

## Editorial

### A clean slate

*Sealing some kinds of criminal records would let more people build stable lives after prison — and it would help the economy, too.*

April 26, 2023

Not every prison sentence is supposed to be for life. And yet too many people who have broken a law, served their time, and earned their release find themselves under a continuing sentence: They're unable to find a good job, pursue an education, or even rent a decent apartment because of their past conviction.

They may be out of prison, but they're not free. And we all pay a price for it.

As a society, we have a fraught relationship with the idea of redemption — letting someone pay their debt and move on. But sealing the records of people convicted of some types of crime is not just the right thing to do; it's good for public safety, it boosts the economy, and it makes people more self-supporting. The Clean Slate Act deserves broad support.

If passed, the measure would automatically seal some types of criminal records after a person has served their time. There'd be a waiting period first — three years for misdemeanors, seven for felonies. New charges or convictions? You'd be ineligible. Sex offenses would never be sealed.

The records would still be accessible for review in certain circumstances, such as when a person applies for a gun license or seeks a job in specified fields, such as working with children.

Even when people with criminal convictions are legally eligible for a job, they often face obstacles. Just the stigma of having a record can win applicants a quick trip to the rejection pile. But keeping them out of the workforce is expensive in more ways than one. The Center for Economic and Policy Research has estimated that the un- or underemployment of working-age people with prior felony convictions costs the U.S. between \$78 billion to \$87 billion in annual GDP.

Making more people employable would ease the hiring crunch. And with their labor, these workers would increase business productivity — along with boosting local economies with their increased spending power.

That's why Clean Slate has the support of major employers, business groups, and unions, including JPMorgan Chase, Verizon, Microsoft, 1199SEIU, and the Business Council of New York State.

And for those who worry about a risk of criminal activity: A study of Michigan's Clean Slate program found that people whose records had been sealed had a 4.7 percent rearrest rate, lower than the arrest rate for the general public (6.6 arrests per 100 people). That's right: Those whose records were sealed under Clean Slate were less likely to be arrested than someone who'd never been arrested before.

Then there's this: When people can find stable housing, pursue a degree, or land a better-paying job, they are better able to take care of themselves and their families. They can support themselves — and that means fewer people dependent on social services to make ends meet.

On the flip side: If someone can't find a job with opportunities for advancement, can't get a trade license or even train for new skills, can't find a decent place for their family to live, it feeds a cycle of poverty and crime.

People need, and deserve, a way out. Clean Slate gives them that chance.

And that's how you build safer cities and stronger neighborhoods — by giving people the tools to build better lives for themselves.