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Some unintended consequences of a felony conviction

Mary Ann McGivern | Feb. 26, 2013 NCR Today

Legislators identify an action and label it a crime. A would-be new felony before the Missouri House is fleeing the police in an automobile -- in other words, a high-speed car chase. In my opinion, we don?t need any more felonies. Resisting arrest would be an appropriate charge.

Prosecutors pile up these felony counts in an effort to get a plea deal. If that fails, the judge and jury follow the law: the legislation made in the state House.

But in the Internet age, those felonies follow a person forever. No more the youth?s impulsive bar fight or drug possession. Job and apartment applications ask about felonies. It?s against the law to make a hiring decision based on criminal history alone, but when it?s one of the screening questions, I assume the companies do just that. And the apartment application I saw over the weekend stated clearly that the realtor would not rent to anyone with a felony conviction.

Beyond housing and jobs, *The New York Times* published an account [1] last week of how long sentences devastate families and communities. Too many men, black men, are missing from home, and their families are trapped in poverty.

Finally, we are learning that children pay a heavy price when a parent is incarcerated. And now, writing a bad check to pay a bill and failing to return rental property are felonies. These bad behaviors used to go to civil court. But now it is a crime to be poor. A legislator told me if we try to revoke the rental nonreturn, he?d have all the rental companies in his office to complain. Really, they?d have a better chance of getting paid in civil court than by sending their ex-client off to prison burdened with that life-long felony label.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/science/long-prison-terms-eyed-as-contributing-to-poverty.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0