

WE ARE ALL CRIMINALS

One in four people in the U.S. has a criminal record.
This is the other 75%.

Participants in We Are All Criminals tell stories of crimes they got away with. The stories range from humorous to humbling, but all have one thing in common: they are privately held memories without public stigma. Each shows that oftentimes the only thing separating clean from criminal is who gets caught.

PRIVATE MEMORY

Scholar: Possession of Controlled Substance, Etc.



My criminal history is not particularly exciting or uncommon. Drug usage, a couple of 'publics' (intoxication and urination), trespassing, disorderly conduct, and internet piracy.

I smoked marijuana relatively frequently in high school and would drive around with friends who were dealing; I could have been busted or implicated in something.

In retrospect, though, the same sorts of privileges that shielded me from being caught would have shielded me from being punished.

My family is full of lawyers—and more than that, I grew up in a very affluent town. It was the kind of place where it was easy not to have contact with the police; the few interactions I had were very respectful and innocuous. A tap on the shoulder, a suggestion to go home.

The whole town's economy is based on the university, so there's a disincentive for cops to really act. The school, the students, our parents—it's probably more of a headache to arrest

someone than to just let them go.

PUBLIC RECORD

Looking suspicious on campus

I used to wear a hoodie to work.

I work for a caterer on a college campus and would change into my uniform once I got there: black slacks and white button down shirt. The less you wear it, the longer it lasts, you know?

Anyway, I started getting stopped by campus police on my way in. Where are you going? What are you up to? What's in the backpack?

Hey, man—I'm just trying to get to work, but they wouldn't listen.

Why don't you step over here? Mind if I look inside your bag?

Yeah, I mind: now I'm late. That would land me another ten-minute delay—or worse. I've been cuffed and searched for no reason other than I'm a black man on a very white campus.

I don't wear a hoodie anymore. It doesn't matter if it's 20 degrees outside or 90, I only wear my uniform—that bright white ironed shirt vouching for my presence on campus, allowing my existence.

Why WAAC Matters



We Are All Criminals is innovative and provocative. It highlights the many collateral consequences of criminal charges in our society and how difficult it truly is for people to get second chances. Many of these ongoing punishments seem unnecessary and unfair since people change—and at the end of it we are all criminals.

--Ebony Ruhland, University of Minnesota

WAAC is an invitation to understand the richness of my own history. When someone you love is incarcerated, the impact is devastating and lasts well beyond the time spent inside. WAAC puts stories at the center of its mission and reminds me that the acts of respectful listening and reflection can make positive change. We are not alone, and by telling our stories and listening to those of others, we can make a difference.



--Ingrid Nuttall, Board Chair, We Are All Criminals

We Are All Criminals in the Community

“I feel like I’m trapped in a netherworld.”

— Professor Jason Sole, on living with a criminal record.

We were honored to exhibit the WAAC banners at Minnesota's Restore the Vote event in February. Restore the Vote calls for reenfranchising people on felony probation and parole, enabling tens of thousands of people across the state to cast a ballot on issues that affect them, their families, and their communities.



“We need to close the empathy gap.”

— Public Defender James William.

Thanks to James for spending an afternoon talking about WAAC and how we can work together toward second—and first—chances in North Carolina. Additional thanks to Duke Law's Jim Coleman (below right), Lynden Harris from Hidden Voices, Jennifer Thompson from Healing Justice and author of Picking Cotton, and to the brilliant advocates at the Center for Death Penalty Litigation for hosting WAAC in Durham. And thanks to the Wilmington Public Defenders for bringing the bench and bar together to talk about WAAC (below left).



Support for WAAC

Help us spread the message by donating [online](#). We couldn't do this without you!

WAAC is grateful to The Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota for its generous support of our work.

