

# Your Practical Guide to Leaving Crime Behind

Listen, I know you're reading this because part of you wants something different. That's huge. That's actually the hardest part—admitting you want change. So let's talk about how to make it real.

## The Real Talk Upfront

Change is possible. I'm not going to bullshit you—it's not easy, and it won't happen overnight. But thousands of people just like you have done this. You're not broken, you're not hopeless, and your past doesn't have to be your future. The research backs this up: most people involved in crime eventually leave it behind. You can be one of them.

What you need to understand is this: willpower alone won't cut it. You also can't just wait for programs to save you. It takes both—your commitment plus smart strategies that actually change your daily life. Let's get into it.

## STEP 1: Change Your Environment (This is Priority #1)

**What you need to do:** Get physical distance from the people and places connected to your criminal life.

**Why it matters:** You can't become someone new in the same place with the same people. The research is clear—people who move to a different city (not just a different neighborhood) are 15% less likely to get locked up again. Your old crew, your old corners, your old triggers—they pull you back without you even realizing it.

**How to do it:**

- **Best option:** Move to a different city entirely. Look into temporary work programs in other states, or if family lives elsewhere and they're good people, consider moving there.
- **If you can't move far:** At least find work or daily activities that keep you away from your old areas. Different job, different route, different hangout spots.
- **Reality check:** Yeah, parole might require you to stay in your county. Talk to your PO about exceptions if moving would genuinely help. Some are more flexible than you'd think.

**The emotional truth:** This is scary as hell. You're leaving behind everything familiar, even if it's toxic. That fear means you're taking it seriously. Feel it, but don't let it stop you. New places mean new possibilities.

## STEP 2: Accept That You Need Money (And Get Smart About It)

**What you need to do:** Build legitimate income, even if it starts small and shitty.

**Why it matters:** Let's be honest—you need to eat. You need a place to stay. If crime is the only way you know how to make money, and you're broke, you'll go back to what you know. The trick is building something legal that can compete with illegal money over time.

### How to do it:

#### Immediate (First 30 days):

- Call 211 (or visit 211.org) and ask about emergency assistance—food, temporary housing, immediate needs.
- Sign up with American Job Centers (also called One-Stop Career Centers)—they're free, government-run, and help with job searches.
- Look into transitional employment programs that give you a paid job right away while you figure out longer-term plans.

#### Short-term (First 6 months):

- Take whatever legitimate work you can get to start. Yes, it might pay less than what you made before. Yes, it might be boring. That's temporary.

- Construction, warehouses, food service, retail—these sectors hire people with records more often.
- Apply at companies with "ban-the-box" or "fair chance" policies: Amazon, Walmart, Home Depot, Chipotle, Starbucks, Target, UPS.

### Long-term (6+ months):

- Get into trade school or apprenticeships: welding, HVAC, plumbing, electrical work. These pay real money and they're desperate for workers.
- Study for your GED if you don't have it—programs are usually free.
- Look into community college for an associate's degree or certificate. Financial aid (Pell Grants) are available again for people with records.

The emotional truth: Starting at the bottom when you've made serious money before feels like shit. It feels humiliating. I get it. But here's what the research shows: people who stick with legal work for just 6 months start seeing their life stabilize. And stable work opens doors to better work. You're not going to be doing entry-level forever unless you want to.

## STEP 3: Invest in Education or Skills Training

What you need to do: Get some kind of credential, certificate, or degree.

Why it matters: Education cuts your chances of going back to prison by 43%. That's huge. It's not just about the paper—it's about becoming someone who has options. More skills = more choices = less desperation.

### How to do it:

- **GED programs:** Usually free through community colleges or adult education centers. Just google "GED classes [your city]."
- **Trade schools:** Look for programs in construction trades, automotive, culinary, manufacturing. Many have financial aid.
- **Apprenticeships:** These are gold—you get paid while you learn a skilled trade. Search "apprenticeship programs [your state]" or ask at American Job Centers.
- **Community college:** Start with one class if you're nervous. Financial aid covers tuition for most people with criminal records now.

**Real talk:** You might think "I'm too old" or "I'm not smart enough." Fuck that. The average person changes careers 5-7 times in their life. People in their 50s and 60s go back to school all the time. You're not too old, too stupid, or too far gone. Those are lies your brain tells you to keep you stuck.

**The emotional truth:** School might have been a bad experience before. Maybe you struggled, maybe teachers gave up on you. That was then. You're different now because you want it for real reasons, not because someone's making you. That changes everything.

## STEP 4: Find Support Programs and Use Them

**What you need to do:** Stop trying to do this alone. Find organizations and people who help people like you.

**Why it matters:** Nobody successfully leaves crime behind by themselves. You need people who get it, resources you don't know exist, and support when you're about to give up.

### How to do it:

#### Start here:

- **Call 211** (seriously, do this first)—they'll connect you to local programs for housing, jobs, food, healthcare, reentry services.
- **Google these terms:** "reentry programs [your city]," "prisoner reentry services [your state]," "reentry resources [your area]"
- **Check your state corrections website**—most have a list of reentry programs.

#### Look for these types of programs:

- Case managers who help you navigate all this shit
- Employment services (job training, resume help, interview prep)
- Housing assistance (emergency shelter, transitional housing)
- Mental health and addiction treatment (if you need it, get it—untreated issues will pull you back)

- Legal help (expungement, getting your license back, clearing up court stuff)
- Peer support groups (people who've been there and made it out)

### What good programs look like:

- They have staff who actually listen to you
- They help with multiple things (not just one issue)
- They're free or very low cost
- They follow up with you instead of disappearing
- They employ people who've been incarcerated themselves (peer specialists)

**The emotional truth: Asking for help feels weak. It's not. It's strategic. Every successful person you've ever heard of had help. Using resources isn't charity—it's using the tools available to build what you want. Pride won't keep you out of prison, but swallowing it and asking for help might.**

## STEP 5: Build a New Identity (Yes, Seriously)

**What you need to do: Start seeing yourself as someone different than who you were.**

**Why it matters: You can't act like someone you want to be while still thinking of yourself as who you were. Your brain follows your identity. If you still see yourself as "a criminal who's just trying to stay out," you'll act like that. If you start seeing yourself as "someone who made mistakes and is building something better," you'll act like that instead.**

### How to do it:

- Stop introducing yourself with your past. You're not "an ex-con"—you're someone working in construction, studying to be an electrician, trying to start a business, whatever.
- Find purpose in your experience. Lots of people who make it out end up helping others—mentoring, speaking at programs, working in reentry services. Your past doesn't have to be wasted; it can be what qualifies you to help people nobody else can reach.
- Notice when you make different choices. Seriously—when you choose not to hang with old friends, when you show up to work on time, when you handle stress without doing something stupid—notice it. That's evidence you're changing.

- Get around different people. You become like who you spend time with. Find people who are where you want to be.

**The emotional truth:** You've done things you're not proud of. Maybe things that hurt people. You can't undo that, but beating yourself up forever doesn't help anyone. The research shows that people who successfully change hold onto this idea: "I always had good in me, even when I did bad things. Those actions weren't my real self." It's not about denying responsibility—it's about not letting your past be the only thing that defines your future.

You have to forgive yourself at some point. Not because you deserve it, but because you can't build a new life while dragging around chains from the old one.

## STEP 6: Handle Setbacks Without Giving Up

**What you need to do:** Expect problems. Plan for them. Don't let them destroy everything.

**Why it matters:** This isn't a straight line. You'll have bad days, bad weeks, maybe even slip up. The difference between people who make it and people who don't isn't that they never struggle—it's that they don't quit when they do.

### How to do it:

- **When you mess up:** Don't spiral. One bad choice doesn't erase all your progress. Figure out what triggered it and adjust.
- **When you want to give up:** Call someone. Your case manager, a peer support person, that one family member who actually believes in you. Don't sit alone with those thoughts.
- **When doors close:** Job didn't work out? Program rejected you? That's info, not a death sentence. Try a different door.
- **When people doubt you:** Some people will never believe you've changed. Their doubt is about them, not you. Let your actions speak over time.

**The emotional truth:** There will be days when this feels impossible. When you're broke, tired, everyone's treating you like shit because of your record, and you know exactly how to make fast money the old way. In those moments, remember: the research shows that most people who stick with change for 6-12 months get through the hardest part. You don't have to feel motivated every day. You just have to not quit.

## STEP 7: Be Patient With the Timeline

What you need to do: Give this 1-3 years of real effort before judging if it's working.

Why it matters: Crime offered quick money but long-term consequences. Legit life offers slow progress but long-term stability. Your brain is wired for immediate rewards, so delayed gratification feels like punishment. But the science is clear: real change takes years, not months.

### The realistic timeline:

- **First 3 months:** Survival mode. Meet basic needs, connect with programs, start building routine.
- **3-6 months:** Still hard but getting structure. Entry-level job, maybe starting education, staying out of trouble.
- **6-12 months:** This is where most people either make it or give up. Life is stable but not exciting. Keep going.
- **1-2 years:** Things start getting better. Maybe a raise, better job, finishing a program, people starting to trust you again.
- **2+ years:** You're not just surviving, you're building something. Better opportunities open up. Life feels different.

**The emotional truth:** Two years feels like forever when you're in the thick of it. But compare it to a prison sentence. Compare it to the years you spent caught up in shit that wasn't making you happy anyway. You have time. Age isn't the barrier you think it is—people successfully change careers in their 40s, 50s, even 60s all the time.

You've already survived harder things than building a legitimate life. You've just never tried it for real.

## The Bottom Line

You already know what doesn't work—you lived it. Now try what the evidence says does work:

1. **Get distance** from people and places that pull you back
2. **Build legitimate money** even if it starts small
3. **Get education or skills** that give you options
4. **Use support programs** instead of trying to lone-wolf it
5. **Become someone new** in your own head
6. **Don't quit** when shit gets hard
7. **Give it real time** to work

The science backs this up. Thousands of people have done exactly this and made it. You're not special in a bad way—you're dealing with the same stuff they dealt with. Which means you can use the same strategies that worked for them.

Your past is your past. It happened. But it doesn't have to be your future unless you let it.

Make the call. Do the work. Give yourself a real shot at something different.

You got this.