

# The Promise's Record Clearing Initiative: Three Years of Clinics in Philadelphia

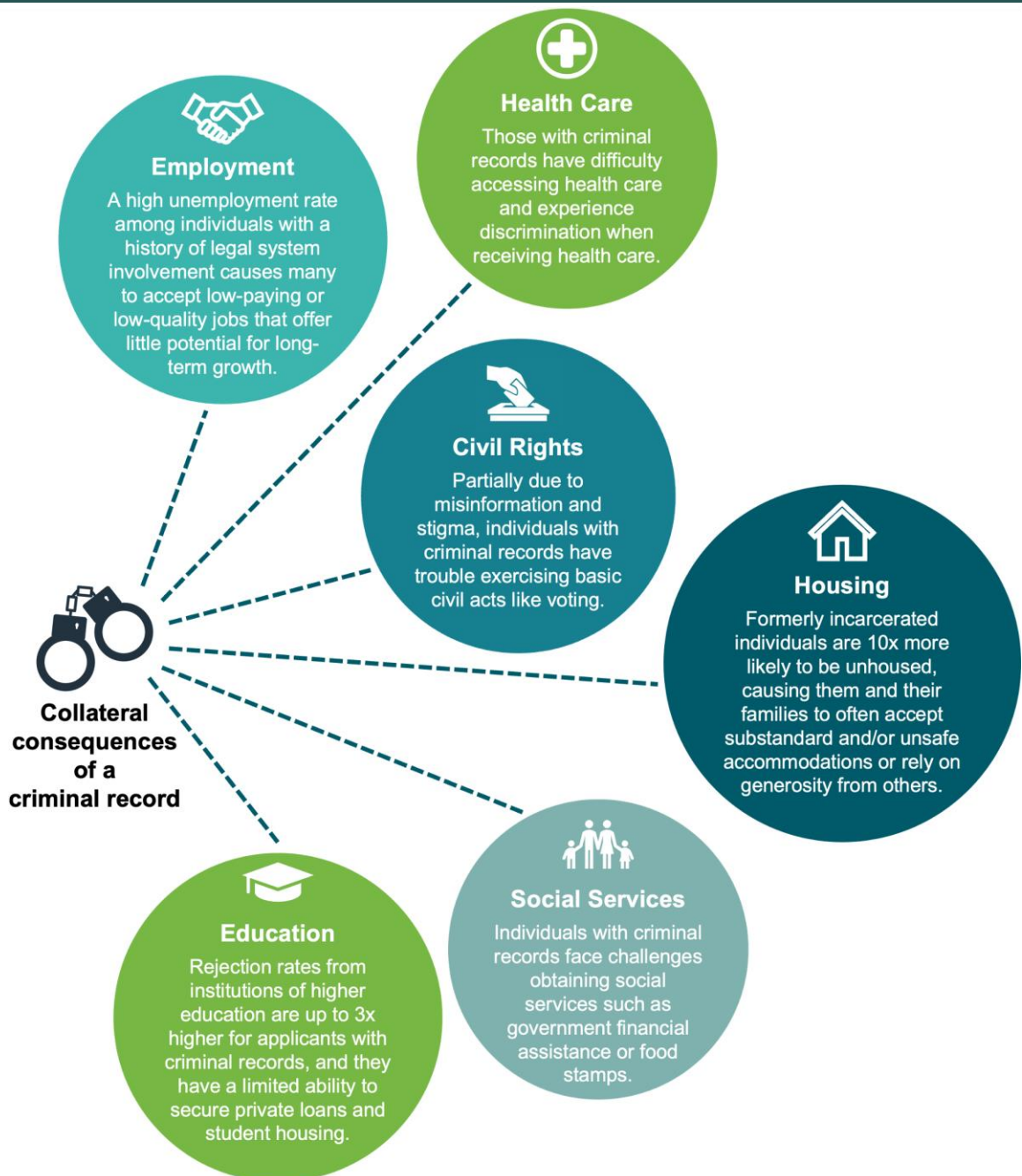
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JUVENILE JUSTICE  
RESEARCH & REFORM LAB

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# The Damage Caused by a Criminal Record



## Longer-Term Consequences

As a result of these various consequences, many individuals with a criminal record history and their families suffer from instability and intergenerational poverty, which can trap them in uncertain and unsafe situations.



# An Initiative to Expand Access to Record Clearing

Informed by research ranking potential anti-poverty interventions by their strategic impact and feasibility, **United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey**, in partnership with the City of Philadelphia, launched *The Promise*, an innovative public-private partnership dedicated to increasing economic mobility for Philadelphians.

**The Promise**  
THE PHILADELPHIA POVERTY ACTION FUND

POWERED BY



United Way  
of Greater Philadelphia  
and Southern New Jersey

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



City of  
Philadelphia

In May 2022, The Promise launched *The Jobs & Opportunities Challenge*, which sought to remove barriers to quality employment by supporting **partnerships among 24 community-based organizations and three legal organizations** to provide access to free legal services aimed at clearing criminal records via sealing, expungement, and pardon.

## Partnering Legal Organizations



**PHILADELPHIA  
LAWYERS for  
SOCIAL EQUITY**

As part of this initiative, local organizations hosted **community events** that include **free legal clinics**, where community members met individually with legal representatives to assess their record clearing eligibility and obtain support and/or representation.

In this report, **we summarize** record clearing options and available information about the record clearing clinics that were held in the initiative's first three years, including the number of individuals who attended associated clinics, clinic locations, and some background information about attendees.

# Summary of Record Clearing Options in Pennsylvania

## Pennsylvania Courts

### Sealing

#### Description

Prevents the public from accessing criminal records.

#### Process

Often automatic; otherwise, file a court petition and pay a fee (unless waived for indigency).

≈ **12-18 months**

#### Eligibility

- Cannot seal certain serious misdemeanor convictions or any felony convictions.
- Cannot seal misdemeanor convictions from the past 10 years.
- Cannot seal cases for those who owe restitution.

## Pennsylvania Courts

### Expungement

Judicial order permanently erases a criminal record from state databases.

File a court petition and pay a fee (unless waived for indigency).

≈ **18-26 months**

- Largely, only for charges not resulting in conviction.

#### **Eligible convictions include:**

- Summary convictions for those with no additional arrest or conviction in past 5 years.
- If age 70+ and has no arrest or conviction in past 10 years.

## Pennsylvania Pardon Board

### Pardon

Governor's order "forgives" a criminal record.

Submit comprehensive application, complete interviews, and attend a Board hearing. Requires post-pardon expungement.

≈ **4-5 years**

- Not eligible if currently under court supervision.
- Must pay court fines and costs before pardon recommendation to Governor.
- Not an official regulation, but individuals with a more distant history of system involvement tend to have greater success obtaining a pardon.

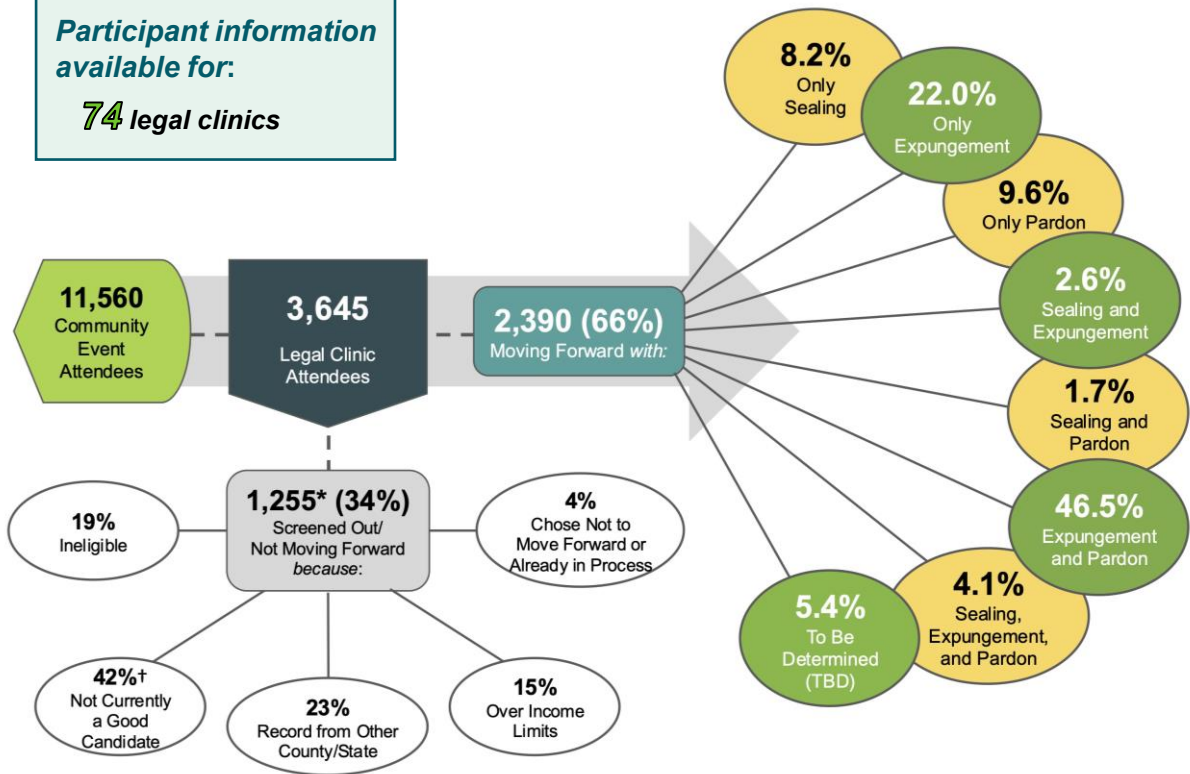
# Philadelphia Record Clearing Initiative

To facilitate individuals taking advantage of record clearing opportunities offered by Pennsylvania's executive and judicial branches, The Promise and United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey supported multiple community events with record clearing clinics across Philadelphia, staffed by representatives from local legal organizations and hosted by community-based organizations across the city.

As of **June 14, 2025**, 76 clinic events had been held as part of this initiative; overall attendance information was available for **74 clinic events**, which **11,560** people attended. The summary below includes data from 74 legal clinics embedded within those community events.

## Participant information available for:

**74 legal clinics**



\* Some individuals' cases did not move forward for multiple reasons; thus, the sum of percentages across reasons exceeds 100%.

† Individuals might be considered "not currently a good candidate" for multiple reasons, such as having a recent or very serious case. Legal organizations then typically recommended waiting before pursuing record clearing options.

**Nearly 70%** of event attendees who met with legal representatives moved forward with some form of record clearing, with most seeking to **both expunge and pardon their records**.

# Legal Clinics Held Across Philadelphia During the 3-Year Initiative

## Clinic Dates

### 2022

May 21	June 25	August 13 (2)	September 10	September 24 (2)	October 29
June 4	July 16	August 20	September 15	October 1	November 12
June 10	July 23	August 27	September 17	October 15	November 19
June 19	July 29	September 3	September 22	October 22	

### 2023

February 18	April 22	May 9	June 8	September 16	November 4	December 9
March 18	April 29	May 20	June 11	September 23	November 11	
March 25	May 6	June 6	July 29	October 7	November 18	

### 2024

January 24	April 23	June 1	August 24	November 16 (2)
March 23	April 27	June 15	September 21	December 7
April 6	May 11	June 22	October 30	December 14
April 20	May 16	June 29	November 2	

### 2025

January 18	April 5	April 22	May 17	June 7
February 1	April 9	May 3	May 24	June 14

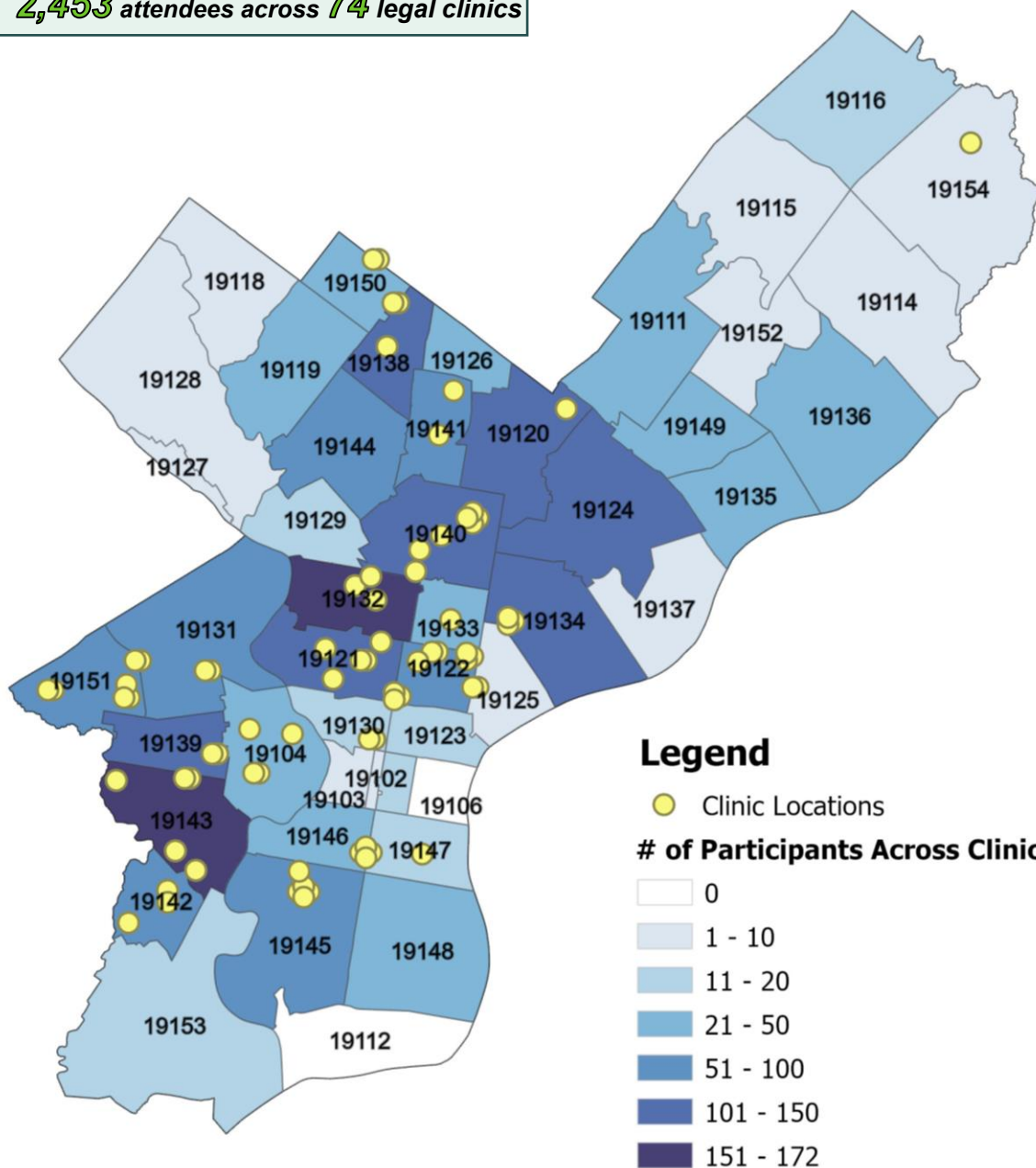
## Community Event Hosts

ACANA	New Kensington CDC
Beyond Literacy	NOMO Foundation
CEIBA	Philadelphia Bail Fund
Compassion CDC	Philly Black Worker Project
Community College of Philadelphia Foundation	Revolutionary Vision
Eastern North Philadelphia Workforce Development Corp	Southwest CDC
EMIR Healing Center	The Elevation Project
Father's Day Rally Committee	The Reawakening Agency
Institute for Community Justice	Unity in the Community
JEVS	Uplift Solutions
First Step Staffing	Urban League of Philadelphia
Make It Happen Philly	Xiente (formerly Norris Square Community Alliance)

## Legal Clinic Attendance Across Philadelphia During the 3-Year Initiative

Zip code information available for:

**2,453** attendees across **74** legal clinics

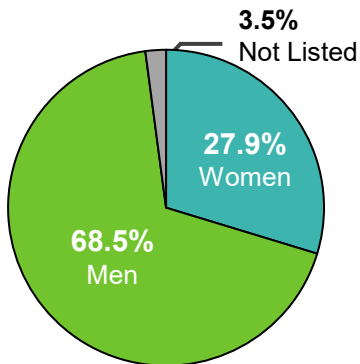


\* An additional 233 attendees lived outside Philadelphia.

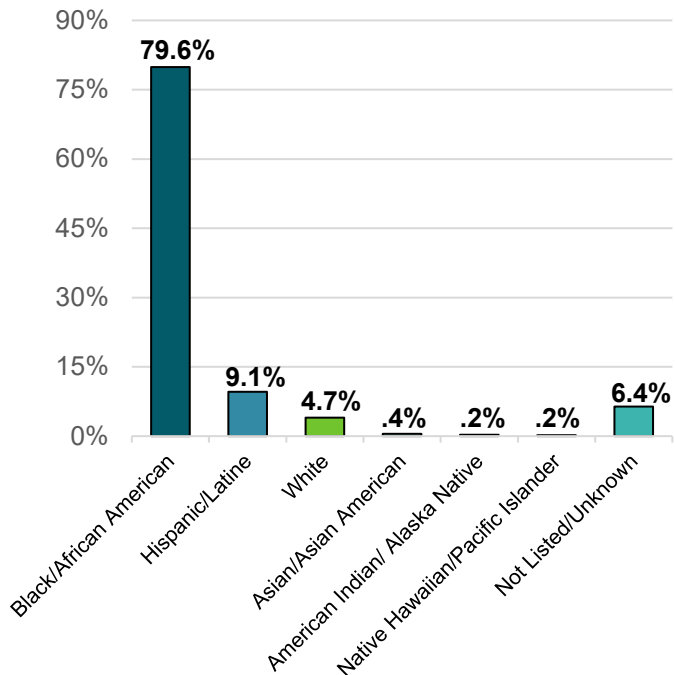
# Characteristics of Legal Clinic Attendees

## Demographics

Data available for 2,390 attendees



The **majority (69%)** of clinic attendees were **men**; most attendees identified as **Black/African American (80%)**



Because individuals could report multiple racial/ethnic identities, the sum exceeds 100%

## Time Range of Arrest Records

Data available for 2,296 attendees

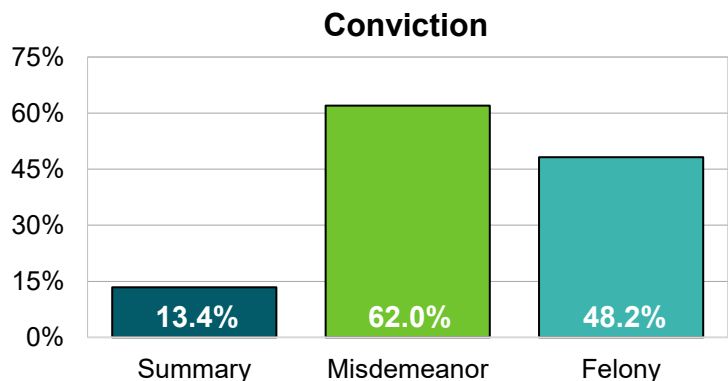


Attendees' first recorded arrests dated back to **1963**; for some individuals, even their most recent arrest dated back **more than 50 years**.

## Types of Convictions

Data available for 2,296 attendees

**More than half** of clinic attendees had at least one **misdemeanor conviction** on their record, and about **half** had at least one **felony conviction**.





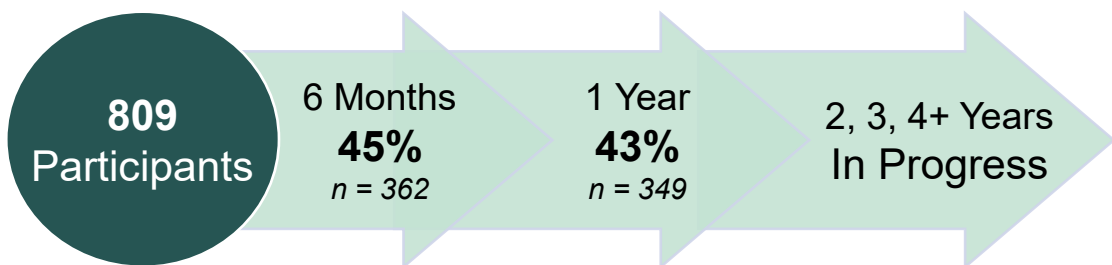
# Moving Forward: The Evaluation Process

Partnering with *The Promise* and *United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey*, the **Juvenile Justice Research and Reform (JJR&R) Lab at Drexel University** is conducting an **evaluation** of this record clearing initiative.

At legal clinics held during the first 26 months of this initiative, JJR&R Lab members recruited attendees pursuing record clearing, asking them to complete surveys over the course of several years (i.e., up to 5 years) following their clinic attendance. These **surveys gauge the impact of having a criminal record** (e.g., on employment, housing, system involvement, self-esteem) and assess participants' **experiences as they move through the record clearing process**.

In addition to self-report information, the JJR&R Lab is **comparing employment and criminal legal system outcomes** of individuals participating in record clearing clinics with non-participants who have similar legal histories by obtaining and examining administrative data from publicly available databases operated by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts and the federal Criminal Justice Administrative Records System.

## Follow-Up Survey Completion



A total of **809 clinic attendees** were recruited for the study and completed a baseline survey on their original clinic date. Participants were then asked to complete a follow-up survey 6 months after their original clinic date, and then annually from 1 year after their original clinic date, up to 5 years after their initial clinic date. Study participants are currently in the 2- and 3-year follow-up period. The 4-year follow up period will begin in 2026, and the 5-year follow-up period will begin in 2027.

***For more information:***

**The Promise's Record Clearing Website**

**United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern  
New Jersey (UWGPSNJ)**

**Juvenile Justice Research and Reform (JJR&R) Lab**

**Community Legal Services (CLS)**

**Defender Association of Philadelphia**

**Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE)**

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