Captive Afterlives in the Age of Mass Conviction

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Captivity’s rhizomes extend well beyond prison walls.

Four and a half million people in the United States are not in prison or jail, but are under direct correctional supervision through systems of parole or probation. Tens of millions more have criminal records that show up on a routine background check.
These are the lives held captive.

There had been a dispute with a domestic partner, and although no one had been harmed, Linda had been charged with Assault on a Person with a Firearm and sentenced to five years in state prison. The judge acknowledged this was a relatively stiff sentence, but justified it by emphasizing that ‘someone could have gotten hurt’ and insisting on the importance of using the case to ‘send a message’.
A record of who has been policed, surveilled and prosecuted.

What is a criminal record?
Discrimination on the basis of criminal records intersects inescapably with racism.

Though her light skin, racial ambiguity, and small frame likely worked in her favor, she was nonetheless a woman of color convicted of a felony classified as violent.
Who is ‘risky’? Who is vulnerable?

When the background report came in the mail, she realized she was not simply a dispatcher looking for a new position, but rather a post-carceral subject whose presumed riskiness warranted careful consideration by all those with whom she came in contact.
The feeling of being held captive resonates not only with the imprisoned, but also with those who have been released.

Though she was no longer held in a cage, Linda continued to be tracked, managed, and contained by a mysterious set of arbiters, some of whom had never even met her.
‘A criminal record is not a bar to employment’, he had said reassuringly, with a wide company smile.

Fair procedure. Fair outcomes?
Those of us invested in the success and well-being of people who are coming home from prison tend to focus on outcomes.

You see, it wasn’t just the disappointment of not getting hired. It was the way the company had raised her hopes and then scuttled them and the frustration in the certainty that she would have been a great fit for the job.
Abstract:
Criminal records have become an increasingly important mechanism for managing and containing criminalized populations beyond prison walls. This ethnographic analysis of a formerly imprisoned woman’s search for work explores how the feeling of captivity resonates not only with the imprisoned but also with the recently released.