

# Fair Chance Hiring Study

*Findings and Implications for Strategies and Messaging*



Mississippi  
Business Alliance  
FOUNDATION

# Foreword

## *A Collaborative Effort to Strengthen Mississippi's Workforce*

The Mississippi Business Alliance (MSBA), through its Foundation, and Magnolia Correctional Industries (MAGCOR) partnered as respective thought leaders in reentry and business to better understand the landscape of the hiring of formerly incarcerated individuals across Mississippi.

MAGCOR brings deep experience in reentry strategy, offender rehabilitation, and workforce reintegration initiatives. The Mississippi Business Alliance represents employers across industries and regions of the state and serves as a leading voice for business growth and workforce development.

Recognizing that successful reentry and strong workforce participation are mutually reinforcing goals, these organizations worked together to seek objective, data-driven insight into employer awareness, attitudes, and practices related to hiring formerly incarcerated individuals. By combining expertise in public safety, reentry systems, and employer engagement, this partnership aimed to move beyond anecdote and toward actionable research.

This study reflects a shared commitment to:

- Strengthening Mississippi's workforce,
- Expanding employment pathways for qualified individuals seeking a second chance, and
- Providing business leaders with clear data to inform policy, messaging, and practical hiring strategies.

The findings that follow are intended to support informed decision-making among employers, policymakers, workforce leaders, and community partners committed to improving both economic opportunity and public safety in Mississippi.

## Purpose and Methodology

Over two months from Oct. 18 to December 16, 2025, hiring decision makers across Mississippi were surveyed to understand the business awareness, attitudes and practices related to the hiring of formerly incarcerated individuals. The purpose of these findings is to help develop public policies and procedures leading to a stronger workforce in Mississippi, while also providing a better pathway for formerly incarcerated individuals to reenter society as productive citizens.

The Fair Chance Hiring Study research was conducted by Ad5, LLC, a Mississippi corporation, in cooperation with and on behalf of the Workfuture Institute for Workforce and Educational Excellence, using the field services of Endeavor Business Intelligence based in Birmingham (Endeavor). The data collection survey instrument was developed in a cooperative effort among Workfuture Institute, Ad5, and Endeavor.

The staff of Ad5 and Endeavor have jointly conducted numerous studies and surveys across Mississippi for more than thirty years and provide a deep understanding of Mississippi businesses and consumers. Endeavor also actively and successfully hires from candidates who have been adjudicated in the legal system, allowing them to offer additional insights both as a research company and as a company directly involved in hiring from persons in the category of interest.

The study findings are presented showing results comparatively from two distinct sample groups. The first was Mississippi Business Alliance membership lists (both for Mississippi Economic Council and Mississippi Manufacturers Association, which were merging during the survey period but still had separate membership lists at that time) and from an online panel survey of General Business, as it is referred to herein. The general business panel was comprised primarily of human resources professionals; the MSBA combined list was primarily small business owners or CEOs, both of whom self-identified as being involved with hiring decisions. All respondents live in Mississippi and make or participate in hiring decisions.

The margin of error for the MSBA respondents (total of 73) is 11.4%. For the General Business sample the margin of error is 6.8%.

This workforce product was funded by a grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration under the PROWD (Partners for Reentry in Workforce Development) initiative. The grant is administered in Mississippi by the Mississippi Department of Employment Security.

# Building a Statewide Reentry Framework

For many years, Mississippi has pursued reentry initiatives through dedicated agencies, community organizations, workforce programs, and employer partnerships. However, what has been notably absent is comprehensive, employer-informed data to guide the design of a coordinated, statewide reentry system supported by sustained funding and measurable outcomes.

This study helps close that gap.

By capturing direct input from hiring decision-makers across business sizes and industries, this research provides actionable insight into:

- Employer willingness to consider second chance hiring,
- The factors that most influence hiring decisions,
- The specific barriers and concerns businesses experience,
- The types of resources and incentives that increase employer confidence, and
- The practical differences between large and small business environments.

Until now, efforts to build a statewide reentry strategy have often relied on anecdotal evidence, localized program data, or national research not tailored to Mississippi's business climate. This report provides Mississippi-specific data that can serve as a foundation for structured planning.

With this information, policymakers, workforce leaders, corrections officials, and business stakeholders can:

- Design targeted employer engagement strategies rather than one-size-fits-all messaging,
- Prioritize training programs aligned with demonstrated employer demand,
- Structure incentive programs where they will have measurable impact,
- Develop model hiring policies to support small and mid-sized businesses,
- Align reentry services with workforce development infrastructure, and
- Establish clear performance metrics tied to employment outcomes.

A fully coordinated statewide reentry system requires more than good intentions. It requires data, alignment, accountability, and sustained investment. This study provides the baseline understanding necessary to move from fragmented initiatives to a comprehensive, employer-informed system that strengthens public safety, workforce participation, and economic growth.

The opportunity now is not simply to expand programs, but to build a durable, funded, statewide reentry framework rooted in evidence and supported by the business community.

## Executive Summary of Research Findings

The findings imply several key needs and opportunities that are important to those working to increase employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated workers. This set of “implications” is derived from an analysis of findings and after consideration of possible action items to improve hiring among this applicant pool. These findings also assist in developing messaging to key audiences that will improve the efficacy of placement of these individuals.

**Perhaps the most encouraging finding is that the majority of businesses of every size in Mississippi will consider hiring from this pool of workers because they believe people deserve a second chance. Some level of success will be possible when applicants have proper and relevant training, references, and the ability to interview well** in order to demonstrate they have a good work ethic. Soft skills rated highly important and must not be overlooked.

Generally, **the larger the corporation the more likely it has policies in place regarding hiring** formerly incarcerated individuals. Companies over 250 employees almost always have policies in place and those under 50 employees rarely had policies in place. Importantly, these larger corporations generally report better outcomes from their hiring practices.

Awareness of government and other programs to help formerly incarcerated people back into the workforce is very high among human resources professionals in General Business and very low among CEOs and owners of small businesses (the MSBA list), **so there is great opportunity for education and public information initiatives to have positive impact on smaller businesses.** Information distribution at existing meetings and mailings of MSBA as well as sponsored seminars by Workfuture Institute in cooperation with its allies can also yield improvements by using these ongoing events to educate the membership of the significant opportunities to expand their hiring pool of applicants.

The larger corporations in the General Business universe of respondents also report that about **nine of 10 outcomes were at least somewhat positive. This implies training works, and that knowledge of reentry programs and other incentives work.**

Below are listed possible tactical responses to leverage this investment in research, possible strategies to improve hiring from the target pool, and messaging to build awareness and increase interest.

**Visit [workfuturems.com](http://workfuturems.com) to review full survey result details.**

# Strategic Action Plan

1. **Focus on larger businesses first** (audience one: 250 employees and up; audience two: 50-250; audience three: under 50). These larger corporations will generate the most short-term impact because they already have policies in place consistent hiring procedures, and knowledge of programs to increase the success rate. Of these, 98% were very or somewhat willing to hire formerly incarcerated.

Any additional information, incentives, training or other programs could have immediate results for a very willing audience of HR professionals in larger organizations regardless of industry category.

2. **Educate and inform smaller businesses** under 50 employees about incentives and reentry programs. Use direct marketing messages, Workfuture website, seminars and public speaking at key conferences. Only 14% were very familiar with programs and only a third had any knowledge, compared with nearly 8 in 10 of the General Business group being aware. This educational process should yield results fairly quickly.

3. **Make it easier for smaller businesses to put new hiring policies in place** by providing assistance and sample policies that are ready off-the-shelf to adopt or customize, through seminars, on-line presentations, and a resource web site under the Workfuture Institute website.

These policies should follow accepted industry standards and provide language that is fully vetted by appropriate legal counsel.

4. **Highlight the success of reentry programs** (where 6 in 10 hires are reported). Use public relations and publicity, website, video interviews in a testimonial style, presentations, direct marketing, and collateral materials.

These communications will require careful selection of corporate participants and individuals who voluntarily authorize the use of their stories.

5. **Tell the story of the success rate** (9 of 10 hires in General Business were very or somewhat positive) of hiring using available programs. The implication is that awareness and use of various programs by these larger corporations is working.

Again, video should be considered as the primary delivery mechanism (for presentations, conferences, website, or direct delivery).

6. Those convicted of violent crimes and sex crimes are far more difficult placements. Therefore, make sure these **two groups have extra attention placed on training, experience, and developing references** to help overcome a much higher hesitancy to hire.

7. Put programs and procedures in place to **be sure that job seekers do not give up too soon**. Positive outcomes go up after three months post-incarceration, with bigger spikes in acceptance by employers after six and again after 12 months. Emphasize to the job seeker that time post-incarceration without additional legal issues is a positive that improves placement opportunity.
8. In any programs developed, emphasize ways to **focus on certifications, interview skills, and developing good references** from parole officers and trainers.
9. **Develop and promote NEW training programs** (or revitalized old programs) to both large and small business, as both groups said “new training programs” as their top response to an open-ended question about what they need.

**Focus on the need for reliability and work ethic.**

10. Gather data and create a **central clearinghouse (Workfuture website with prominent links to others such as MAGCOR and Accelerate MS) for financial messaging:**
  - a. Tax incentives
  - b. OJT
  - c. Wage subsidies
  - d. Subsidized training
  - e. Sponsored apprenticeships
11. Centralize in the same **clearinghouse data on community partnerships:**
  - a. Reentry programs
  - b. Sponsored apprenticeships
  - c. Legal guidance
  - d. Policy (using provided templates) to be completed with community partners

# Messaging

**People deserve a second chance.** This was the top answer for both segments of the survey, with a third of each respondent group listing it as the top reason to hire from this group in an open-ended question.

**We have the relevant skills and experience you need.** These two factors rated as second most important among all segments.

**There are financial incentives to hire formerly incarcerated people who have paid their dues to society.** Incentives rated as important.

**Employers won't be left alone once they hire from this candidate pool. Follow-up help is available to increase the likelihood that the hire will be successful.** It was found to be important especially to small businesses to have parole checks, transportation, and mentoring, so use any of those available programs as proof points that the business owner is not out on a limb alone.

**Many resources to help in screening and hiring the right person for your situation are readily available and the information is free.** Once a robust clearinghouse of data, forms, policy guides and links to other resources is developed, make that a central message of an outreach program that uses direct communication, sponsorships, speaking at conferences and seminars, public relations for publicity, and highly targeted digital marketing.

**Reentry programs, incentives, training, OJT and other community programs work to help achieve successful hiring of well-prepared workers.** Emphasize that success is likely based on a major survey of those who take advantage of these support programs.

## Next Steps to Gain Positive Outcomes

1. **Conduct additional information gathering** from other states and organizations working to assist formerly incarcerated people to reenter the workforce. Conduct informal outreach or formal research with executive interviews, as well as a review of available studies and documented case studies.
2. **Create a centralized database or clearinghouse** on the Workfuture Institute website of:
  - a. programs for OJT training or other job preparation
  - b. programs offering financial or other assistance at the local level
  - c. ongoing state and federal training
  - d. community-based reentry programs
  - e. written policies and procedures that companies can adopt
  - f. testimonials of successful hiring
  - g. Assistance, programs and information available at MAGCOR, Accelerate MS, MDES and allies
3. **Develop written policies and procedures that businesses can adopt to improve hiring success.** By vetting these protocols in advance with legal counsel and HR professionals, smaller businesses are more likely to adopt these best practices due to reduced costs and ease of implementation.
4. **Create a hub and spoke network at Workfuture Institute** to help guide those with hiring responsibility to the programs providing guidance, direct support, follow-up, training, and monitoring of success.
5. **Publicize the findings** through media relations and speaking engagements at conferences, seminars or one-on-one meetings with large employers (or groups of small businesses). Build a library of case studies in all major industries (construction, manufacturing, healthcare, etc.).
6. **Drive traffic to the clearinghouse information** using any available resources and channels. Promote this resource through all MSBA channels to its membership, as well as through appropriate state agencies such MDES and Accelerate MS.
7. **Plan for training in cooperation with community colleges, universities, and Accelerate MS to assure that future training is tied directly to industry needs based on current and evolving data.** Advise allies on how to assure training programs match the job availability by both geography and industry-specific skill sets, with a forward-looking approach that anticipates the changing economy in Mississippi and addresses the needs of major new economic development projects.

Include the **integration of the Mississippi Occupational Map with MDES's Mississippi Works platform** (incorporates priority occupations by NAICS Code, identification of credentials of value for occupations, and mapping of postsecondary institutions and private relevant training).



<https://www.msba.com/>



<https://workfuturems.com/>



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Partners for Reentry Opportunities  
in Workforce Development

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