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UCLA Labor Center

New Report: Criminal Justice System Locks People Into Bad Jobs

LOS ANGELES - A report released today, Get to Work or Go To Jail: Workplace Rights Under Threat, considers the ways that federal, state, and local governments increasingly make and carry out the threat: get to work or go to jail. The report, a collaboration between the UCLA Labor Center, the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor & Employment (IRLE), and A New Way of Life Reentry Project, presents the ways that workers on parole or who face criminal justice debt can’t afford to refuse a job or to speak up about poor working conditions.

“When people think about the criminal justice system, they often only think about how difficult it is for people coming out of jail to find work. However, this system can also lock people into jobs that deny workers standard labor protections such as minimum wage and workers compensation. These workers may face dangerous working conditions, yet are unable speak up,” said Tia Koonse, report co-author and Legal and Policy Research Manager at the UCLA Labor Center.

The report makes novel use national survey datasets to produce new national estimates of the rates of incarceration for failure to work. The threat of incarceration impacts thousands of workers on a daily basis.

“On any given day, 9,000 people are incarcerated solely for violating probation or parole conditions requiring work and/or payment of court-ordered debts. In major cities, a shocking 15% of all African American fathers are at some point incarcerated as a child-support enforcement action,” explained Noah Zatz, report co-author, UCLA Professor of Law and Associate Director of the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. “These individuals are workers struggling to stay afloat in a bad labor market. Almost everyone jailed for child support had some recent employment, and two-thirds of those incarcerated for work- or debt-related parole or probation violations had been working full time. Most, however, earned less than $1000 per month, too little to live on, let alone keep up with accumulated debt.”

Other findings present the prevalence and implications of community service programs that are generally considered more favorable alternatives to incarceration.

“In Los Angeles alone, 50,000-100,000 people each year must perform unpaid, court-ordered community service to work off criminal justice debt,” said Theresa Zhen, report co-author and
fellow at A New Way of Life Reentry Project, “Nationwide, state and municipal governments and nonprofits receive a stream of free labor from individuals who may have to work hundreds of hours and yet these workers are commonly stripped of workers rights because they are not considered actual “employees.”

Report authors hope the findings spark inquiry into the implications of community service, work programs, and parole/probation.

Link to report: http://www.labor.ucla.edu/publication/get-to-work-or-go-to-jail/

**Please contact Citlalli Chávez to schedule interviews with workers facing this threat and/or report authors.**