

# Gatekeepers: The Milwaukee Field Experiment in the Employment Application Process

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## Abstract

Criminal history and race have been prominent figures in the research of discrimination in the labor market. Initially there was a heavy reliance on statistical analysis of employment data as an indicator of bias in employment. The use of field experiments that use audits conducted by testers applying for entry-level positions has become an important resource in the examination of discrimination in the labor force. The testers are matched on all characteristics, but race. In the present study, evidence of discrimination relied heavily on a comparison of callbacks for entry-level positions of Black male and White male testers based on their race and criminal history. Testers were required to participate in debriefings and maintain a diary of all of their interactions during the application process. Three themes emerged from the diaries and debriefings of the testers: (a) the application process was influenced by a “gatekeeper,” (b) racism was evident, and (c) an emotional effect was noted on both testers.

## Keywords

criminology, social sciences, criminal behavior, deviance, public safety, crime

## Introduction

The effect of a criminal history and race on employment opportunities is well documented by Pager (2003), Pager and Quillian (2005), and Pager, Bonikowski, and Western (2009). The literature describes the effect discrimination has on employment opportunities and future earnings of minorities and ex-offenders (Holzer, 2011; O’Neill & O’Neill, 2011; Pager et al., 2009; Riach & Rich, 2010; Sites & Parks, 2011). Some investigations into employment discrimination involved the use of statistical analysis of comparisons of wages between minorities and White employees (Bendick, Jackson, & Reinoso, 1994; Daniel, 1997; McGinnity & Lunn, 2011; Schwieren, 2012; Stepanikova, 2012. Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 1999, Veenman, 2010).

Pager (2003) and Pager and Quillian (2005) used field experiments with matched pairs of testers to examine the natural environment for the gathering of data and information regarding employment discrimination. Pager found a significant effect of race in the findings in Milwaukee and New York. Only 14% of Blacks received callbacks compared with 34% of White noncriminals ( $p < .01$ ).

Veenman (2010) encouraged the use of triangulation of research methods when examining employment discrimination. Veenman argued that one method is not superior to the other. Furthermore, one compensates for the weakness of the other and vice versa. Veenman argued each methodology during triangulation could produce different information

regarding employment discrimination. Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2011) described triangulation as the use of multiple sources, or locations, or researchers in the analysis process. In the present research, the researcher (the researcher, unpublished) used a field experiment with testers, a telephone survey, and the diary entries of the testers to examine employment discrimination for entry-level positions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The following research examined the role of gatekeepers in the application process for entry-level positions in the labor market of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. An added feature of the present research is the testers were required to maintain a diary of their interactions with the gatekeepers during the application process.

## Literature Review

The dramatic role of the gatekeepers has been examined at different levels of organizations. Mitchell (2003) defined a gatekeeper as anyone who stands between you and the person who might want to hire you. Mitchell suggested gatekeepers can be receptionists, HR recruiters, and resume screeners.

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Columbaro and Monaghan (2009) conducted a literature review regarding the effect of the gatekeeper perceptions of online degrees and employment. They suggested that employers' gatekeepers preferred someone with a degree from a traditional learning environment. Therefore, the employers' gatekeepers negative perception of online degrees was a barrier to hiring.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), the gatekeeper plays a prominent role in the communication process of organizations. It was suggested that the degree of authority possessed by the gatekeeper is not necessarily an accurate reflection of their influence on the decision-making process.

Morrill, Buller, Buller, and Larkey (1999) suggested that the individual gatekeepers in an organization can be elusive. Morrill et al. argued that it is frequently a challenge to identify them. Ruth-McSwain (2011) examined the influence of public relations practitioners as gatekeepers to the news in organizations. One of the findings included that the gatekeeper influenced the decision-making process of their organizations. Ruth-McSwain argued that the gatekeeper had a role in their organization's communication with the news media and other external sources. Furthermore, the use and influence of the gatekeeper authority in filtering communication was evident at multiple levels of an organization.

The growing concern regarding gatekeepers in the application process resulted in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to implement new federal guidelines regarding the use of a criminal history in the early stages of the employment process (Berrien, 2012). The new guidelines were implemented to show disapproval of criminal histories being abused as a barrier to employment. EEOC added specific reference to the "Timing" of the use of criminal history in the application process. EEOC suggested that the questions regarding criminal history should be eliminated from the application form. Furthermore, the questions regarding criminal history should be reserved until the interview process.

Other decision makers came to similar conclusions regarding the potential abuse of criminal history records in denying employment. Some cities, counties, and states enacted laws to discourage the use of criminal history checks on applications (Oberstein & Gilbreth, 2010). Oberstein and Gilbreth (2010) reported on the measures taken by the state of Massachusetts to ban criminal history inquiries on job application forms. The ban does not prohibit criminal history inquiries later in the application process.

## Background of the Study

The researcher (unpublished) used a field experiment to examine the effect of a criminal history and race on employment in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin labor market. The field experiments used two testers (one Black male and one White male) to audit 30 employers who were randomly divided into two categories: Criminal Record (CR) and No Criminal Record (NCR) job sites. The two testers were matched in all

characteristics except race. Each tester was required to maintain a diary of the application process experience.

Data were collected on the number of callbacks and interviews received by each tester. A telephone survey was conducted to allow the employers of the audit to express their willingness to hire disadvantaged workers. Similar to the field experiments of Pager (2003) and Pager and Quillian (2005), a dramatic disparity exists between the callbacks of the Black male tester and the White male tester (the researcher, unpublished). The Black male tester received no callbacks when applying at CR job sites. The White male tester received 40% of his callbacks from the CR job sites. Moreover, the Black male received 27% of his callbacks from NCR job sites compared with the White male's 47%. According to the researcher (unpublished), the telephone survey of the same employers indicated a willingness to hire both ex-offenders regardless of their race, yet the audit revealed the opposite.

The diary entries of the testers were subjected to comparative analysis (the researcher, unpublished). Three themes emerged from the diary entries and debriefings: (a) the application process was influenced in the favor of the White male applicant by the "gatekeepers," (b) racism was evident, and (c) an emotional effect was noted on both testers.

## Research Rationale—Diary

The purpose of the present report is to examine the emerging themes from the testers' diaries and debriefings. During the field experiment, each tester maintained a diary of his interactions with the employers. The testers recorded their interactions with the employer or representative immediately after leaving the premises. They recorded the day, date, time, and location in their diary. They also recorded their conversations with the employer or representative at each site, as well as a physical description of each. Furthermore, they recorded the approximate age, build, hair color, and other characteristics to assist in identifying the individuals.

Constant comparative analysis was used to obtain data relevant to the testers' interaction with the employers. Each tester diary entry described the overall interaction with comments made by the employer or representative. The diary entries were read four times and the top three prominent similarities or emergent themes were recorded.

Categories were determined from the diaries' comparative analysis. This was done in part, to review the diary entries for clarity and correctness. Incidents were developed from making observations of differential treatment recorded by the testers for the job site that was visited. This was recorded for that particular site and the tester. After the completion of all 30 job sites, it was determined through the comparisons if any similarities or patterns existed among the incidents.

Data produced by constant comparative analysis were interpreted through descriptive statistics. This systematic

method of constant comparative analysis was used to evaluate the content of the diary entries to determine what themes or theories emerged (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002). Specifically, a comparison was made of the interactions of the Black and White testers who applied at the same job site using the same criteria with the employer or representative. The only significant difference between the two testers was race. The two testers did not know each other, never knowingly met each other, and the job sites were randomly selected.

### Research Rationale—Debriefings

Testers were required to call the researcher after auditing each job site. This allowed the researcher the opportunity to debrief the tester after the completion of each job site audit by telephone. A second debriefing occurred at the end of the workday for the testers. This was a daily individual debriefing of each tester. The debriefing consisted of reviewing the diary entries of the testers. During the review, the testers were instructed to describe their experiences at each job site. This was done as the researcher reviewed each of the diary entries of the testers, requested clarification if needed, and checked the observations entered in the diaries for accuracy and completeness. The information obtained during the debriefings was subjected to the same comparative analysis rigor as the diary entries (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002).

### Description of Testers and Sites

Testers were employed from the local colleges and universities in the Milwaukee area. Two testers (one White male and one Black male) were selected. The testers were selected and matched based on their age and race. They were counseled by a professional employment specialist regarding their dress, physical appearance, and communication skills that are appropriate for seeking employment. Also, for the purpose of this study, they were assigned similar characteristics of education and work experience for application purposes. Testers were required to have their own means of transportation. Also, they were required to apply only at those places assigned to them by the researcher. Furthermore, they were not allowed to accept any employment from any of the audited employers during this research.

The 30 employers were selected from the city of Milwaukee, randomly from the Sunday classified section of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel newspaper and JobNet. The testers were randomly assigned to apply for entry-level positions at the assigned employer.

The testers were trained to record their interactions with the employer and others during the application process. The testers recorded their interactions with the employer or representative immediately after leaving the premises. They

made their diary entries prior to going to subsequent job sites. They recorded the day, date, time, and location in their diary. They also recorded conversations with the employer or representative at each site, as well as a physical description of each. Furthermore, they recorded the race, gender, the approximate age, build, hair color, dress, and other characteristics to assist in identifying the individuals. These procedures were part of the training that was conducted by a former member of law enforcement who had experience in covert operations.

The present study design allowed both testers the opportunity to visit the same employer under the same circumstances of having a CR or NCR. Therefore, the impact of personal contact by CR and race were examined as to their interactions with each employer's representative.

### Summary of Findings: Emergent Themes

The present study found that 73% of the employers studied inquired of the criminal history through the application. The majority of the employers (57%) who asked information regarding a criminal history in the application offered a disclaimer. A disclaimer is described as informing the applicant that a CR does not necessarily bar them from being hired.

The debriefings and diary entries indicated that the personal contact had a positive impact on the White male tester. The White male tester reported enjoyable experiences during the application process at the CR and NCR job sites. The White male tester debriefings and diary entries indicated the application process was a positive emotional experience.

The debriefings and the diary entries revealed a dramatic difference between the two testers. The Black tester indicated that he was frustrated and dissatisfied with the application process. The application process had a negative emotional effect on the Black tester. Also, the comparison revealed that the negative effect experienced by the Black tester was across the CR and NCR job sites. Moreover, no experiences reflecting such negativity were reported by the White tester.

The gatekeepers in the application process were barriers for the Black male tester participation in the process. He was not only denied applications by the gatekeepers, he was discouraged from participating in the process. For example, he was asked direct questions regarding his willingness to participate in a drug screening, he reported being treated rude, and he was not offered assistance in completing the application.

The use of constant comparative analysis of the diary entries resulted in three themes. These themes relate to (a) the power and authority of the gatekeepers in the employment application process, (b) racism, and (c) the emotional effect of the application process. All three of the themes emerged after careful examination of the diary entries.

## Gatekeepers

One theme that emerged from the diaries of the testers is the role of the employee having initial contact with the applicants. The employee was named the gatekeeper. It was observed during this research that the gatekeepers' primary responsibility in the hiring process was to dispense and retrieve applications. The analysis of the diary entries revealed how these responsibilities were taken to various levels of liberty with some gatekeepers on several occasions. It was observed in the diary entries that the gatekeepers decided who received applications and who did not. The testers' diary entries supported that the gatekeepers were denying applications more often to the Black male tester as compared with the White male tester. At one location, the Black male tester was denied an application and the White male tester was given one immediately within minutes of the Black tester being denied.

I went to the office and was greeted by a White female, white shirt, 35- to 40-years old, blond-colored hair, and she was heavy build. I told her I was there to apply for the "call taker" position. She told me they were out of applications and turned away. I didn't believe her so I stood for a split second, surprised, and then I started to walk away. I saw a White guy heading to the window so I was looking back to see was she going to give him an application. I could see her looking at me until I got to the door. She had to lean to look around the White guy who was now at her window. I believe she gave him an application but I couldn't be sure. (Wednesday, Black Male Tester, NCR, Customer Service Representative)

When I first entered the building I went through the right entrance, walked to the counter, told the receptionist there, African American female, petite black hair, mid-to-late 20s that I was there to apply for the "call taker" position, she informed me that I'd have to exit, go through the other entrance, and fill out an application in the other office (with the plate-glass window).

I exited and reentered the correct office, approached the plate-glass window, informed the new receptionist, White female, blond hair heavy-set, white shirt, early 30s that I was there to apply for the call taker position. She told me that I was free to fill out an application (located at a small table to the right) and if I wanted to return it tomorrow, it had to be in before 2:00 p.m. (Wednesday, White Male Tester, NCR, Customer Service Representative)

There were other examples of how the gatekeepers used their authority. The gatekeepers offered support to the White male applicant in verifying that the information was complete and accurate. The White male tester commented on one job site, where the gatekeeper reviewed applications for the appropriate signature and indicated that was one of the first few things the manager checked. This was the job site where the same gatekeeper prescreened the Black male tester

regarding his work behavior, and asked if he was amenable to being fingerprinted, taking a drug test, and allowing a background check before being given an application.

When I first entered the business I approached the reception counter and the clerk, White male, brown hair (short), red company uniform shirt with "Pete" written on front, asked how he could help. I told him that I was there to apply for the driver's position and he handed over a lengthy application. He pointed out that they needed information about job history up to 10 years. He then told me that I could grab a seat in the lounge at the picnic table to fill out the application.<sup>1</sup>

When I finished I returned to the counter. Pete reviewed the application to make sure that all of the signatures were there (which he mentioned was the first thing that the manager looked at). He asked to photocopy my license and told me that the manager would be in later today. He would review my application and would be giving me a call later this week. I thanked him, we shook hands, and I exited. (Monday, White Male Tester, CR, Driver)

I was greeted by four White males. All were in their early to late 40s. I talked to the shortest of the four men, who had short brown hair and a beard and mustache. They all had on the company uniforms with first names sewn above the pocket. I talked to the one with "Pete" sewn onto his shirt. I told him I was there to apply for the driver's position. He asked me if I would mind working long hours. I told him no. He asked if I would mind being fingerprinted, because by federal law they would have to do it. I told him no. Then he asked me if I needed a few days to take a drug test. I said no, I'm not worried about that. He said we also do background checks. I said O.K. After the questioning, he said I'll go get you an application to fill out. I completed the application and returned it to the same person. He accepted the application and I left. (Friday, Black Male Tester, CR, Driver)

There were other examples in the diaries describing the roles of the gatekeepers. Another diary entry of the Black male tester discussed being asked about previous experience in international shipping and the possibility of having a CR. Again, these were questions that were asked prior to giving him an application that were not asked of the White male tester.

At another job site, the gatekeeper asked the White male tester if he had an appointment. When he informed her that he did not, she told him to have a seat and found someone to interview him, thereby receiving an interview. The gatekeeper also pointed out to him the areas on the application that must be completed that included a skill list and math quiz. In interacting with the same gatekeeper, as described in the diary, the Black male did not receive the special instruction or specific directions in terms of which section to complete.

In a similar experience at a different job site, the White male tester recorded his experience with a human resource

manager who informed him that she wanted to interview him after he completed the application. The human resources manager indicated that she was alerted to him by the receptionist (gatekeeper). There were similar diary entries where the gatekeeper was offering assistance to the White male tester in the form of reviewing his application and referring him to interviews and no such support was given to the Black male tester.

When I first entered the building I approached the receptionist, White female, dark brown curly hair glasses, brown shirt, and early 40s and I told her that I wanted to apply for the driver's position. She showed me an introduction letter, which states that the applicants must show two forms of ID, high school diploma, and three personal character reference letters. I explained that I only had the ID and social security cards with me but I could get everything else. The receptionist gave me the application and invited me to grab a seat and fill it out.

While I was filling out the application, the HR manager came out (White female, blond hair, tan suit) and said that she was told by the receptionist that I was completing an application and she wanted to ask a couple of follow-up questions about getting my diploma and letter of reference. I told her I could get both. She then invited me to stay after my application was filled out for a prescreening interview.

When I finished the application I gave it to the receptionist who looked it over carefully, copied my SS card and driver's license, and then told me to have a seat and wait for the HR manager. After a few moments she directed me to the HR manager who invited me into her office. She began asking questions about my employment history, driving history, etc. She explained what the job entailed and described the 2-week training. She described the criminal background check as important and said that "if there's anything on your record you should write it down because it won't matter unless it relates seriously to the job. But, if something came up that wasn't written down then it will be considered falsification of application and I would get fired." She then stated that she didn't foresee that being a problem in my case. We discussed some other general points of the job. She handed me her business card in case I had questions later. She thanked me for coming in. We shook hands, and I thanked her for the interview. I also made sure to thank the receptionist on my way out, and then exited the building. (Monday, White Male Tester, NCR, Driver)

Upon entering I was greeted by a receptionist, White female in her late 30s, brown shoulder length hair with glasses. I told her I was there to apply for the driver position and she handed me a very long application with several inserts. She asked did I have a driver's license, social security card, diploma, and three letters of reference letters. She said you will need that before an interview. I told her it would not be a problem to have this information for her. Upon completion of the application the receptionist looked it over and said I will give this to the manager. (Tuesday, Black Male Tester, NCR, Driver)

## Diary Entries: Racism

Another theme throughout the diary entries involved capturing the "real-life" experiences of the testers. In the research by Pager (2003), Pager and Quillian (2005), and Yinger (1986) discussed how audit studies provide "real-life" data. Such data, rich in detail and story cannot be captured using surveys (Yinger, 1986). For instance, the diary entry from the Black male tester, who was prescreened in the presence of the gatekeeper coworker, revealed on-the-spot details and reactions that could never be captured in such rich narrative after the experience. The same situation also illustrated how the gatekeeper verified the accuracy of information for the White tester, but not for the Black tester. If the two testers had not been sent to the same location under the same conditions, these facts may never have been disclosed. This supported the theme that the disparity in treatment is based on the race of the tester.

There are several examples that supported this theme of disparities in the application process on the part of the gatekeepers that are based on race. They included asking questions that are not in the application, not reviewing all applications for accuracy, and being denied an application when the process was still open. The diary entries were crucial in capturing how the gatekeepers exercised their apparent authority over the initial interview process. There is evidence that the gatekeepers discriminately selected who could access the attention of their superiors and who could not. In this case, the White male tester gained access, while the Black male tester did not.

One example involved the description of an event where the Black male tester sensed the gatekeeper did not tell the truth regarding her assertion that they were not accepting any applications. He described his attempt to see if she was going to give an application to a White male who was walking up to the gatekeeper as he was leaving, who proved to be the other unknown tester. He could see her watching his every move until he left the building. He reported not being able to see her hand the White male an application, but it was verified in the diary and debriefing of the White male tester that he did receive an application.

When I first entered, I approached the host, White male, Black short hair, black shirt, late 20s and told him that I was there to apply for the busser position. He got an application from under the counter and handed it to me. I took a seat in one of the booths to fill it out.

When I finished the application, I looked around for the host to turn it in, but he was nowhere to be found. I was going to just leave it on the table or wait a moment until he returned but then a manager approached. I asked if I could turn in the application with him. He informed me that he was looking for me because "Paul" said I was applying for the busser position. He invited me to take a seat at one of the tables for an impromptu interview. He asked what type of hours I was looking for, if I was still

attending school and how much, and whether I was presently employed. My criminal history (CR job site) never came up in the interview. When he ran out of questions, he introduced himself as “Tom” (White male, balding brown hair, black shirt, and late 40s). He told me that he would pass the application on to “Karen” but he told me she was out of town for the week because her brother was getting married. He said that she’d probably get in touch with me next week for a second interview. I thanked him, we shook hands, and I exited the restaurant. (Wednesday, White Male Tester, CR, Busser)<sup>2</sup>

I was greeted by a young White male in his 20s with dark hair. I told him I was applying for the bus boy position that was advertised. He went to the dining area and returned with an application. He told me if he wasn’t around when I was done, I should leave the application on the bar. I completed the application and I was about to leave it on the bar when I saw the White male. I took him the application. I asked him will there be interviews? The White male looks down at the application and said he just give them out and pass them on. He mumbled something under his breath and walked away. (Friday, Black Male Tester, CR, Busser)

The White male tester also described an interview where the Human Resource Manager asked him where he went to grade school. He reported although she had been told about his CR “she did not flinch.” Similarly, he shared an incident where an owner hired him on the spot before he took a drug test. This experience mirrored another position where he was told he could start training before he took a drug test or completed his background check.

When I arrived I had to be buzzed into the warehouse after ringing the door bell and announcing myself. The owner of the company, White male, White hair with a bit of gray, black shirt, mid-to-late 50s, extremely nice guy, led me to the table with applications sitting in a box on top. Before grabbing me the application he asked me a few questions, such as, “Have you ever driven before?” (yes). “Where have you been working?” “Different jobs.” “Why stop?” (Better opportunities somewhere else), etc. He told me that the regular guy in charge of hiring was on vacation, so I should just fill out the application and then talk to him [the owner].

Before I could even finish the first page of the application the owner sat down in front of me at the table and told me that since he would be leaving soon that he’d take a look at what I had so far. I offered him my resume as well since I hadn’t even gotten close to the employment history section. He looked it over, asked me about my experiences in college. He told me a story about his times there in the 60s and how he was entering the Union (still under construction when he heard that Kennedy had been shot; 1963). He asked some pointed questions and basically told me that it was a foolish move (“take it from the owner of a company; this ain’t the way to do it”), and told me about his partner whose kids are bankers and engineers because their dad didn’t want them in this business. He asked if lifting would be a problem, whether I could pass a drug test, etc. He then told me that he’d give me a job, but under one condition” that after a

year of delivery I would return to school (or else he’d fire me so that I could return to school). I agreed and we shook hands.

The owner then told me to finish up the application and he’d get the paperwork started. When I’d finished the application, the foreman, White male short light brown hair heavy-set, green shirt, mid-to-late 40s, came over to the table with paperwork for the drug test. He collected my application, got on the phone with the drug testing center. He then filled out some paperwork, I signed where I needed to, and he gave me directions to the testing center. The owner came back over and told me to report to work tomorrow at 5:30 a.m. and that I’d be going out to Madison with him. We talked for moment longer (mostly about the job and common sense), he told me that he wasn’t just hiring me to be a fill-in, that he was getting ready to fire one driver and that another had been on workman’s comp for 3 months, and that I’d have a fairly permanent position. I thanked him again for the opportunity, we shook hands again, and I left the building. (Thursday, White Male Tester, NCR, Delivery Driver)

I was buzzed in and greeted by a White female in her 30s with brown hair. I told her I was there to put in an application for the driver position. She asked me did I have a CDL. I told her that the ad said no CDL was needed. She directed me to a table where the applications were in a box. I completed the application and returned it to her. She informed me that the hiring manager was on vacation and he would be reviewing application when he returned. (Thursday, Black Male Tester, NCR, Delivery Driver)

There were numerous examples of events captured during the audit that promoted using the diary method of data collection and analysis. The “real-life experiences” of the testers provided rich understandings of events that are not recorded by the employer or his or her agent.

## Emotional Effects

It was clear from the diary entries of both testers that the application process had an emotional impact that is distinctively different. The debriefing sessions that followed each experience disclosed these feelings over time. The White male tester related more positive personal contacts during the application process. He used phrases that expressed his pleasure in his duties like “I got to work.” He frequently ended his diary entries with how he thanked the person before exiting the building. In one of his diary entries he wrote, “I also made sure to thank the receptionist on my way out . . .” The White male testers related the experience with the owner of a company who hired him on the spot. He referred to him as a “fatherly advisor.”

The personal reactions by the testers were critical to understanding the feeling beneath the written word. In one entry the Black male tester accused the gatekeeper at one location of being untruthful. He described the experience of another gatekeeper checking his background and looking up at him every 2 min. One gatekeeper was described as being rude, arrogant, and flippant, because he told him that his job

was merely to accept the applications and pass them on, and then he walked away.

Words describing the personal contacts were extremely insightful. In our debriefing, the Black male became encouraged when an employee representative indicated that he was the most qualified applicant he had seen in 2 years. His confidence seemed to improve after being approached at another location where he described a positive interaction with an African American gatekeeper who described specifics about the process, and the experience, “we hit it off.”

The application process also had a dramatic negative emotional effect on the Black male tester. He described situations in his debriefs but with more compelling terms. For example, during the debriefing of the job site where he was prescreened by “Pete,” he explained that the questioning was accusatory. Also, he explained that the experience was more than the questions and that it is something you had to experience. His emotional reactions became more apparent as the process continued. He questioned how people could do this every day. He became disturbed regarding the incident where he believed a gatekeeper did not tell the truth about being out of applications and turned him away. During the debriefing, he became insistent that the receptionist (gatekeeper) deliberately lied.

The Black male tester voiced frustration when he felt rejection from someone of his race. He revealed how an African American woman in charge of hiring reacted when she reviewed that he had marked on his application that he had a CR. He provided the scripted explanation of his drug arrest. He became distraught as he described how she rose from her chair as a signal that it was time for him to leave.

I was greeted by a young Black male in his mid 20s, with short black hair. I told him I wanted to apply for a driver position. He told me to wait and he would get the manager. He returned with a medium to heavy built African American woman with black hair. I told her I wanted to apply for the driver position. She gave me an application from a drawer and told me to bring it to her office when I was done. I completed the application and went to her office. She invited me in and told me to have a seat. She looked at the application and the first thing she asked about was the arrest. I told her about the arrest and how the Judge sent me to the House of Corrections. Her attitude changed and she said someone would call me for an interview. As she said this, she stood up indicating I should leave. (Monday, Black Male Tester, CR, Driver)

The above experience of the Black male was not the same for the White male tester. The White male tester visited the same location the following Wednesday:

When I first entered the building I approached the reception window and requested an application from the receptionist, African American male, short black hair (shaved almost bald and late 20s, heavy-set). He asked to see my driver’s license and gave me the application once I handed the license over. I took

the application to the table and began working. He came out of the office about halfway through the application and returned my DL.

When I finished the application, I was told to take it and the photocopy of my DL back to the processing office. I met with the Human Resource/Hiring person (African American female, heavy-set, black hair, late 30s, white shirt) who gave me an on-the-spot interview. She inquired about my driving experience, whether I’d accept a job at the Waukesha office if the Milwaukee jobs were all full, what my availability was. She even gave me a little quiz about Milwaukee street locations and the location of certain places (Zoo, Museum, etc.), which I passed with flying colors.

There was never any mention of a criminal record in the interview but it was in the application. She finished by giving me a set of handouts to study in preparation for a CDL class meant to train me for getting a permit. She then told me that she would give me a call by Friday to let me know if I cleared the background, but she told me that I could start the class tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. It was my choice whether to wait for clearance. I thanked her, we chatted for another moment and then I exited the building. (Wednesday, White Male Tester, CR, Driver)

Based on these “real-life” experiences, the two testers demonstrated very different emotional responses to the application process. The White male tester appeared more upbeat and required less reassurance; he enjoyed the experience. The Black male tester needed notably more encouragement particularly as the process continued and frustration and discouragement escalated.

## Summary

The diary entries richly reflect the significance of the personal contact by the employer or representative as more favorable to the White over the Black tester. Note that each one of the locations resulting in a diary entry is frequented by both testers. The diary entries supported the evidence that race and criminal history impacted the employment decision to call back an applicant in the present study.

Interestingly, the diary entries of the testers revealed how some employers and their representatives responded to the applicants. The diary method facilitated insight into the compelling nature of these writings. Each tester wrote of his unique experiences when interacting with employers and each representative as accurately as they could capture.

These findings were supported by the specific entries into the diaries of the testers. This data reflected that the employers and their representatives favored the White male tester who received more interviews from personal contact. For instance, it became apparent that the gatekeepers were favoring the White tester. The Black tester was denied applications, whereas data supported that the White tester received an application from the same person. There was also evi-

dence in behavior notations to support that this was intentional on the part of the employee.

The intentional disparity in treatment between the White tester and the Black tester support the theme of racism. Throughout the debriefings and diary entries, there are examples of the gatekeepers favoring the White tester over the Black tester. The Black male tester was denied applications, treated indifferently, and not provided assistance that was extended to the White tester. It was also evidence from the debriefings and diary entries that this had a negative emotional effect on the Black tester. The White male tester expressed a positive outlook on the application process.

There were events during the audit that could not be captured using merely survey methods. For example, in some cases the Black male tester was denied applications, was subjected to preapplication screening, and was told positions were filled. Yet, at one job site the Black male tester was praised by an African American manager as being one of the most qualified applicants he had seen in 2 years but still did not get a callback. In another case, an African American employer offered to make sure the application of the Black male tester got to the manager. He also told him how to follow-up on the process. The Black male tester received a callback from the employer.

Similar experiences occurred with the White male tester. The White male tester reported that at a CR job site, the manager asked him about a school she thought his brother may have attended with her. He wrote in his diary that during the interview he told her of his scripted response about his CR. He wrote, "She didn't even flinch."

The White male tester also wrote about being hired by one employer before he completed the application by promising to have a drug screening. He described the employer as a "fatherly advisor." He also described an experience with a human resource manager who interviewed him writing that she encouraged him to disclose all of his criminal history on the application. Another experience of the White male tester occurred at a CR job site. There is no question on the application regarding a criminal history, so he told the manager of his scripted story during the interview. The White male tester wrote there was no follow-up regarding his criminal history.

## Conclusion

The constant comparative analysis of the diary entries revealed three dominant themes. These themes include (a) the power and authority of the gatekeepers, (b) racism, and (c) the emotional effects of the application process. Several visits indicated that the gatekeepers were denying applications to the Black male tester. In contrast, they were offering assistance to the White tester that resulted in him obtaining interviews and assistance with the completion of the application. Furthermore, the Black male tester was asked prescreening questions by the gatekeepers that were not asked of the White male tester. At one job site, the Black

male tester reported feeling intimidated by the questions asked by the gatekeeper, because they were asked in the presence of employees.

The emerging theme of capturing acts of disparate treatment or racism observed during the "real-life" experiences of the testers demonstrated the richness of information obtained through audit and diary entries. The behavior of the gatekeeper was captured in the diaries as events resulting from the interaction with the testers. The "real-life" experience involved the gatekeepers exercising authority in the process that cannot be verified as legitimate.

The action of the gatekeepers had an emotional effect on the testers. The White male tester was treated positively by the gatekeepers so his behavior was positive and upbeat. The Black male tester became frustrated at the repeat rejection and behavior from the gatekeepers. He required more counseling and coaching as the process progressed.

Several instances were reported where the gatekeepers influenced who obtained an application and an interview. It appears that individuals in these entry-level positions have acquired a significant amount of power and authority. They have either elevated themselves or have been elevated by others in the organization. Moreover, it was not even apparent if their superiors were aware of the liberties taken. The details captured in the diaries and debriefing sessions revealed that the gatekeepers appeared to make decisions based on their perceptions of the individuals who walked through their doors.

The behaviors of the gatekeepers are examples of how the Black male tester was discouraged and prevented from participating in the process. These are also examples of activities and behaviors that cannot be captured by a survey. Moreover, it is difficult to design and implement an effective survey to capture the same information observed in the present study. It is unlikely that a gatekeeper will admit in a survey that they denied applications to Black applicants. It is also unlikely that a gatekeeper shall admit to aiding some applicants based on their race to obtain an interview. There were many similar incidents in the diaries that do not lend themselves to a survey but are better suited for real-world controlled experiments.

It is important to recognize that the behavior of the gatekeeper can persist because there appeared to be no visible mechanism or process in place to monitor their activity. In short, they do because they can. One could argue that the employers allow this behavior to occur at the hands of an entry-level low-paying and likely expendable person, because they comply with the will of the employer. This also allows the employer an opportunity to avoid taken positive action toward increasing diversity of the workplace.

## Author's Note

This article is based on the dissertation of Lenard Wells while attending Cardinal Stritch University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Lenard Wells is currently at the Department of Criminology and

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### Notes

1. Red company uniform shirt and “Pete” are substituted for the name of the employer and employee, respectively.
2. The names “Paul,” “Tom,” and “Karen” were substituted for the real names by the author.

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### Author Biography

**Lenard Wells** is a retired lieutenant of police with more than 30 years of criminal justice experience.