and author of [Untapped Talent: How Second Chance Hiring Works for your Business and the Community](#) outlined the business case for second chance hiring. A shrinking labor force could doom US economic growth, and one solution is to expand where we look for potential employees. The economy works best when everyone who wants to work has an opportunity to participate to the fullest extent of their capabilities. This is not just a social good, but an economic imperative. Korzenik said attendees should “know their felony” since fewer than half of people convicted of a felony spend time in prison and should not always be viewed as a threat to public safety and do not warrant the lifetime stigma that often comes with a felony conviction. He also encouraged companies to review their hiring policies, including vendor restrictions, that may not be necessary.



[Alex Ruder](#), Principal Adviser at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, talked about effective second chance hiring models that often involve partnering with non-profit organizations to provide necessary supports, wrap around services, job training, and mentorship, and can lead to a successful experience for both employers and employees.



Alex Camardelle, Director of Workforce Policy at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, outlined the historical context that shapes today's criminal legal system and impedes workforce equity for Black returning citizens. The 13th amendment, Black Codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow Laws, and the racially motivated War on Drugs have all incentivized disproportionate enforcement of laws and have driven mass incarceration.



Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and EEOC rulings, studies show White applicants receive 35% more call backs than equally qualified Black applicants, and the negative impact of a criminal record is far more pronounced for Black men. Dr. Camardelle reiterated the need for employers to develop clear policies on applicant screening, utilizing individual assessments instead of blanket policies of exclusion, and the importance of investing in recruiting talent from communities most impacted by the criminal legal system.

THE EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

Georgia-Pacific - JaKathryn Ross, GJP Board member & Senior Director of Community Affairs at Georgia-Pacific, facilitated audience questions and highlighted two Georgia companies' experience with these issues.

Coca-Cola - Anne Blich, Senior Counsel at Coca-Cola, shared how she and her legal department colleagues came to better understand barriers faced by job seekers when volunteering with GJP's criminal records clinic, and how it helped them understand why policy change was needed to remove barriers for job seekers and expand Georgia's workforce. Along with other companies, Coca-Cola wrote a letter to Georgia legislators in 2020 in support of the Senate Bill 288, which was key to framing this problem as a workforce development issue and in getting the law passed.

UPS - Craig Holmes, Senior Labor & Employment Counsel at UPS, shared how UPS's background check policies have changed over the years. They had become bloated due to more exclusions being added each year. Workforce demands and the 2012 EEOC guidance on background checks pushed them to simplify their background screening process. Using a multi-department approach, they updated their standards to focus on two things—recency and relevancy. If an applicant is flagged with a potential issue after a background check, one of their HR professionals will talk to the applicant to hear their story and make an assessment and decision based on their standards. These changes met internal resistance at first, due to fears about higher claims and job site incidents, but those concerns did not play out.

THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES

Speakers encouraged attendees to start having conversations with their colleagues, learn from other companies who do second chance hiring and from non-profit partners. There has been some good progress to reduce barriers to reentry in Georgia through policy change, but more change is needed to address stigma and barriers faced by many people with felony convictions, and to fully address the disparities caused by our country's history of systemic racism, and help employers hire the qualified workers they need.

CONTACT GEORGIA JUSTICE PROJECT

There are many ways to continue to engage in this conversation and learn more about second chance hiring. GJP provides numerous opportunities to volunteer to assist individuals facing barriers to reentry. We also welcome the opportunity to tell you about our policy agenda going into the 2022 session--occupational licensing reform, reducing poverty-based driver's license suspensions, and continuing to expand access to expungement are at the top of our list--and how you can be involved. GJP is also here as a resource to facilitate these conversations within your company. GJP's next employer event is planned for early December 2021.