

Challenges Faced by Former Prisoners in Reintegration Process: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

The reintegration of individuals who have served their sentence in a correctional institution is a complicated process associated with many challenges. This systematic review examines the obstacles prisoners encounter during their reintegration into society before their release. We focused on publications available through the Sage databased and primarily indexed in Scopus. Qualitative studies published between 2018 and 2024 were probed. The review was conducted in alignment with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). The results show that former prisoners encounter significant obstacles in finding employment. This is commonly due to low vocational skills and inadequate formal education. In addition, many former prisoners are negatively affected by stigmatization, medical problems, psychiatric issues, and inadequate support from family and community. The present study provides valuable insights into the complex process of reintegration and the life experiences of prisoners, and it highlights the importance of effective reintegration programs. The findings should help to guide effective strategy development to help pre-release prisoners successfully transition back into life outside of the correction facility before their release.

Keywords: Challenges, Former Prisoners, Reintegration, Stigmatization, Offenders

Introduction

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) defines the adult correctional system as "persons living in the community while supervised by probation or parole agencies and those incarcerated under the jurisdiction of state or federal prisons or in the custody of local jails (Moore, 2023)." Bartlett and Hollins (2018) report that the number of incarcerated women and girls worldwide has increased by 50% over the past 17 years and amounts to approximately 700,000. Women in prison have significantly higher rates of psychiatric morbidity compared men in prison and women in the community. They often face multiple morbidities, report high levels of past trauma and substance misuse, and are at risk of receiving inadequate treatment for acute mental illness while incarcerated. However, Bartlet and Hollins (2018) caution against generalizing these findings globally due to limited understanding of different contexts.

Incarceration is inherently stressful, with the prison environment being particularly intense in this regard (Villanueva & Gayoles, 2019). In addition to ensuring public safety, it is the responsibility of the prison administration to facilitate the successful reintegration of prisoners into society (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2019). Despite this responsibility many former prisoners face significant obstacles upon release. The criminal justice system has historically emphasised punishment particularly under the "get tough on crime" philosophy, which has resulted in numerous ex-offenders struggling to successfully reintegrate (Gunnison et al., 2019).

Reintegration can be an emotionally charged and disorienting experience for individuals leaving prison, and it is often accompanied by unrealistic expectations (Pratt et al. 2022; Tharshini et al., 2018). Institutional indifference exacerbates these challenges and causes prisoners to reflect on the nature, purpose, and end of their sentence. Pratt et al. (2022) argued that understanding these critical moments of a prison sentence is important for advancing broader theories of justice and assessing the impact of transitions within the criminal justice system. Although there is a substantial literature, Khan (2023) notes a significant gap in research addressing the challenges faced by prisoners under immediately up release. Coloma, Salaberria, and Perez (2021) highlight that prisoners with a high risk of recidivism often lack important tools to navigate life after release. Several studies show that recidivist offenders are often characterized by antisocial tendencies and early development of criminal behaviour (Coloma et al., 2021). Additionally, neuropsychological problems such as learning difficulties, reasoning impairments and academic failure in childhood and adolescence along with a criminogenic environment, contribute to the likelihood of recidivism (Coloma et al., 2021).

Harvey (2020) points out a research gap in relation to the re-entry process and available programs for those incarcerated in prisons, as most studies have focused primarily on prison inmates while those in jails and associated re-entry programs have been underrepresented. The Jails to Jobs initiative aim to address re-entry barriers by providing services both during incarceration and upon release. However, concerns remain about the effectiveness of the initiative. Harvey (2020) argued that re-entry programs should commence from the first day of incarceration and include transition services to support reintegration upon release (Harvey, 2020). The reintegration of former prisoners is often hindered by various obstacles. These obstacles can include insufficient education or vocational experience, criminal history, social stigma, unstable relationship networks, and issues related to addiction or mental health (Pasma et al., 2023). Policy makers, practitioners and criminologists continue to focus on critical reintegration challenges such as employment, housing, finances, access to healthcare, and obtaining a valid ID.

Pasma, Genniken, Palmen, and Nieuwbeerta (2023) emphasized the importance of multi-agency support for successful reintegration. They have argued for collaboration between prison and community professionals to address critical resettlement issues, including employment, housing, financial management healthcare, and identification. However, there remains little evidence of the actual impact of such support on prisoners perceived preparedness for re-entry (Pasma et al., 2023). Effective reintegration approaches are essential for the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society; effective re-entry approaches are essential. As stated by Harvey (2020), adjustments in policy

could have a significant impact on how correctional institutions and related organizations prepare people for reintegration (Harvey, 2020).

Moreover, different types of professionals are trained to provide customised support to prisoners (Pasma et al., 2023). As discussed in the following section, it is likely that the involvement of a multi-agency team offering re-entry support improves prisoners' perceptions of being prepared for release (Pasma et al., 2023). However, many prisoners can find it challenging to navigate the prison system and access appropriate professional networks for support, which can lead to a cumulative disadvantage for those in need of it (Pasma et al., 2023). The ineffective implementation of multi-agency professional support is of great concern, yet little attention has been paid to understanding the outcomes of the re-entry support provided by prison-based and community-based professionals (Pasma et al., 2023).

The importance of studying prisoner reintegration lies in its direct connection to public safety, economic sustainability, and social cohesion. When reintegration fails, the consequences extend beyond the individual to affect victims, families, correctional institutions, and taxpayers. Recidivism places a heavy financial burden on governments due to repeated incarceration costs and strains already overcrowded correctional facilities. Conversely, successful reintegration contributes to reduced crime rates, enhanced community stability, improved family relationships, and better long-term socioeconomic outcomes.

Despite the extensive body of literature on incarceration and recidivism, significant gaps remain in synthesizing qualitative evidence that captures the lived experiences of prisoners during the pre-release and immediate post-release phases. Much of the existing research emphasizes quantitative recidivism outcomes without sufficiently exploring how structural, psychological, social, and institutional factors interact to shape reintegration trajectories. Understanding these experiences is essential for designing effective, evidence-based interventions that address the root causes of reintegration failure. The significance of this study lies in its practical utility.

The findings are beneficial especially to the policymakers by providing evidence to guide the development of comprehensive reintegration policies and multi-agency collaboration frameworks. Besides that, the significance might be beneficial to the social workers and mental health professionals, by identifying critical psychosocial and substance abuse needs that require coordinated intervention and as well as the researchers by highlighting methodological and theoretical gaps in the current reintegration literature. Furthermore, this review underscores the effectiveness of integrated, multi-level reintegration strategies that combine employment support, stable housing, healthcare continuity, digital inclusion, and family engagement. By focusing on qualitative insights, the study amplifies the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals and professionals working within correctional systems, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of reintegration as a dynamic, relational, and ongoing process rather than a single post-release event.

Method

Systematic reviews of qualitative studies can provide valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of individuals across multiple studies, shedding light on the reasons behind complex issues and contributing to theory development (Juliana et al., 2024). A systemic literature review on the challenges of reintegration for pre-release prisoners was used in the present study. Keywords such as “reintegration,” “offenders,” and “challenges,” were used and the Sage database was searched to collect relevant research studies. Although various strategies are available for conducting systematic literature reviews, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Metanalysis) guided the present study. Prisma generally offers a clear, structured, and systematic methodology that strengthens both the thoroughness and reliability of the results.

Eligibility Criteria

To obtain comprehensive information on the reintegration of pre-release prisoners, specific criteria were established to select relevant reading material. For example, the materials had to be printed in English and available electronically (e.g., articles, theses, reviews, books, meta-analyses, and annual reports). In addition, the selected materials had to contain qualitative data, specifically, results from interviews conducted with prison police authorities, prison officials, pre-release prisoners, or other prison staff.

Additionally, exclusion criteria were applied to secure a focused and critical literature review. Materials with incomplete or irrelevant information on pre-release prisoner reintegration, including articles, theses, book reviews, meta-analyses, or annual reports that were lacking sufficient detail, were excluded. A full summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria is found in Table 1.

Table 1

Eligibility Criteria

Item	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population	Former prisoners	New prisoners
Phenomenon of Interest	Reintegration of former prisoners	
Time frame	Published within 2018-2024	Published below 2018
Language	English	
Type of Journal	Open access journal	Non-peer review journal

Study Selection

To select relevant research for the present review, the present study abided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist. The PRISMA flow chart systematically guided the process for searching for the appropriate studies.

Initially, 2,611 articles were identified through a comprehensive search of Sage databases using predefined search terms. After removing 780 duplicate articles, 1831 unique articles remained. The titles and abstracts of these articles were screened for relevance using predefined inclusion criteria, including participant details, peer-reviewed status, language, year of publication, and methodology. At this stage, 826 articles were excluded because they did not meet the criteria, leaving 1,005 articles for full-text review.

The full-text articles were then thoroughly screened for inclusion in the study. When ambiguities arose about the eligibility of an article, a consensus was reached between the reviewers to decide whether the studies should be included or excluded. This process led to the removal of 788 articles that did not meet the criteria, particularly those that were unrelated to the offender reintegration process.

As a result, 16 studies were identified as relevant to the research topic. The PRISMA statement and Figure 1 provide a detailed summary of the screening and selection process.

Figure 1: The process of (PRISMA) screening and selection

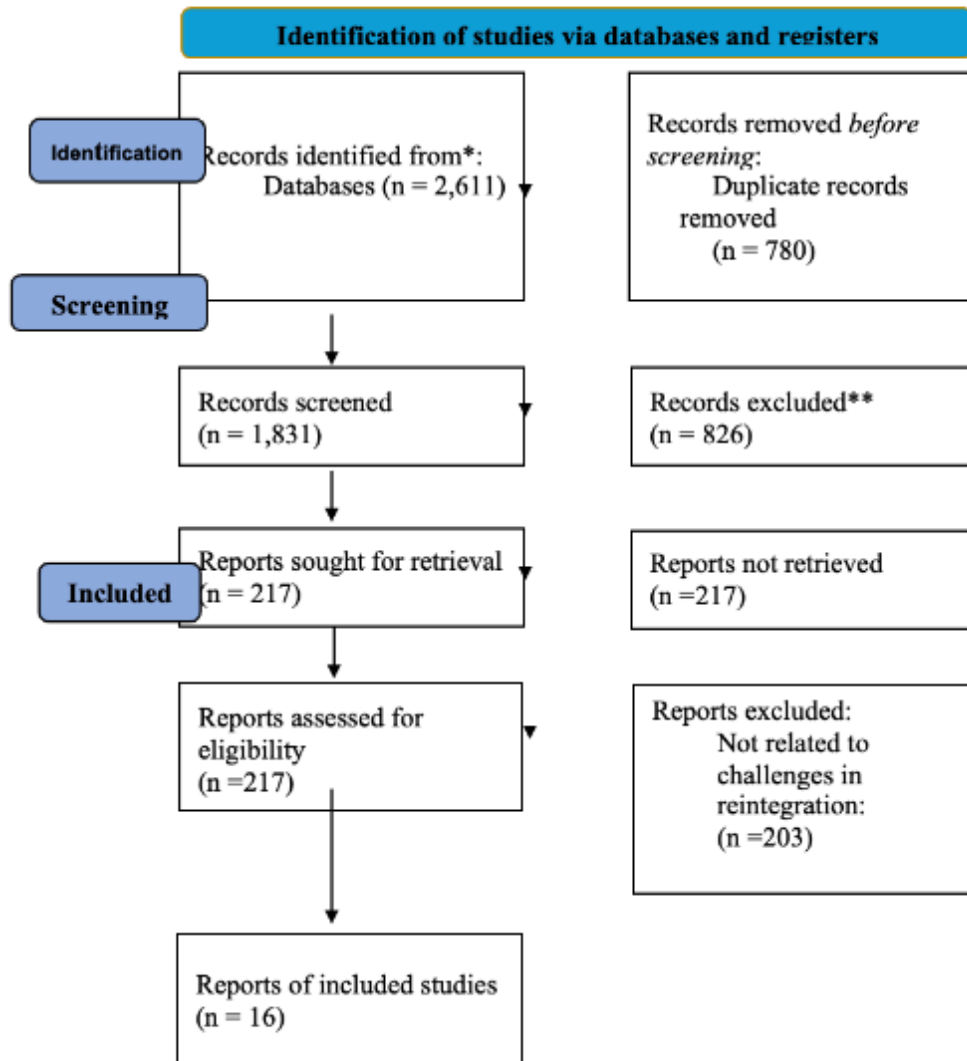


Table 2

Data Extraction from the Included Studies

No.	Author Details	Aims	Sample	Results
1.	Maria Berghuis	To assess the effectiveness of re-entry programs designed to reduce recidivism and ensure successful reintegration among adult, male offenders.	Male offenders.	These results suggest that current re-entry programs have no significant effects on reducing or increasing odds of recidivism for adult, male offenders.
2.	Tarela Juliet Ike, Dung E Jidong, Mieyebi L Ike & Evangelyn E Ayobi	To understand attitudes towards ex-offenders' reintegration and whether there is a positive association between the level of education and the likelihood of accepting ex-offenders into society.	Ex-offenders.	The qualitative analysis further finds a lack of confidence in ex-offenders' genuine reintegration coupled with the perceived role of community trauma, which collectively fuels a negative social identity against the ex-offenders.
3.	Emma Tuschick, Nikki Carthy, Nadia Wager, and Marty Chamberlain	To examining the barriers and facilitators to male sex offenders' reintegration from prison or secure care into the community.	Male sex offenders.	The findings identified that formal and cultural aspects of reintegration, such as probation services, stigmatization, and registration, were the three largest barriers that men faced upon their release, with stability aspects, such as positive relationships, religion, and support groups, being key facilitators to their successful reintegration.
4.	Amanda Pasma, Esther Jan Ginneken, Hanneke Palmen, and Paul Nieuwbeerta	To examine the level of professional assistance provided to prisoners with reintegration needs,	4,309 prisoners of the Dutch Prison.	Prisoners have more contact with prison-based than with community-based professionals, but that the latter relatively often have contact with prisoners with related reintegration needs.
	Codi Rogers, Jacques Jordaan & Karel Esterhuyse	To identify which variables are possible predictors of correctional adjustment among male incarcerated offenders in a private, maximum-security correctional centre in South Africa	418 male maximum-security offenders.	The results indicated that the combination of some variables (friends, avoidance and problem-solving) predicted internal adjustment and (anger, friends and verbal aggression) predicted external adjustment of the offenders.

6.	Stina Lindegren,	To explore readiness from a perspective of lived experience,	19 adult men convicted of sexual offenses in Swedish prisons.	Expectations of better sentence conditions Contagious fear and mistrust in prison Participating for, but not with, close ones The crisis – a unique, relational opportunity
7.	Matthew Maycock, Kenny McGuckin, Katrina Morrison	To examine their reflections on their role. TSO's reflections revealed their growing awareness of the 'pains of desistance' and the challenges around reintegration, insights which had not been apparent to them in their prior work as officers working only in prison	20 throughcare support officers (TSOs).	The liminal space within which they work has profound implications for their views on the difficulties of rehabilitation and reintegration.
	Mohammed Qasim & Colin Webster	To frame our choice of theory by way of a riposte to the under theorizing of much of the re-entry literature.	19 British-born Pakistani Muslim men, Aged 18 to 31, Living in Bradford, north England.	The challenges they faced were likely to be intractable and insurmountable, regrettably returning them to prison. At another, their social integration after being released from prison was hampered by something more than their individual choices and agency.
	Olga Sánchez de Ribera, Larissa Christensen & Kirsty Hudson	To explore factors that affected the public's attitudes and perceptions of policies with a variety of significant associations and predictors.	43 studies 31 in the meta-analysis.	Respondents showed high levels of support toward these policies, particularly notification, registration, residence restrictions, and controlling movement using GPS. While findings indicated the public support such as policies, it was interesting to find that they had less belief in the effectiveness of these policies in reducing recidivism and protecting children.
10.	Ingeborg Jenssen Sandbukt	To qualitatively investigate the accounts and experiences of men released from prison.	8 men released from prison after serving a sex offense conviction in Norway.	Despite less restrictive policies and a total absence of SORN laws, the social stigma linked to being convicted of such crimes severely affected the men. To some degree, they all experienced feelings of stress or anxiousness, and they withdrew and isolated more.

11.	Amanda Pasma, Esther Van Ginneken & Paul Nieuwbeerta	To examine the association between professional support and re-entry preparedness.	1442 soon-to-be-released prisoners across 26 Dutch institutions.	Support was positively related to re-entry preparedness for prisoners who had needs prior to imprisonment, and instrumental support from community-based professionals showed the most robust results.
12.	Xiaoye Zhang	To investigate the re-entry experience of women who had left this prison to improve their pre-release programs.	21 white-collar ex-prisoners. The average age of the 21 participants is 43 years old	Factor affecting their successful re-entry into the labour market is formal and informal social and employer censure resulting from their criminal record.
	Simon D. Venema, Anja Dirkzwager & René Veenstra	To examine the association between fatherhood, residential status, and registered reconviction rates	845 Dutch pre-trial prison.	The results show that fathers who co-resided with a partner and children 6 months after release from prison were significantly less likely to be reconvicted 18 months after release than non-fathers and fathers who did not reside with a partner and children. Fathers' larger family context and reoffending risk factors need to be viewed in conjunction to understand the relationship between fatherhood and reoffending after release from prison.
	Grace Low, Cinnamon Lindsay Latimer & Alice Mills	To explores key psycho-social benefits of home that support men to desist from crime.	16 men with histories of imprisonment in Aotearoa New Zealand.	As a result, they need a home with psycho-social benefits that enhance their sense of wellbeing and ontological security.

Findings

Fourteen articles from different countries were analysed, including three studies focusing on Dutch prisons and others mainly from England, as well as further contributions from China, New Zealand, and Norway. This section summarises the findings based on the research questions and highlights the main challenges in the reintegration of offenders. Prison sentence completion engenders a chance for people to re-enter society and embrace prosocial behaviours. However, the probability of recidivism and re-incarceration following release is substantial (Mathlin et al., 2024).

Successful reintegration of individuals is a complex process involving 5 interconnected elements, including employment, accommodation, substance abuse, social support, and

recidivism. As Mohamad et al. (2024) highlighted, overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses all aspects of the reintegration process.

Research by Legodi and Dube (2023) has shown that overcrowding in correctional facilities is a major obstacle to reintegration programs' effectiveness. Overcrowding, a worldwide problem, is a significant issue in correctional centres, affecting offenders, their families, correctional officials, and the wider community (Legodi & Dube, 2023).

Community reintegration programs are often carried out to reduce overcrowding in correctional institutions. However, they face inherent difficulties including attaining suitable housing for offenders and ensuring a secure, supportive environment. The pressing need to reduce overcrowding can lead to compromised assessments and rehabilitation. This can efforts ultimately hinder reintegration outcomes (Legodi & Dube, 2023).

Lumpkin (2020) also highlighted the challenges of post-release. Such challenges include the difficulty of finding new housing and employment, adjusting to new technologies, and acquiring important skills. In addition, former offenders often struggle to change negative behavioural patterns. Additionally, transitioning from the highly structured prison environment to the autonomy and ambiguity of community life proves to be a considerable challenge.

Challenges in Reintegration of Former Offenders

Ex-offender rehabilitation and reintegration persists as a considerable challenge for community development. As noted by Mohamad et al. (2024), addressing this problem requires a cross-disciplinary strategy incorporating perspectives from criminal justice, psychology, social work, and public policy. These aforementioned perspectives prove useful in tackling the challenges involved with successfully reintegrating individuals with criminal histories into society. Reeves (2020) defines ex-offenders as individuals who have been convicted of a crime, sentenced to incarceration, and subsequently released after completing their sentence. The process of returning to society after incarceration is commonly referred to as re-entry (Reeves, 2020).

To ensure their well-being post-release, ex-offenders are expected to participate in various social and economic activities. However, upon release from prison to ensure their well-being. However, they often encounter significant social challenges that hinder successful integration (Benard, Msomba, & Pasha, 2023). Furthermore, post-release ex-prisoners transition period is often turbulent and characterized by challenges such as securing stable housing and reconnecting with families, communities, and support systems (Benard et al., 2023).

Employment

Employment is widely recognized as a crucial factor in successful reintegration, as it provides financial stability and promotes a sense of purpose and belonging within society (Mohamad et al., 2024). As emphasized by Zakaria, Jaafar, and Mat Lazim (2018), incarcerated individuals are often depicted as impoverished, uneducated, and jobless both before and after incarceration, with many being re-incarcerated upon release. Various elements lead to

the challenges that released offenders face when trying to re-enter into communities (Zakaria, Jaafar, & Mat Lazim, 2018).

Research has repeatedly shown that elevated levels of unemployment in ex-offenders after release are associated with insufficient job skills and limited educational backgrounds. This unemployment is strongly correlated with heightened recidivism rate (Zakaria et al., 2018). Additionally, both formal and informal reproach by employees and the community, often resulting from criminal histories, creates significant barriers to re-entering into the labour market (Xiaoye Zhang, 2024). As noted by Zakaria et al. (2018), stable and meaningful employment significantly reduces the likelihood of recidivism for ex-offenders. Nevertheless, incarceration tends to disrupt employment opportunities and discourages people from pursuing post-release employment. The challenge of securing stable, fulfilling employment and attaining financial stability are major factors in consequent recidivism. Consequently, approximately two-thirds of ex-offenders return to prison within three years of their release. Thus, barriers such as legal restrictions, inadequate skills, and limited access to education and training obstruct successful (Zakaria et al., 2018).

Francis (2018) underscored that ex-offender unemployment is complicated and is becoming increasingly problematic. Although previous re-entry research has examined the collateral effects of incarceration on employment from the perspective of ex-offenders, there has not been much research investigating re-entry practitioners' perceptions of job search constraints. Unemployment is strongly linked to higher recidivism rates, and this has driven researchers to explore strategies to enhance employment prospects for ex-offenders (Francis, 2018). The lack of research on re-entry prospects and the failure to classify these barriers reveals a considerable gap in the body of research (Francis, 2018).

Research has shown that systematic legal and social barriers often prevent ex-offenders from finding employment after their release from penal institutions. Furthermore, an individual's employability often depends on the nature of their offense, highlighting another critical gap in the literature regarding job search restrictions for ex-offenders (Francis, 2018). While "ban-the-box" legislation was introduced to reduce barriers at the application stage, evidence suggests that restrictions have merely shifted to other stages of the job search process (Francis, 2018).

Formerly incarcerated individuals also encounter numerous barriers to re-integration, including challenges relating to employment, finances, housing, healthcare, and obtaining a valid ID (Pasma, Ginneken, Palmen, & Nieuwbeerta, 2022). Pasma et al. (2022) investigated the extent to which relevant professionals support prisoners with their reintegration needs. Their findings suggest that prisoners generally interact more with prison-based professionals than with community-based professionals, although the latter often deal with prisoners in need of reintegration support (Pasma et al., 2022). Certain groups, such as those with complex health needs, those without valid ID, or those about to be released require additional attention (Pasma et al., 2022).

Offender Management (OM) emphasizes the crucial role between prison-based and community-based professionals in addressing reintegration issues (Pasma et al., 2022). In many prisons, professionals such as case managers and mentors are primarily responsible for

preparing prisoners for release. It is important to understand the relationship between reintegration needs and the support available, as unmet needs can have a negative impact on prisoners and post-release outcomes. Recent research has increasingly focused on protective factors and destabilizers referred to as reintegration needs. These include employment, housing, finances, healthcare, and valid identification documents (Pasma et al., 2022). This focus partially aligns with the risk paradigm and emphasizes the importance of addressing these needs to promote successful reintegration.

The OM framework advocates for comprehensive support and continuity of care through coordinate networks of prison-based and community-based professionals to remove barriers to reintegration. Support at an individual level is perceived as crucial for addressing reintegration needs and enhancing ex-offender outcomes (Pasma et al., 2022).

Housing

Housing is an important aspect of ex-offender reintegration, as it provides psychosocial benefits, promoting well-being and a fundamental sense of security (Grace Low et al., 2023). Berghuis (2018) highlighted that most re-entry interventions concentrate on human and social capital, including employment support, housing support, strengthening social support, and reducing drugs and alcohol dependence. These interventions, however, commonly focus on offenders' shortcomings rather than their strengths, abilities, and autonomy, which are critical for active involvement in the re-entry process. Berghuis (2018) also argued that re-entry should be seen as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time event (Berghuis, 2018).

The prisoner's release day is commonly seen perceived by the public mind as a pivotal moment and eagerly anticipated by prisoners (Pratt, Schliehe, & Laursen, 2022). Despite this, the moment of release itself is rarely studied in the academic literature. Instead, the focus is on the reintegration of prisoners (Pratt et al., 2022). Moore (2023) emphasised the importance of understanding how formerly incarcerated individuals are reintegrated into the community and points out that there are different release mechanisms, including completion of a full sentence or release under community supervision such as probation or parole (Moore, 2023). However, the stigma of having a criminal conviction and enduring challenges that a criminal record brings affects individuals throughout their lives (Moore, 2023).

Moore (2023) also examined the ongoing challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face post-release, addressing critical issues such as education, employment, housing, family support, mental and physical health, and community engagement (Moore, 2023). Harford (2019) criticized the fact that rehabilitation strategies do not sufficiently take into account the potential of transitional housing units (THUs) in prison. Hartford (2019) noted that due to the difficulty of accessing prisons and the vulnerability of inmates, little research has explored the experiences or opinions of inmates on the factors associated with reoffending (Harford, 2019). The scarcity of research in this area speaks to the imperative to study how transitional housing can enhance the outcomes of re-entry and advance policy and practice (Harford, 2019).

Transitional housing units are more than merely a solution to housing. They are designed to improve the re-entry process by addressing practical needs. Such needs include,

acquiring a driver's license, obtaining safe accommodation, and ensuring dependable transportation (Harford, 2019). The housing units offer comprehensive support to facilitate the transition into the local community (Harford, 2019). Research shows that an unstable housing situation has a significant impact on ex-offender reintegration. Therefore, stable housing is a vital part of rebuilding their lives and decreasing the likelihood of reoffending. Without secure housing, the likelihood of reoffending increases significantly (Mohamad et al., 2024). Examining the role of THUs for preparing ex-offenders for reintegration provides valuable insight into their potential in overcoming these challenges and in improving re-entry strategies (Hartford, 2019).

Social Support

Recent research has suggested that individuals released (or about to be released) from prison commonly need treatment, interventions, mental health support, accommodation, and employment as a means of reducing recidivism risk and supporting their successful reintegration into the community (Tuschick et al., 2024). Jarvelainen and Rantanen's (2021) research indicated that society's digitization has created both challenges and opportunities for the prison system. For example, research has shown that digitization affects interactions between incarcerated individuals, prison culture, and it impacts recidivism rates. Yet, it can also bring security risks. On the positive side, digitization is reported to improve social skills, self-esteem, rehabilitation, and the reintegration of ex-offenders. Additionally, the access to digital services improves communication and ties with family (Jarvelainen & Rantanen, 2021).

Individuals returning home after incarceration often aspire to a fresh start but regularly face barriers, resulting in a significant gap between their hopes and the reality of reintegration (Groman, 2023). Re-entry efforts face the challenge of attempting to bridge these gaps to ensure a smoother transition back into the community (Groman, 2023). The faith community has recognized the unique challenges faced by women returning from local jails and has taken steps to provide tailored support. One example of such an initiative is the RCC Coming Home Program. This program offers a re-entry model by bringing together community partners, local agencies, and volunteers to meet these women's needs. This program provides a trauma-educated, data-based approach and aims to support people returning from incarceration while remaining grounded in and reflective of the community it serves (Groman, 2023).

Bright, Brewer, and Morselli (2021) noted that crimes are often concealed and frequently go undetected, as perpetrators maintain social barriers to distance themselves from out-group members, including researchers. Additionally, individuals who enter the prison system often lack the skills and resources necessary for productive participation in society (Morselli, 2021). However, the impact of incarceration extends beyond the individual incarcerated (Sandoval, 2023). Despite their physical isolation, incarcerated individuals remain integral members of their communities, performing specific tasks and maintaining connections with other members of the community (Sandoval, 2023).

Villanueva (2019) examined the life experiences of seven incarcerated mothers and identified several recurring themes. These include drug use as the reason for incarceration; the difficulty in fulfilling parental duties; missing family members; dependence on financial support and encouragement; coping with physical absence, and the use of religion and

spirituality as coping mechanisms. The mothers also emphasised that through spirituality they maintain a positive attitude, improve themselves, strive for a better future, become a better person and mother, and learn the valuable lessons from their incarceration experience. Villanueva (2019) categorized these experiences into five main themes: Incarceration due to drugs, challenges of motherhood while incarcerated, emotional and spiritual resilience, maintaining a positive outlook, and hopefulness for an improved future (Villanueva, 2019).

Muthee, Adeli, and Barsa (2020) emphasized that ex-offender re-entry and reintegration into the community is an increasingly important criminology topic. Upon release, ex-offenders are released into an environment that is markedly different from the structured prison environment, and this poses considerable adjustment challenges for ex-offenders (Muthee et al., 2020). This difficulty is worse for those who have served long sentences in prison, as they face the difficulty of adjusting to a quickly changing and dynamic environment. These circumstances further complicate the reintegration process (Muthee et al., 2020).

Recidivism

Studies have indicated that recidivism remains a major challenge. As noted by Malatjie (2022), high incarceration rates are generally a long-standing global problem that has even impacted the most developed and affluent societies. The recidivism rate has been closely linked to the effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programs in correctional institutions. Upon release, ex-offenders are often alienated and stigmatized and this often leads them back to criminal behaviour and perpetuates the cycle of recidivism. Without effective reintegration into the community, ex-offenders have little chance of becoming law-abiding, contributing members of the community. Malatjie (2022) also investigated the perceptions of third parties in Africa regarding community support for the reintegration of ex-offenders and found that the length of incarceration had a minimal impact on the willingness of third parties to support reintegration efforts.

According to Atabong (2023), some prisoners join gangs to fit in, become part of a powerful group, share common fears or beliefs, gain a false sense of security, or participate in a revolutionary movement within the prison. The deprivation model states that participation in gangs' involvement helps inmates cope with the pains of incarceration, including fear of victimization, limited access to goods, a desire for integration, and a need for status and protection. In addition, facilitating trade within the prison environment is another motivation for gang involvement (Atabong, 2023). However, gang involvement often promotes negative behaviours and mindsets that contribute to recidivism (Atabong, 2023). Ex-offenders often return to their communities with fewer resources and greater needs than before incarceration because they did not earn income during their time in prison (Atabong, 2023).

Reeves (2020) emphasized that the re-entry process often leads to recidivism for many ex-offenders. The communities they return to often lack the moral support and infrastructure necessary for successful reintegration. While release from a correctional facility provides an opportunity for reintegration, individual, societal, and bureaucratic barriers hinder the process, which often begins at the time of release (Reeves, 2020). The complexities surrounding ex-offenders and employment further worsens these challenges, with local,

state, and federal leaders often unsure how to address the barriers associated with re-entry and recidivism (Reeves, 2020).

Harford (2019) examined the "downstream" impact of recidivism on inmates' families and communities. While there is little specific data on the impact of transitional housing programs on recidivism rates, Pennsylvania has reported a decrease in its recidivism rate. The Council of State Governments Justice Centre report, *Reducing Recidivism: States Deliver Results*, highlights innovative strategies used by eight states, including Pennsylvania, to combat recidivism (Harford, 2019). Given the economic burden of the prison system and the public health and safety risks associated with released inmates, it is crucial for correctional professionals, criminal justice reform advocates, and legislators to identify and understand the factors that facilitate or impede inmates' preparedness for community re-entry and their potential for recidivism (Harford, 2019).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse presents pre-release prisoners with major challenges during the reintegration process prior to release (Tharshini et al., 2024). Beeler, Renn, and Pettus (2023) highlighted that justice-involved populations, including incarcerated individuals and recently released individuals, have high rates of substance use disorders (SUDs). The complexity era of mass re-entry from prison into the community is compounded by conditions such as SUDs, mental health disorders, and physical health problems that increase the risk of re-incarceration (Beeler et al., 2023). By studying a sample of formerly incarcerated individuals and their social support partners, Beeler et al. (2023) aimed to address gaps in understanding how social support persons perceive SUDs and how they support their loved ones in prioritizing help-seeking behaviours, including the use of available services.

Francine White (2023) highlighted several programs aimed at re-entry into society that address critical issues such as mental health, substance abuse, and life skills. These programs aim to facilitate women's successful reintegration into society, although their effectiveness varies from initiative to initiative. Research has consistently indicated that women have more severe problems entering the criminal justice system when compared to their male counterparts. Consequently, many women leave prison with unmet needs that may have worsened during incarceration, compounding the challenges of reintegrating into society (Francine White, 2023).

Women returning home from prison face multiple demands, including as securing housing, finding employment, accessing treatment programs, and re-establishing relationships with children and family (Francine White, 2023). Some programs are entirely community-based, while parole boards or probation agencies supervise offenders. Many states have implemented offender reintegration initiatives that include participation in treatment services and community supervision (Francine White, 2023). These initiatives often involve collaboration with various community agencies that provide substance abuse programs, mental health, job readiness, and employment services (Francine White, 2023).

Meanwhile, Jamin et al. (2021) reported that prisoners have significantly higher rates of substance use and more harmful patterns of use compared to the general population. Release from prison is associated with an increased mortality rate among drug users due to

the high risk of overdose. Sixty percent of all drug-related deaths occur within 12 weeks of release from prison, and 20% of these deaths are related to release from prison or leaving treatment (Jamin et al., 2021). The immediate post-release period is crucial for support and action, with collaboration between prison and community health and social care services vital to ensure continuity of care (Jamin et al., 2021).

Targeted interventions can save lives and promote engagement in further treatment and recovery. However, coordination and continuity of care need to be improved in many countries, and preparation for release must begin in prison and continue seamlessly after release, without interruption to healthcare and social support (Jamin et al., 2021). Phoglad (2019) also noted that rehabilitation programs for prisoners aim to facilitate their reintegration into society. Some programs aim to restore prisoners to their former positions or ranks while they are incarcerated or on parole. Current rehabilitation programs for offenders focus on education, vocational training, and psychotherapy to improve prisoners' skills and life skills (Phoglad, 2019). In addition, specialized services, such as drug addiction treatment, are included in rehabilitation efforts. Social workers play a crucial role in supporting and providing appropriate programs for inmates within the criminal justice system (Phoglad, 2019).

Conclusion

Symkovych (2020) noted that penal authorities and society often perceive prisoners as unreliable. The administration of punishment largely involves the assessment and management of the risks posed by prisoners. Although most prisoners are eventually released, they are usually expected to make progress in their rehabilitation, reform, or correction during their time in prison. Although individual prisons vary in their ability to help prisoners, they are generally ineffective at preventing harm. More effective strategies are needed to ensure that individuals returning to their communities after incarceration are successful.

Prisoners face numerous challenges during their reintegration process, including issues related to housing, employment, substance abuse, and overcrowded correctional facilities. Both governmental and non-governmental agencies should work together to develop strategies and provide community-based programs to ensure effective and successful re-entry in the future.

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