

How Students from Different Economic Backgrounds View Criminal Records When Making Hiring Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Criminal record holders face many barriers to successful integration into society, including difficulty obtaining employment. Previous research has identified that the stigma surrounding criminal records strongly negatively influences hiring decisions. However, prior studies have not compared the views of employers from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This paper explores whether students from school districts with different average income levels have different perspectives on the significance of a nonviolent criminal record when making hypothetical employment decisions. I distributed a mixed-method survey to two different student populations: a school district with a high median household income and another with a significantly lower median household income. The quantitative portion of the survey used a Likert scale that had respondents answering questions about the employability of a person with a nonviolent criminal record based on four categories: nondescript, professional attributes, crime-specific, and context of job function/industry. A chi-squared test established a statistical significant difference between the two groups' responses to the nondescript question, while the other three categories were used to investigate the complexities of that finding. Next, the qualitative portion of the survey used an open-ended question and was analyzed using a thematic analysis, revealing differences in themes. I concluded that, while both schools have a significant portion of students who would not hire criminal record holders, in general, students from the school district with the lower median household income had greater concerns and were less likely to hire someone with a nonviolent criminal record than students in the higher-income school district.

Introduction

There are over 77 million people with a criminal record living in the United States (Morzenti 2021). Given this large number, it is critical that people with criminal history be able to move beyond their records and become productive citizens. However, people with criminal records face many barriers that impede their ability to succeed. Security concerns, easily available data, and background checks restrict opportunities for employment, housing, and social services. Criminal record stigma, which can be defined as stereotypes employers and others harbor toward individuals with a criminal record, can be detrimental to obtaining employment (Clark 2020). In fact, the unemployment rate for people with a criminal record is 8% to 9% higher than the general rate of 3.7% (Morzenti 2021). Diminished employment opportunities often lead to recidivism; two out of three former prisoners are rearrested within three years of release (Benecchi 2021). Given the high rate of recidivism and its link to unemployment, there has been significant research on how the stigma associated with a criminal record influences employers' decision-making around hiring.

Most of the research in this area has found that the stigma of a criminal record is a determinative factor influencing employers' hiring decisions. While these studies are instructive on how decision-makers generally

view the significance of criminal records, there are no studies that examine whether employers from different socioeconomic backgrounds have differing views. My research seeks to close this gap. The study I conducted explores whether students from school districts with different average income levels have different perspectives on the significance of a nonviolent criminal record when making judgments about employment. This research will provide insight into how decision-makers from different economic backgrounds view criminal records in the employment context.

Literature Review

Past Research Addressing Employers' Perceptions of Applicants with Criminal Records

Previous research has examined how employers view applicants with criminal records and why they tend to reject them. One study published by the Criminology Department of the University of California-Irvine revealed that employers more harshly evaluate applicants with a criminal record than applicants who engaged in similar behavior but were never convicted of a crime (Sugie 2020). Similarly, researchers from the University of Utah found that employers scrutinize the behavior of employees with a criminal record more carefully than those without one (Morzenti 2021). Even if other employees were discovered to be engaging in similar misconduct, employers had a bias against those with a record (Morzenti 2021).

Previous research has also examined the more specific issue of how employers view juveniles with criminal records. Researchers from Arizona State University conducted a study to explore how likely employers would be to grant an interview to a juvenile with a criminal record. The results indicated that all else being equal, a criminal record penalized an applicant and that "structural and social stigmatization" influenced employers' willingness to grant interviews (Clark 2020). Criminal stigma also has been shown to be an even more significant impediment for women, specifically women of color, who seek employment (Ortiz 2018).

Other studies have examined the specific concerns that lead employers to be reticent to hire people with criminal records. One study found that employers claim a concern with "repetition risk," meaning that a person's prior illicit behavior may predict similar future behavior (Sugie 2020). While this risk is a component of employers' concerns, researchers conclude that the general stigma attached to a criminal record goes beyond the concern that the employee will engage in future crime (Sugie 2020). A criminal record brands a person with "negative credentials", thereby providing a "socially legitimated basis" for employers to make assumptions about their professional attributes such as reliability, trustworthiness, dangerousness, and congeniality (Sugie 2020).

Relatedly, numerous studies have addressed the negative impact of criminal record stigma on record holders' attitudes toward successfully obtaining employment (Ispa-Landa 2022). Record holders suffer from their own perceived stigma—the expected reactions or attitudes of others—when reentering society or the workplace. The greater the threat of discrimination, the more likely people are to react with defensiveness, fear, and urges to conceal their identity (Moore & Tangney 2017). Ex-offenders also tend to internalize stigma, accepting negative stereotypes ascribed to people with criminal records as personally descriptive (Moore & Tangney 2017). The internalization of these harmful stereotypes leads to a diminished sense of self, further causing ex-offenders to withdraw from efforts to seek meaningful employment and successfully reintegrate (McWilliams & Hunter 2020).

Past Research Addressing Criminal Stigma in Lower-Income Populations

Prior research has shown that people living in lower-income communities experience more negative impacts related to the criminal justice system than those living in high income communities (Lake 2020). Disparities in

wealth coincide with higher rates of crime in lower income areas (Brush 2007; Stucky 2015). A criminal record leads to difficulties in obtaining professional licenses, access to public housing and public assistance, all leading to higher rates of homelessness and unemployment in poorer areas (Lake 2020). As a result, there is a correlation between low socioeconomic status and an increased risk of crime, particularly late adolescent crime (Savolainen 2018).

Indeed, the inability to gain stable employment after being convicted of a crime has been identified as the most significant factor in determining the likelihood of recidivism (Westrope 2018). A study by *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* found that record-clearing intervention boosted ex-offenders' employment rates and average real earnings (Selbin 2018). As a result, there have been efforts to facilitate applicants' fair chance at employment by removing conviction and arrest history questions from job applications, forcing employers to consider job candidates' qualifications first, without the stigma of a conviction or record (Avery 2021; English 2018).

Gap in Research

While there has been significant research on the impact of a criminal record on the ability of record holders to gain employment (Clark 2020), and on how employers view the significance of a criminal record when making hiring decisions (Sugie 2020), previous studies have not addressed how employers with different economic backgrounds may have different perceptions of job applicants with criminal records. Past research studies have examined the specific concerns that lead employers to be reticent to hire people with criminal records, but they have not sought to discern differences in perspectives among employers with different economic backgrounds. This study utilizes a population of students to discern these differences. While students certainly do not represent the entire employer population, prior research consistently shows that stereotypes are developed as early as childhood (Sherman 2013), and adults develop their implicit bias in their youth (Mulcahy 2017). So, the students of today will be an incomplete but accurate representation of the employer decisions of tomorrow.

Method

To address the question whether high school students from school districts with different median household income levels view the significance of a nonviolent criminal record differently when making judgments about employment, I conducted a study utilizing a mixed-method approach.

Two mixed-method surveys were conducted, one distributed to Ohio students at a school district with a high median household income and one distributed to students at a nearby school district with a significantly lower median household income (see Appendix A). Both were distributed using a stratified random sampling method. This mixed-method approach allowed for both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of both population groups.

Using a mixed-method approach was important because mixed methods capture a broader perspective of respondents' opinions than would have been revealed had only one component of the method (e.g., a Likert scale) been utilized to gather data and formulate results. The qualitative results were combined with the quantitative data to create a deeper analysis and understanding of students' opinions from both economic populations.

Quantitative Portion of the Survey

The questions in the quantitative portion of my survey were based on a Likert scale that had the respondents answer questions about the employability of a person with a nonviolent criminal record. The first of these questions is a nondescript question asking the respondent to put themselves in the position of an employer and rate, on a scale of one to six, whether knowing that an applicant has a criminal record for a nonviolent crime impacts their view on hiring (see Appendix C). This general question allowed for a general statistical test to be run to determine whether there were statistically different responses between the high-income and low-income populations.

Then, I added three more specific questions relating to professional attributes, crime specifications, and context specifications.

- 1) *Professional Attributes*: Whether a criminal record affects respondents' view of their reliability, trustworthiness, and teamwork ability.
- 2) *Crime-Specific*: Whether the type of crime committed affects respondents' view of their employability.
- 3) *Context-Specific*: Whether the type of job an ex-criminal is applying for affects respondents' view of their employability.

These questions should allow for greater insight into the variation between the responses of high-income and low-income individuals.

The first specific group of questions was modeled on a University of California-Irvine study in which adult employers evaluated sample applicants' expected future behavior on the following attributes: team player, following workplace rules, working well with customers, respectful of workplace authority, and hard worker (Sugie 2020). The attributes scale I utilized had the students evaluate applicants based on reliability, trustworthiness, and congeniality (i.e., whether the applicant would work well with other employees) (see Appendix B). For example, in a question about reliability, the respondent was asked to put themselves in the position of an employer, and on a scale of 1-6, asked if knowing that an applicant has a nonviolent criminal record would impact their view of whether the applicant will be a reliable employee. The respondent was asked to decide on the Likert scale if the nonviolent criminal record would 1 (not impact their view of reliability) - 6 (strongly impact their view of reliability/very unreliable) in the workplace.

The second specific group of questions were aimed at determining if knowledge of the specific offense type would impact hiring. The crimes identified in the scenarios were shoplifting and illegal possession of drugs (see Appendix D). The crimes of shoplifting and illegal drug possession were chosen for use in this question based on the hypothesis that drug possession might have less of an impact on hiring practices than shoplifting. With drug legalization occurring in Ohio and many other states, I thought it possible that a record for drug possession might carry less weight with the respondents. Both crimes could be either a misdemeanor or a felony depending on the severity of the offense (Ohio Criminal Law 2023). There was no mention in the questions of the specific industry or job function for which the applicant was being considered.

The last group of questions provided the context of the specific industry and job position for which the applicant was being considered. The questions did not specify the type of nonviolent offense for which the applicant had a record. The job functions and companies were a laborer at a construction company, a house cleaner at a house cleaning company, and a customer services representative at a home security company (see Appendix E). These jobs were chosen because of their varying perceived risk, prestige, and public interaction. A laborer at a construction company requires minimal interaction with company clients or customers while a customer service representative at a home security company requires working in constant communication with consumers about ensuring safety. In addition, construction companies are often listed as "felon friendly employers" on publicly available lists published by the United States Probation Office and other government agen-

cies. The answers to these questions provided data informing whether a respondent knowing about an applicant's criminal record would impact the hiring decision in differing ways depending on the type of job function and industry for which they are being hired.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Nondescript Question

The first hiring-decision question was the nondescript question, providing a general scenario about hiring without awareness of the specific nonviolent crime or the type of employment or industry for which the person is being considered for employment. The left end of the scale (1-3) indicated that the respondent would not hire the individual with a record. The right end of the scale (4-6) indicated that the respondent would hire the individual. This question, while general, was critical to my overarching research question: it highlights the difference between low-income and high-income students' willingness to hire someone with a nonviolent criminal record. The survey was distributed to all students at each high school. 88 students from the lower-income school district responded to the survey; 66 students from the higher-income school district responded to the survey. The students were required to answer all of the survey questions. The table below compares the two populations' responses to the survey's nondescript question.

Table 1. Low Income vs High-Income District Responses to Non-Descript Question

1a) Low-Income High School Population

Nondescript question - Low Income	Responses answering 1-3 (not hire)	Responses answering 4-6 (would hire)	Total Responses
# of responses	60	28	88
% of responses	68.2%	32.8%	100%

1b) High-Income High School Population

Nondescript question - High Income	Responses answering 1-3 (not hire)	Responses answering 4-6 (would hire)	Total Responses
# of responses	27	39	66
% of responses	40.9%	59.1%	100%

These percentages make it seem that the lower income students are more likely to not hire the applicant, while the higher income students are more likely to hire the applicant. However, in order to accurately determine whether the two groups are providing statistically different answers, I ran a statistical analysis. The test I used was a chi-squared test for homogeneity to test how likely it is that the two samples came from the same population. If the test results in an improbable percentage (specifically, less than this test's alpha level of 0.05), then it is safe to assume the two groups' answers are statistically different. I conducted this test using a calculator. Pictures of the initial values, the expected values, and the chi-squared test are provided below.

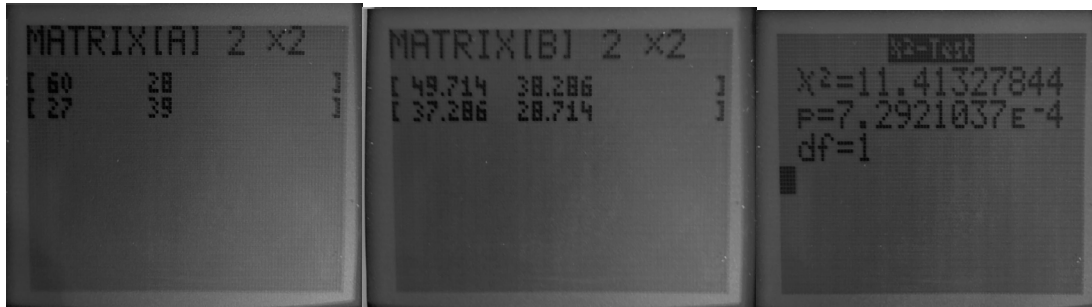


Figure 1. Chi-squared Test conducted on TI-84 calculator

The test yielded a chi-squared value of 11.413, resulting in a p-value of 0.000729. Since 0.0007 is less than 0.05, we can determine that the two groups have statistically different responses to the survey. As detailed above, the low-income high school had a higher percentage of students choosing to not hire someone with a criminal background (68.2%) than the high-income high school (40.9%). Although these percentages are relatively close, our statistical test determined that they are statistically different and therefore the divergence between the two populations in their responses to this question is significant. On average, the data reflects that the lower income students are more likely to not hire the applicant, while the higher income students are more likely to hire the applicant.

Seeing that the data presents a distinction between the two groups on the general, nondescript question on hiring, I turn now to an analysis of the three groups of more specific quantitative questions. As mentioned above, these questions are:

- 1) Professional Attributes: Whether a criminal record affects respondents' view of their reliability, trustworthiness, and teamwork ability.
- 2) Crime Specific: Whether the type of crime committed affects respondents' view of their employability.
- 3) Context-Specific: Whether the type of job an ex-criminal is applying for affects respondents' view of their employability.

Professional Attribute Question

First, it is instructive to review the three survey questions addressing professional attributes, in which the respondent was asked to express their opinion on the effect of a nonviolent criminal record on reliability, trustworthiness, and congeniality. If the respondents answered on the left end of the scale (1-3), they expressed that a criminal record would have minimal or no impact on the way the respondent would view the ex-offenders' reliability, trustworthiness, and congeniality. If the respondents answered on the right end of the scale (4-6), they expressed that a criminal record would have some impact on the way the employer would view reliability, trustworthiness, and congeniality. The table below compares the two populations' responses to the professional attributes questions.

Table 2. Low-Income vs High-Income District Responses to Attribute Questions

2a) Low-Income High School Population

Attribute Questions	# of responses 1-3	% of responses 1-3	# of responses 4-6	% of responses 4-6
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Q1: Reliability	56	64%	32	37%
Q2: Trustworthy	48	55%	40	45%
Q3: Congeniality	57	65%	31	35%

2a) High-Income High School Population

Attribute Questions	# of responses 1-3	% of responses 1-3	# of responses 4-6	% of responses 4-6
Q1: Reliability	43	65%	23	35%
Q2: Trustworthy	37	56%	29	44%
Q3: Congeniality	50	76%	16	24%

Note that in both populations, the majority leaned toward the lower end of the scale, indicating that a nonviolent criminal record would not impact their view of ex-offenders' reliability, trustworthiness, and congeniality in the workplace. Of note, the higher-income school district had a greater percentage of respondents on the left side of the scale in comparison to the low-income district respondents. While these percentages were very close between the two groups on the questions of reliability and trustworthiness, the high income group had a larger variance on the question regarding congeniality. Congeniality is the quality of being pleasant and agreeable. Someone known for their congeniality is friendly, nice and easy to get along with. It is hard to say why the question of congeniality would prompt respondents in the high income group to have a higher percentage indicating that a criminal record would not impact their view of this trait. However, given how closely aligned the percentages were generally, the relevant finding from these questions is that the majority of the respondents from both groups responded that the criminal record had minimal or no impact on their views of these character traits.

Crime-Specific Question

The next question provides crime-specific information. Respondents were asked to put themselves in the position of an employer, and on a scale of 1-6, decide if an applicant having a non-violent criminal record for a certain type of crime makes them more likely or less likely to hire that applicant. There was no mention in the questions of the specific industry or job function for which the applicant was being considered. The left end of the scale (1-3) indicated that the respondent would not hire a person with a record; the right end of the scale (4-6) indicated that the respondent would hire.

The table below compares the two populations' responses to the survey's crime-specific questions. Note that in both populations the majority of the respondents answered on the left end of the scale (1-3) which indicates that the majority lean towards not hiring an individual with a record for shoplifting or illegal possession of drugs. The table below shows the results.

Table 3. Low Income vs High Income District Responses to Crime-Specific Questions

3a) Low-Income High School Population

Crime-specific	# of responses 1-3	% of responses 1-3	# of responses 4-6	% of responses 4-6
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questions				
Q1: Shoplifting	57	65%	31	35%
Q2: Illegal drug possession	57	65%	31	35%

3b) High-Income High School Population

Crime-specific questions	# of responses 1-3	% of responses 1-3	# of responses 4-6	% of responses 4-6
Q1: Shoplifting	41	62%	25	38%
Q2: Illegal drug possession	42	64%	24	37%

Both population groups responded similarly to this question type. Indeed, the percentages are nearly identical. This is an interesting outcome as the data is consistent with the lower income population's response to the nondescript question above, but inconsistent with the higher income population's responses to the nondescript question above. Specifically, we saw that in the lower income population respondents were inclined to not hire someone with a criminal record – 68.2% of the low income group responded this way. When the specific nonviolent crime was added, the responses were consistent in the low income group – 65% responded that they would not hire the applicant knowing their criminal record was for shoplifting and exactly the same percent responded they would not hire the applicant knowing their record was for illegal drug possession. However, in the higher income population, the respondents' answers were changed from their responses to the nondescript question. While a majority of the high income students responded to the nondescript question that they would hire an applicant, their responses changed when they were told of the specific crime the applicant committed. A majority of the high income group now responded that they would not hire someone with a record for shoplifting or illegal drug possession. It would appear that in the high income group, knowing the specific crime changed their views. It is possible that when answering the nondescript question the high income respondents had some other less severe offenses in mind, such as a traffic offense. Adding the specific offenses of illegal drug possession and shoplifting caused many of the respondents to swing toward not hiring the applicant.

Context-Specific Question

The last question includes the context of the type of company and job position for which the applicant was being hired. The questions did not specify the type of nonviolent offense for which the applicant had a record. The left end of the scale (1-3) indicated that the respondent would not hire an individual with a record; the right end of the scale (4-6) indicated that the respondent would hire.

The table below compares the two populations' responses to the context-specific question of the survey. Note that in both populations the percentage of respondents who answered that they would not hire increased as the company and position type the applicant was applying for increased in perceived risk factors (e.g., hiring a laborer with a record for a construction company might be seen as a "less risk" for the company compared to a customer service representative for a home security company).

Table 4. Low Income vs High Income District Responses to Context-Specific Questions

4a) Low-Income High School Population

Company specific questions	# of responses 1-3	% of responses 1-3	# of responses 4-6	% of responses 4-6
Q1: Laborer at Construction Company	15	17%	73	86%
Q2: Cleaner for House Cleaning Company	39	45%	49	56%
Q3: Customer Service Representative at Home Security Company	54	61%	34	39%

4b) High-Income High School Population

Company specific questions	# of responses 1-3	% of responses 1-3	# of responses 4-6	% of responses 4-6
Q1: Laborer at Construction Company	10	16%	56	85%
Q2: Cleaner for House Cleaning Company	35	53%	31	47%
Q3: Customer Service Representative at Home Security Company	42	63%	24	37%

For the position of laborer at a construction company, the majority of respondents from both the low income and high income populations responded that they would hire the applicant. 83% of the low income respondents and 85% of the high income respondents responded in this way. Given the nature of the position, it seems that the majority of both populations did not see the existence of a nonviolent criminal record as an impediment to their decision to hire the applicant. Laborers at a construction company normally have no interactions with customers nor access to company bank accounts or other valuables. It is a position and function where any prior nonviolent record would seem to be least relevant.

For the position of customer service representative at a home security company, the majority of respondents from both the low income and high income populations responded that they would not hire the applicant. 61% of the low income population and 63% of the high income population responded this way. For this position, the applicant would be interacting with customers on the very subject of protecting one's home and valuables from criminals. It is a role where the employee would have access to sensitive information about the customers and their property.

For the position of a house cleaner for a house cleaning company, a majority of the low income population responded that they would hire the applicant, while a majority of the high income population responded that they would not. 56% of the low income population responded that they would hire the applicant while 53% of the high income population responded that they would not hire the applicant. This function is a laborer who cleans homes. This position gives the applicant access to valuables in customers' homes but it does not include having access to home security systems. Given these characteristics, it seems the respondents from both groups were less emphatic in their responses than with the earlier two job functions.

Qualitative Portion of the Survey

The qualitative part of my survey allowed respondents to provide some explanatory context to the answers to the survey questions. The students were prompted to answer an open-ended question regarding their opinion on whether employers should be permitted to know about applicants' criminal records (see Appendix F). Specifically, respondents were asked: "Do you think employers should be able to know if a person has a criminal record when deciding to hire someone? Please elaborate." The responses provided greater substance and meaning to the data received from the Likert scale questions.

Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that researchers use to identify patterns and search for common themes in a data set (Dawadi 2020). I used this method to analyze the respondents' opinions on employers knowing about applicants' criminal records. The thematic analysis was conducted on the two populations separately to compare the results. The responses to the question above were reviewed individually, sorted into groups of "yes", "implied yes", "no/against", or "maybe/on the fence deliberations", and significant language was highlighted. Responses with common highlighted language were grouped to identify recurring themes. For example, one student responded, "Yes, While I feel that people who have committed criminal records would vary in severity depending on the crime. They would eventually get to a point to reform themselves but at the same time if they haven't grown in their past could lead to a liability for the employer." I sorted this response into the "yes" group and highlighted significant language used such as "liability", "reform themselves", and "depending on the crime." I repeated this process for all student responses from both population groups. I then began grouping common highlighted language to reveal themes within the data. In this case, for example, the term "liability" was a common phrase used and aligned with a theme of "risks" expressed among many responses.

Out of the 88 responses, only 62 (70%) responses elaborated enough in their explanations to allow for coding. After each response from the low-income district students was coded, four common themes emerged: character assumptions, risks, beliefs, and dependency. Some of the students' responses identified two distinct themes; each one was coded accordingly. The themes identified and their definitions have been coded into a table in Appendix G. The next table highlights common phrases used by respondents from the low-income school district population that correspond with the themes identified above.

Table 5. Recurring Responses from Low-Income District Students

Examples of Repeated Phrases	Corresponding Theme	Percent of Responses that Identified this Theme	Number of Responses that Identified this Theme

• A criminal record is “considered to be one’s characteristic.” • A criminal record “tells you what type of person they are and if they are reliable or not.” • “I also believe it [a criminal record] can say a lot about your character.”	Character Assumptions	15%	13
• To ensure “a safe and stable environment for all employees.” • “A danger to customers or fellow employees.” • “They may commit crimes in that job.”	Risks	28%	25
• “People can really change after prison.” • “[An employer] should not hold any bias against that person because of their record.” • “Mistakes don’t completely define a person.”	Beliefs	22%	19
• “If the crime is a serious offense then they shouldn’t be allowed to do certain professions.” • “If it was a crime that would not	Dependency	26%	23

influence them in the workplace then no it's not a big deal. But if it is a crime that either happened at another workplace or will affect the new workplace, the employer should know about it." • "If someone has been arrested for molestation, then they shouldn't be hired for a day-care."			
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Of note, a significant number of respondents cited character (15%) and risks (28%) as the reasons they thought employers should be informed of the record. However, a significant cohort (26%) communicated that whether an employer should know about a criminal record depended on the type of and severity of the offense and the nature of the workplace the employee would be entering (e.g., working at a bank with a criminal record for stealing). These qualitative responses provide some insights into how the respondents from the lower-income district were thinking about their answers to the hiring-decision questions. Concerns about a job applicants' character and risks were cited by a particularly high number of the respondents (totalling a combined 43% of the respondents). This high percentage provides some helpful context for the respondents' answers around hiring and why knowing an applicant has a criminal record would impact their hiring decisions.

The same data analysis method that was used for the low-income district respondents was applied to the qualitative survey responses from the high-income district. Out of the 66 responses, only 50 (76%) responses elaborated enough in their explanations to allow for coding. After each response from the high-income high schoolers was coded, six themes emerged. Again, some of the students' responses identified two distinct themes; each one was coded accordingly. Four of the themes were the same as the low-income school district (character assumptions, risks, beliefs, and dependency), however, two new themes emerged: application regulation and individual consideration of circumstances. The new themes are also defined and coded in Appendix G. The next table highlights common phrases used by respondents from the high-income district population that correspond with the themes identified above.

Table 6. Recurring Responses from High-Income District Students

Examples of Repeated Phrases	Corresponding Theme	Percent of Responses that Identified this Theme	Number of Responses that Identified this Theme
• "[An employer] should also have a background on how/why it happened — they	Individual Consideration of Circumstances	18%	12

should ask the person applying about it.” • “The hiring process should be holistic and consider multiple factors. Everyone should have the opportunity to explain their criminal record as well because there might be more to the story than we see.” • “Conversations [with the applicant] are necessary before decisions so they can give background of the previous issue.”			
• “Minor crimes should not be available to employers.” • “Some regulations put in place if the criminal record is x years ago, they’ve already served their time, it was minor, etc.” • “The court should be able to decide if the criminal record would be needed to apply for jobs.”	Application Regulation	17%	11
• “If a person has been convicted of money laundering, and applies to work at a bank, the bank	Dependency	17%	11

should know the person's history.” • “Depends on what the job is and how significant the crime is.” • “[An employer] should only know if it is relevant to the job.”			
• “It could affect how they treat their coworkers or handle business information or the product itself.” • “Safety of the customers and other employees.” • “How do you know the person isn’t going to re-offend.”	Risks	20%	13
• “Give people a clean slate and a fresh start.” • “People change and learn over time.” • “They should not base their whole perception of the person on their past because people change.”	Beliefs	11%	7
• “[A criminal record] does say something about a person.” • “Tells a lot about the kind of person they are.”	Character Assumption	9%	6

• “It can help with knowing how someone truly is.”			
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Of note, a significant number of students suggested that applicants be permitted the chance to explain the background and circumstances of their criminal history (18%) and that regulations prevent certain offenses from being disclosed at all (17%). Individual consideration of circumstances and application regulation were significant themes that were not identified in the low-income district student’s responses. Also of note, significantly more students in the low-income district expressed character assumptions and concerns about risks over hiring an individual with a criminal record compared to the high-income school district. In the high-income group only 20% of respondents expressed concerns over risks and 9% over character. The differences in these qualitative responses provides some context for the higher-income populations’ answers to the hiring-decision questions in the survey. A majority of the higher-income population responded to the nondescript question that their decision to hire an applicant would not be impacted by the presence of a nonviolent criminal record. These qualitative answers provide some explanation as to why the higher-income respondents were more willing to hire someone with a criminal record than the lower-income respondents. The responses indicated that the higher-income group had fewer individual respondents expressing that a criminal record negatively reflects on an applicant’s character and risk. The responses also showed that a high number of the respondents believed that regulations should preclude an employer from knowing about certain minor offenses and that individual circumstances should be considered.

Conclusion

Table 7. Summary of Significant Comparative Percentages that Lead to the Conclusions

7a) Low-Income High School Population

Quantitative:	
Students who would not hire an individual with a criminal record	68%
Qualitative:	
Students who expressed theme of “risks”	28%
Students who expressed theme of “application regulation”	0%

7b) High-Income High School Population

Quantitative:	
Students who would not hire an individual with a criminal record	41%
Qualitative:	
Students who expressed theme of “risks”	20%
Students who expressed theme of “application regulation”	17%

Students who expressed theme of “individual consideration of circumstances	0%
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Students who expressed theme of “individual consideration of circumstances	18%
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While there were differences between the two population groups’ responses that were significant to the findings, there were also numerous similarities that reduce the impact of the conclusion. For example, when respondents were asked if they would hire someone with a criminal record for shoplifting, 65% of the low-income students responded that they would not hire the person compared to 62% of the high-income students also responding that they would not hire the person. While a higher percentage of low-income students tended to take the position that they would not hire someone with a record, clearly the percentage difference between the two groups is close. While the difference is important, it also highlights the similarities between the two populations’ opinions.

That said, there are important differences that are highlighted in the table above. Significantly, respondents from the low-income high school expressed a greater concern about hiring an individual with a criminal record compared to the responses from the high-income district (68% of lower income students responded that they would not hire a person with a criminal record, while only 41% of higher income students responded that they would not hire someone with a record). As shown above, I ran a statistical analysis to determine whether the two groups’ answers are statistically different. The test concluded that the two group’s answers are in fact statistically different.

Seeking to give further context to the quantitative findings, I analyzed the qualitative data that was elicited from the respondents in the open ended question on the survey. In the qualitative data set, the four themes of risks, dependency, character assumptions, and beliefs were identified in both populations’ responses. Concerns about risks that may negatively impact the workplace if an applicant with a criminal record is hired was the most prevalent theme in the lower-income district’s data set and was expressed more than in the high-income district’s data set (see table 7). In contrast, the themes of application regulation and individual consideration of circumstances were only expressed in the high-income students’ responses, making up a combined 35% of their responses (see table 7). This demonstrates a more equitable perspective as well as a more holistic approach toward employment on the part of the higher-income district respondents.

Thus, the data tends to show that students from the school district with a lower median household income were less likely to hire someone with a nonviolent criminal record than the students in the higher-income school district. The qualitative data provides some insights into why the lower-income group tended to respond in this way, as a higher percentage of the lower-income indicated that they were concerned about the character of the applicant and risks associated with hiring the applicant. The higher-income group, on the other hand, had a lower percentage of respondents respond that character and risks were concerns and expressed that an employers’ use of a criminal record should be regulated and that the totality of the circumstances around the crime and the applicant should be considered. These differences in the qualitative data provide some explanation as to why the higher-income group was more likely to hire the applicant.

Limitations

It is important to address the limitations of my study that may hinder the accuracy of conclusions drawn from the research. The potential differences between an individual respondent’s actual household income versus the average household income of that respondent’s school district is one limitation. Since the students who were surveyed were not asked to report their household income (based on an assumption that many students would not be able to accurately report that information), the median household income may not reflect the household

income of the individual respondent. Thus, a respondent's personal economic situation may not be reflective of the average income of their school district. Moreover, unlike the high-income school district, the lower-income school district covers a large geographical area with multiple towns that have varying degrees of wealth. Therefore, a respondent from this lower-income school district may have a higher likelihood of an outlier household income.

Another important limitation is the population of my study. To ensure that I could get the most participation in this study, I chose to conduct my research at two high schools with students ages 14-18. Ideally, this study should be replicated with all age groups. However, as mentioned in the literature review, students' internal stigmas are almost fully developed by the age of 14. These current students are the next employers. Using a population of students allows us to examine stigma as it is continuing to present itself in the next generation of employers. Still, future research should be conducted using a larger population expanding across multiple school districts and multiple age populations to confirm the findings of this study.

Another important limitation is that a qualitative research coding approach allows for the subjectivity of the researcher when analyzing the responses. When coding, the researcher makes personal value judgments about what are the relevant responses. Thus, the themes identified are influenced by my bias leading to a lack of reliability in the conclusion. Also worth noting is the effect of social desirability when taking surveys. Since the survey content is of a sensitive nature, the students may respond in ways that they feel are socially acceptable. Hence the responses may not truly reflect the students' opinions which in turn makes the conclusion less reliable.

Future Research

These limitations highlight important future research that should be pursued on this topic. To confirm the validity of my conclusions, research should be conducted on multiple school districts with different average income levels. Further, this research should be repeated in a wider variety of geographic areas focusing on school districts in different regions of the country.

My research provides insight into the stigma around a criminal record and how students from different economic backgrounds view the significance of the record when making hiring decisions. While the students in the high-income district population indicated more receptivity to hiring someone with a criminal record than the lower-income district population, it is clear that more work must be done to alleviate the negative biases that surround criminal record holders. I close with a call to conduct more research into the implications of youth stigma development, from all economic backgrounds. Youth are the decision-makers of the future.

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