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Chicago's business leaders can help halt cycle of crime

By Crain's Editorial Board

Reading the crime blotter or watching the 10 o'clock news can be depressing—so much so that many of us sometimes feel powerless to do anything against the forces of violence, poverty and injustice that are bleeding Chicago.

It doesn't have to be that way. Chicago's executives and entrepreneurs do have the power to reduce the cycle of crime that has brought such pain and embarrassment to the city.

The key they hold is jobs.

As Cook County Sheriff [Tom Dart reminded us](#) in a recent op-ed for Crain's, a criminal record can be a lifetime burden that dooms ex-offenders to poverty, dependence on government aid, dead-end work if they can even find it—and, in many cases, re-offending. Roughly 1.5 million felons can't find jobs in this country today. The Center for Economic and Policy Research estimates that this employment gap costs the American economy approximately \$60 billion per year. And the inability to find honest work increases the likelihood that many of these people will return to a life of crime.

It's no secret that young black men are at the heart of our [city's struggle](#) with policing, crime and incarceration. But a new report sheds light on just how deep the unemployment problem is among Chicago's African-Americans. Forty-one percent of blacks ages 21 to 24 are neither in school nor working, compared with 6.7 percent of whites. Among black men in that age group, the jobless rate rises to 47 percent, versus 31 percent in New York and Los Angeles. If you lay a map of high youth unemployment levels over a map of high-crime areas—as our political columnist, Greg Hinz, did—you'll see remarkable overlap.



Photo by Alamy

That's why it's imperative that Chicago business take up Dart's challenge to open minds and HR departments to hiring ex-offenders.

The federal government provides [financial incentives](#) to employers considering former inmates and bonding programs to help mitigate the risks. And more jails and prisons—including Cook County Jail—are investing in [vocational training](#) to help people who have made mistakes and want a second chance to get one once they hit the job market.

We all benefit when ex-felons go from costing society to contributing to it. Chicago's business community can and should help make it happen.