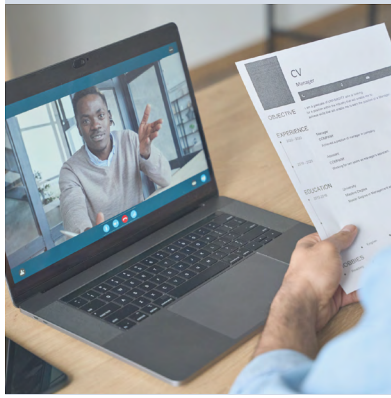


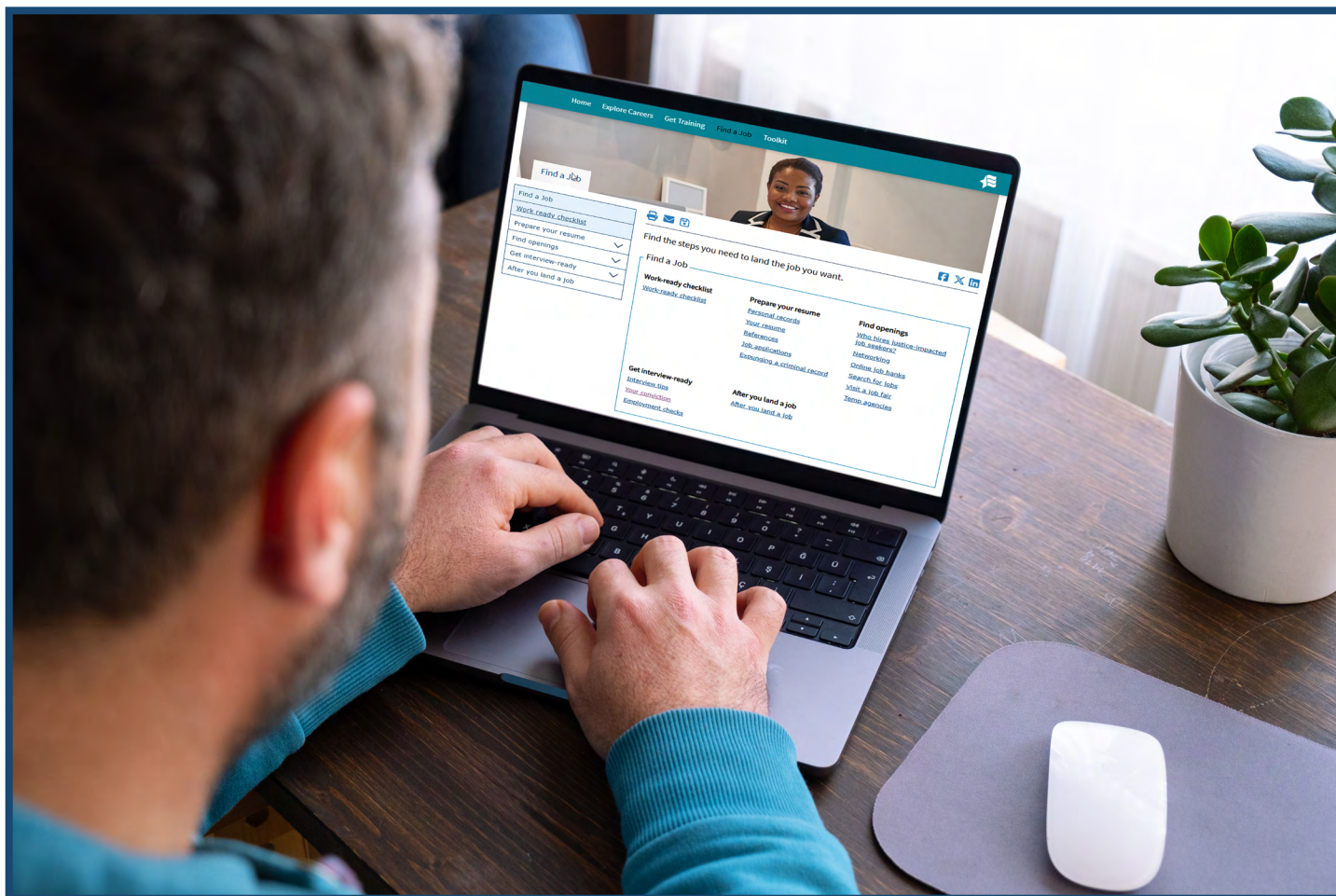
# ReEntry User Research Summary

September 2025



# INTRODUCTION

CareerOneStop is a U.S. Department of Labor program that delivers online tools and guidance to help job seekers explore careers, find training, and connect with in-demand job opportunities. For more than two decades, CareerOneStop has served populations with a range of barriers to employment—including veterans, youth, laid-off workers, and people with criminal records.



Individuals who are reentering the workforce after incarceration have particularly difficult barriers. To support this group, CareerOneStop has developed reentry resources for use both inside correctional facilities, prior to transition, and for post-release individuals at [CareeroneStop.org/ReEntry](https://www.careeronestop.org/ReEntry). This creates a continuity of resources as people transition from incarceration to society.



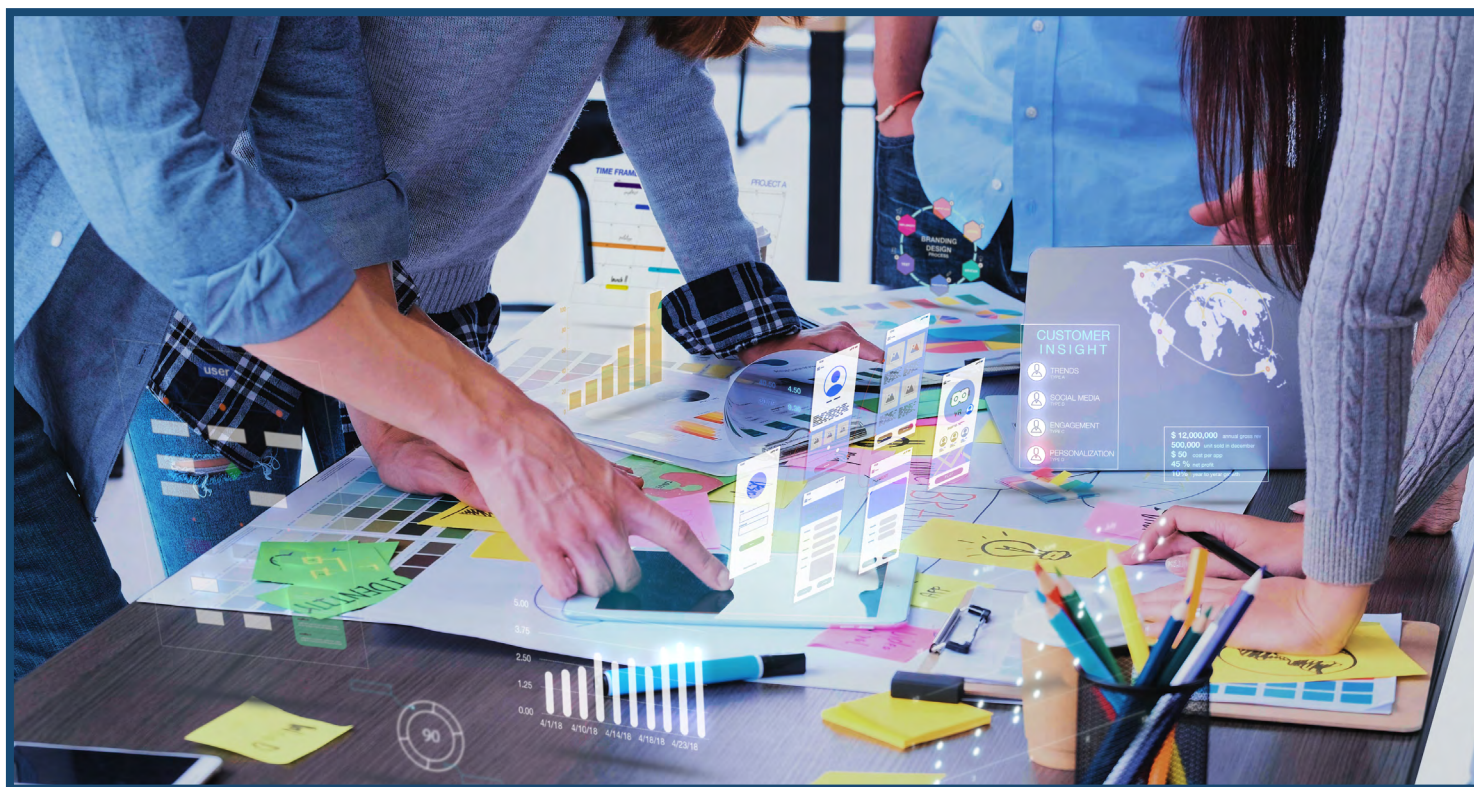
# PURPOSE & GOALS

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CareerOneStop recently conducted user research to better understand the reentry employment experience and the resources needed to support that process. Research questions were:

1. **How do people transitioning from incarceration back to society navigate the job search process?**
2. **What are their key pain points?**
3. **How can CareerOneStop and other resources best meet their needs?**

To learn from the experts, the CareerOneStop user research team met with 10 workforce professionals who assist people in the reentry process. Participants came from three states and were employed either by facilities in pre-release programs or by non-profit organizations in community reentry programs.



## JOB SEARCH NAVIGATION

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Interviews highlighted the common experiences of people navigating a job search as they transition from incarceration. This is represented in the journey map on the following page.

# Reentry Transition Journey Map

User goal: Find a job to fulfill parole requirements

Steps	Release	Search for Jobs	Create Resume & Cover Letter	Apply for Jobs	Prepare for Interview	Start Employment
Emotion Plot						
Goals	Secure housing and transportation	Find a job to fulfill parole requirements	Create a resume and cover letter to apply for jobs	Apply for relevant job openings	Articulate fit for the job with an employer	Receive job offer
Doing	Meet regularly with parole officer to check on requirements and progress	Searching exclusively online for job openings	Using templates to create a resume and cover letter	Applying for jobs online	Looking up interview tips and practice questions online	Understanding and accepting the job offer
Thinking & Feeling	Excited about release, but not confident about handling the pressure of the “real world”	Nervous it will be hard to find a job Overwhelmed with navigating online applications and using computers	Unsure how to create a “professional” resume that will get noticed by employers	Hopeful about getting a response from employers, but fearful of potential bias Defeated by the high number of rejections	Anxious about talking to employers and being able to successfully present self and skills	Relieved and excited to start a new job Nervous about fitting in and keeping the job
Pain Points	Stable housing options are limited Dependent on others for transportation Obtaining essential work documents, including social security card & state ID	Access to reliable internet & computers Finding employers that hire with a criminal background Job opening that work with curfew restrictions	Recognizing work skills & how to talk about them Knowing how to address gaps in employment	High number of fake online job openings Possibility of being rejected from a background check after initial hiring Not targeting jobs to apply to (either applying to all jobs available or being too restrictive)	Lack of interview skills Limited opportunities to practice & get feedback	Recognizing ways to advance in a career Understanding benefits & how to plan for retirement
Opportunities	Outreach & engagement with reentry organizations about CareerOneStop services Connections to local support services & success stories to build confidence	Guidance tasks about additional ways to find job openings & creating an elevator speech Connection with local, curated lists of felon-friendly employers & fair chance hiring initiatives	Guided activity to identify skills & abilities Resume & cover letter templates tailored to justice-impacted job seekers	Content on background checks & potential timelines Guided tasks to match jobs applied to interests or career goals	Guided tasks to prepare how to talk about a conviction Specific interview tips for justice-impacted job seekers	Content on financial literacy Guided tasks about advancement & training opportunities


## KEY THEMES

Interviews identified these three key themes:

- 1. Job seekers looking to reenter the workforce after incarceration face significant barriers, many of which need to be addressed before job search can be successful**

Many experience a lack of support from their existing family and community systems and are often not aware of community resources that could help them with reentry. Mental health issues are common, and many do not have access to computers or a phone.

They also experience employment barriers shared by many low-income individuals, such as lack of housing, transportation, and childcare.



There is widespread lack of confidence around how to navigate life outside of prison, including recognizing that employment opportunities are available, and believing success is possible.

Interviews indicated a major gap in awareness and knowledge about the world of work: the range of occupations and industries that exist, how their skills and interests might match with different occupations, and how to find job openings and apply for jobs. Limited digital literacy skills hinder their job search efforts.



“Some of them ... weren’t given the tools to prepare them for the real world ... they don’t know what they are interested in or how to go about applying for an apartment or applying for a job or schools.”

- Research Participant



## 2. Reentry job seekers often use very few, and opportunity-limiting, job search methods

Workforce professionals described many of their clients as getting “stuck” and limiting their options



unnecessarily. They encourage clients to try several ways to find job openings, including networking. They note the importance of providing clear tasks to complete, practice opportunities, and step-by-step guidance since many participants (especially younger individuals) have never looked for legitimate jobs.

They noted that many of their clients focus only on applying to online job postings, a number of which would not accept candidates with a felony record, and all of which are public and therefore likely to garner many applications.

For individuals who have friends or relatives who have been incarcerated, word-of-mouth sharing of opportunities is common, as they already know the employer accepts applicants with a criminal record. Many limit themselves to this method only.

**“Most clients apply for any and every job they see on Indeed that looks relevant, and they don’t use other methods. They hear back from very few employers and feel defeated and don’t learn from the experience or improve their job search skills.”**

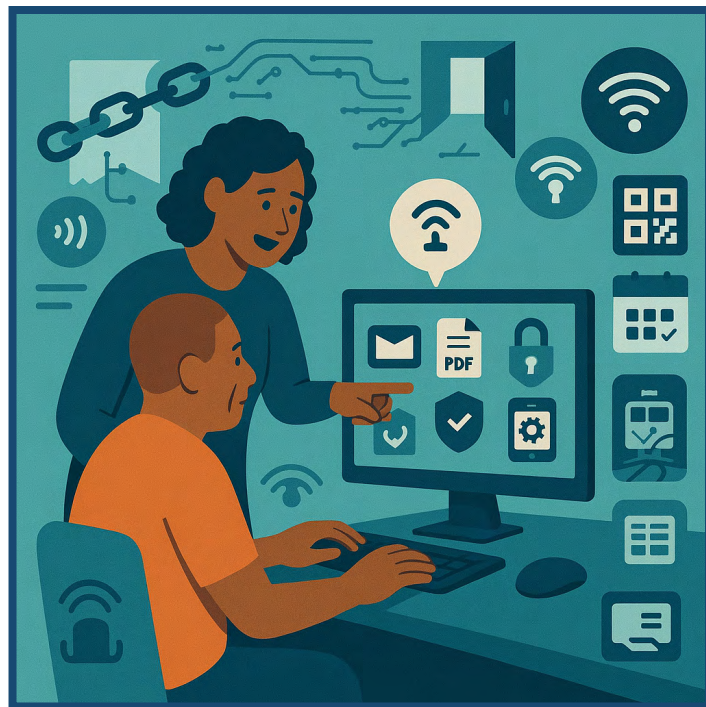
**– Research Participant**

### 3. Digital literacy is limited for many individuals; websites should provide guidance that addresses these users' needs, and prioritize simplicity and ease of use

The experience and needs of the reentry audience are different from both the general public and from people who have a criminal record in their past. It's key for a website supporting reentry to offer content that addresses specific pain points related to users' needs, as well as to establish a personalized experience that guides users to the content that's best for them.

Many found CareerOneStop's reentry website homepage to be overly complicated, making it unclear where to begin or how to find what the user is looking for on the site. (Note that the homepage has since been updated based on this feedback.)

Workforce professionals report clients are unlikely to read content of significant length on their own due to lack of engagement or difficulty understanding the language. They recommended ways to make content scannable and offer it in formats that make it easy to find the specific information users are looking for.



**“I would honestly say based on the patience and need of support ... I don’t see them reading through all that.”**

**“I don’t know if they would know what to do [after reading content] ... they like to just do things.”**

**– Research Participant**

# ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

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Additional awareness gained from the research participants included:

- Employment expectations varied according to the duration of incarceration, prior education, and prior work experience. Many clients need a reality check around the types of jobs they would be likely to be hired for—if they previously worked or trained in a field they are now barred from—and especially for realistic wage expectations.
- Many programs emphasize hands-on practice for clients, including:
  - » How to talk about their conviction in an interview to frame it honestly but with a positive focus on how they’ve developed since the offense, as well as on positive employment habits and commitment
  - » Writing and speaking an “elevator pitch” about their key strengths and how to ask for contacts or job leads
  - » Creating a resume that best presents their work and education experience, whether gained prior to incarceration or in prison
- Obtaining work documents and a driver’s license are important early steps.
- Parole and probation requirements can be an impediment; there is often a requirement to obtain employment (or sometimes, enroll in an education/job training program) at the same time the individual is addressing major barriers to employment such as stable housing and transportation, along with personal issues like family reunification and mental health. For some individuals, parole arrangements require them to check in at transitional housing during the day, and to be at home during typical work hours, which makes it difficult to keep a job.
- Content on the CareerOneStop site that they found especially helpful included background and credit checks, drug testing, and social media checks. Several also said that the Practice Job Application tool would be a useful exercise for their clients.
- Many programs seek to develop a curated list of employers that have hired people with a criminal record in the past. Staff cultivate those contacts locally.
- Skills identification is important since individuals often lack awareness or language to communicate their own skills. This population needs encouragement to identify the experiences where they gained skills, and to practice communicating their skills to employers.





# NEXT STEPS

CareerOneStop is updating content based on these research findings. Looking ahead, expect to see these updates:

- A simplified homepage for the CareerOneStop for ReEntry Job Seekers website, with clear calls to action
- Personalization and guidance, including a step-by-step How-to Guide for job searching with a criminal background
- Simplification of content, including fewer words and easy-to-scan formats
- Templates for job search steps
- Resources and content for low digital literacy users
- Work readiness content that includes basic financial literacy
- Success stories from individuals who have found employment
- Additional video content



Visit [CareerOneStop for ReEntry Job Seekers](#).

What are your experiences with job seekers reentering the workforce? We'd love to hear your input or answer your questions. Email us at: [info@careeronestop.org](mailto:info@careeronestop.org).