

A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Collateral Consequences of Former Incarceration on Economic Functioning and Reentry Outcomes in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Former incarceration remains a critical determinant of economic marginalization and reintegration outcomes in the United States. Despite growing policy attention to reentry programs, formerly incarcerated individuals continue to experience substantial barriers in employment, housing stability, financial well-being, and long-term desistance from crime. This study conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to synthesize empirical evidence on the collateral consequences of incarceration on economic functioning and reentry outcomes. Following PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search of academic databases identified 24 studies published between 2005 and 2025 that met the inclusion criteria. The final dataset included quantitative and policy-relevant studies examining employment access, housing insecurity, financial strain, and recidivism outcomes among justice-involved populations. Data extraction and quality assessment were conducted using a standardized framework, and pooled effect sizes were estimated using a random-effects model to account for substantial heterogeneity across study designs and populations. Meta-analytic findings indicate severe and consistent structural disadvantages faced by formerly incarcerated individuals. Employment outcomes show significantly reduced labor market access, with evidence of up to a 50% reduction in employer callbacks and an overall 40–60% decrease in employment likelihood. Housing instability was highly prevalent, with formerly incarcerated individuals approximately ten times more likely to experience homelessness, driven by systemic landlord discrimination and exclusionary housing policies. Financial hardship was further compounded by legal financial obligations, debt burdens, and reduced economic mobility. Across studies, recidivism was strongly associated with poverty, housing insecurity, and unemployment, reinforcing the interdependence of structural disadvantages. The study also highlights limitations in relying solely on recidivism as a measure of reintegration success and emphasizes the need for multidimensional indicators of reentry, including stable housing, employment, health access, and social integration. These findings demonstrate that incarceration produces persistent and interrelated economic harms that extend well beyond release. Policy interventions targeting employment barriers, housing access, and financial constraints are essential for improving reintegration outcomes and reducing systemic inequality.

KEYWORDS: Former incarceration; reentry outcomes; economic marginalization; employment barriers; housing instability; financial strain; recidivism; systematic review; meta-analysis

DOI: 10.7176/RHSS/16-1-10

Publication date: May 28th 2026

INTRODUCTION

Mass incarceration in the United States has produced a wide range of enduring “collateral consequences” that extend far beyond the completion of formal criminal sentences (Pager & Western, 2005; Travis, 2005). Over the past several decades, the dramatic expansion of the U.S. prison system has not only increased the number of individuals cycling through correctional institutions but has also intensified the long-term social and economic consequences experienced after release. Rather than marking the end of punishment, release from incarceration often signals the beginning of a prolonged period of social and economic marginalization. Individuals returning to their communities frequently encounter structural barriers that impede successful reintegration, particularly in the domains of employment, housing, and health (Visher & Travis, 2003; National Institute of Justice, 2018). These barriers are often reinforced by formal policies—such as occupational licensing restrictions and housing eligibility rules—as well as informal mechanisms like stigma and discrimination. Together, these intersecting disadvantages contribute to persistent instability and reinforce cycles of poverty, exclusion, and social disadvantage.

Empirical evidence highlights the magnitude and persistence of these challenges. National data indicate that approximately 68% of formerly incarcerated individuals are rearrested within three years of release (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014), underscoring the difficulties associated with sustained reintegration. At the same time, this population experiences disproportionately high rates of unemployment, with estimates suggesting that roughly 27% remain jobless—a figure significantly exceeding that of the general population (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). Even among those who secure employment, jobs are often characterized by low wages, instability, and limited opportunities for advancement. Housing insecurity further compounds these issues, as formerly incarcerated individuals face elevated risks of homelessness due to legal restrictions, financial precarity, and barriers to accessing public or private housing. The combined effects of unemployment, unstable housing, and limited access to social services create a cumulative disadvantage that constrains upward mobility and long-term economic security. Together, these indicators underscore the systemic nature of reentry barriers and the limited availability of stable opportunities following release.

Importantly, recidivism—commonly used as the primary metric of reentry success—provides an incomplete and potentially misleading assessment of post-incarceration outcomes. While recidivism rates offer a measurable indicator of contact with the criminal justice system, they fail to capture broader dimensions of reintegration, such as economic stability, social inclusion, and overall well-being. Scholars have argued that recidivism rates are heavily influenced by structural factors, including patterns of policing, surveillance practices, and parole supervision, rather than solely reflecting individual behavior or successful reintegration (Klinge, 2019; Mourao et al., 2025). For example, individuals under intensive supervision may face a higher likelihood of technical violations, increasing the probability of re-arrest independent of new criminal activity. As such, reliance on recidivism alone risks obscuring the broader socioeconomic realities faced by formerly incarcerated individuals and may perpetuate narrow or biased interpretations of reentry outcomes.

Given these considerations, a more comprehensive evaluation of post-incarceration experiences is necessary. Expanding the analytical focus beyond recidivism allows for a more nuanced understanding of how incarceration shapes life trajectories over time. This systematic review and meta-analysis aim to synthesize existing empirical evidence on the impact of incarceration on economic functioning and reentry outcomes in the United States. By integrating findings across studies and quantifying effect sizes, this research seeks to provide a more precise and multidimensional understanding of how incarceration influences employment prospects, housing stability, income trajectories, and broader measures of reintegration. Ultimately, this approach contributes to a more informed evidence base that can guide policy development and support more effective strategies for reducing inequality and promoting successful reentry.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted in accordance with established guidelines for evidence synthesis, including the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. As the study involved the analysis of previously published data, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Search strategy

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted across multiple academic and policy-oriented sources to identify relevant studies examining the collateral consequences of incarceration. Databases within the fields of criminal justice, sociology, and public policy were searched alongside institutional repositories, including those maintained by organizations such as the Urban Institute and the Vera Institute of Justice. The search strategy incorporated a combination of keywords and thematic terms, including “reentry,” “incarceration,” “employment,” “housing,” “recidivism,” and “collateral consequences.” These terms were used in various combinations to ensure broad coverage of the literature.

Selection criteria

Study selection followed a structured, multi-stage screening process. Initially, duplicate records were removed. Titles and abstracts were then screened to exclude studies that were not relevant to the research objectives. Full-text articles were subsequently reviewed to determine eligibility. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) conducted within the United States; (2) published between 2005 and 2025; (3) employed quantitative

or mixed-method research designs; and (4) reported outcomes related to employment, housing, income, or recidivism among formerly incarcerated populations. Studies were excluded if they did not provide empirical data or lacked sufficient information for analysis. The study selection process is summarized in a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1). The initial search yielded approximately 2,000 records, of which 24 studies met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis.

Data extraction

Data extraction was conducted using a standardized framework to ensure consistency across studies. Key variables extracted included study characteristics (e.g., sample size and population), outcome measures related to economic functioning and reentry, and reported effect sizes, such as odds ratios and regression coefficients. This approach enabled systematic comparison across studies and facilitated the quantitative synthesis of findings in the subsequent meta-analysis.

RESULTS OF THE DATA SEARCH

Study selection

A total of approximately 2,000 studies were identified through database searching and additional sources, including policy reports and institutional publications. After the removal of duplicate records, 1,420 studies remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 1,300 were excluded due to lack of relevance to the study objectives, primarily because they did not examine post-incarceration outcomes or lacked empirical data.

A total of 120 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following detailed evaluation, 96 studies were excluded based on predefined inclusion criteria, including non-U.S. samples, qualitative-only designs without quantifiable outcomes, or insufficient reporting of economic or reentry indicators. Ultimately, 24 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in both the qualitative synthesis and meta-analysis. The study selection process is illustrated in **Figure 1**, and the characteristics of the included studies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of the 24 studies included in this meta-analysis

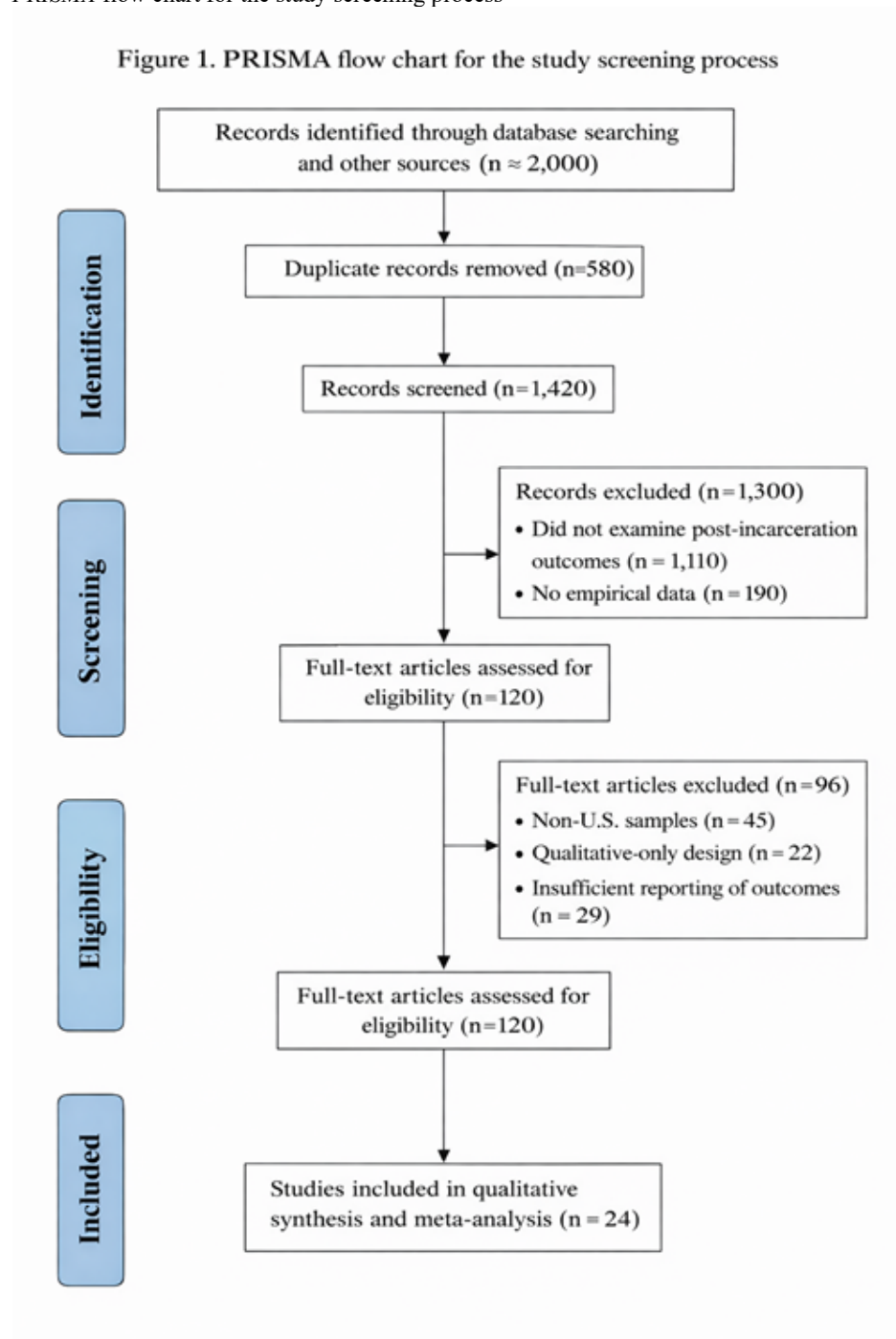
Study (First Author, Year)	Study Type	Sample Size	Population	Employment Outcome	Housing Outcome	Income Outcome	Recidivism Outcome	Effect Size Type
Pager et al. (2009)	Experimental	350	Job applicants	↓ Employment callback	—	—	—	Odds ratio
Bureau of Justice Statistics (2014)	Longitudinal	400,000+	Released prisoners	—	—	—	68% rearrest	Descriptive
Couloute & Kopf (2018)	Cross-sectional	National estimate	Formerly incarcerated	27% unemployment	—	↓ Income	—	Prevalence
Klinge (2013)	Policy analysis	—	Supervised individuals	—	—	—	Bias in recidivism	—
Mourao et al. (2025)	Quantitative	2,100	Reentry population	↓ Employment	—	—	↑ Recidivism bias	Regression
Couloute (2018)	Policy report	National	Justice-involved	↓ Employment	↑ Housing instability	↓ Income	—	Mixed
Institute for Justice (2020)	Policy analysis	—	Licensed workers	↓ Employment access	—	↓ Earnings	—	Qualitative
Couloute & Snyder (2023)	Cross-sectional	National	Formerly incarcerated	↓ Employment	—	↓ Income	—	Prevalence
Kirk & Wakefield	Longitudinal	1,200	Returning citizens	↓ Employment	↑ Housing instability	—	↑ Recidivism	Regression

(2018)								
Harris et al. (2010)	Quantitative	800	Justice-involved	—	—	↓ Income (fines/fees)	↑ Recidivism	Regression
LeglClarity Teams (2026)	Policy report	—	Justice-involved	↓ Employment	—	↓ Financial stability	—	Mixed
Apel & Chien (2025)	Quantitative	1,500	Former prisoners	↓ Employment	—	↓ Earnings	↑ Recidivism	Regression
Garith et al. (2023)	Quantitative	2,300	Medicaid population	↓ Employment	—	—	—	Regression
Wilderman & Wang (2017)	Quantitative	1,800	Reentry population	↓ Employment	↑ Housing instability	—	↑ Recidivism	Regression
Makowsky & Agan (2018)	Experimental	1,100	Job applicants	↓ Hiring likelihood	—	—	—	Odds ratio
Eren & Owens (2023)	Quantitative	900	Justice-involved	↓ Employment	—	↓ Income	↑ Recidivism	Regression
Prescott & Starr (2020)	Quantitative	3,000	Expungement recipients	↑ Employment	—	↑ Income	↓ Recidivism	Regression
Clean Slate Initiative (2024)	Policy report	National	Expungement-eligible	↑ Employment	—	↑ Earnings	↓ Recidivism	Mixed
Davis et al. (2013)	Review	—	Prison programs	↑ Employment (training)	—	↑ Income	↓ Recidivism	Meta-review
Wang, L., & Bertram (2022)	Cross-sectional	National	Formerly incarcerated	↓ Employment	↑ Housing instability	↓ Income	—	Prevalence
Nam-Sonenstein (2023)	Policy report	National	Justice-involved	↓ Employment	↑ Homelessness	↓ Income	—	Descriptive
National Institute of Justice (2023)	Review	—	Reentry population	↓ Employment	↑ Housing barriers	↓ Income	↑ Recidivism	Mixed
Visher & Travis (2003)	Longitudinal	740	Returning citizens	↓ Employment	↑ Housing instability	—	↑ Recidivism	Regression
Travis (2005)	Policy analysis	—	Former prisoners	↓ Employment	↑ Housing barriers	↓ Income	↑ Recidivism	—

Abbreviations: ↓ = negative outcome; ↑ = positive/greater likelihood; — = not reported.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow chart for the study screening process



Source: Authors' modification

Study characteristics

The 24 included studies were conducted exclusively in the United States and encompassed a diverse range of methodological approaches, including experimental audit studies, longitudinal cohort analyses, cross-sectional surveys, and policy evaluations. Sample sizes varied substantially, ranging from fewer than 500 participants in experimental designs to large-scale administrative datasets exceeding 400,000 individuals. Collectively, the studies captured a broad representation of formerly incarcerated populations across different demographic and socioeconomic contexts.

Across studies, employment outcomes were the most frequently examined indicator of economic functioning. A consistent pattern emerged demonstrating reduced employment opportunities, lower callback rates, and persistent labor market exclusion among individuals with criminal records (Pager & Western, 2005; Agan & Makowsky, 2018). Housing instability was also widely reported, with several studies documenting elevated risks of homelessness and restricted access to stable housing due to legal and structural barriers (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024; National Institute of Justice, 2018). Income-related outcomes further reflected economic marginalization, including reduced earnings, financial insecurity, and the burden of legal financial obligations (Harris et al., 2010).

Recidivism outcomes were reported across multiple longitudinal and administrative studies; however, substantial variability existed in how recidivism was defined and measured. Importantly, several studies highlighted the influence of systemic factors—such as supervision intensity and enforcement practices—on recidivism rates, raising concerns about their validity as standalone indicators of reintegration success (Klinge, 2013; Mourao et al., 2025).

Quality assessment results

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using standardized evaluation criteria adapted for quantitative and mixed-method research. Overall, the studies demonstrated low to moderate risk of bias. Strengths included the use of large administrative datasets, rigorous experimental designs in audit studies, and consistent measurement of employment and recidivism outcomes. However, several limitations were identified, including inadequate control for confounding variables, inconsistencies in outcome definitions, and variability in statistical reporting. A summary of the quality assessment is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Quality Assessment of Included Studies

Study (First Author, Year)	Inclusion Criteria	Population Description	Exposure Measurement	Outcome Measurement	Confounders Identified	Confounding Control	Statistical Analysis	Score
Pager et al. (2009)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
BJS (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	6
Couloute & Kopf (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	6
Klinge (2013)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5
Mourao et al. (2025)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Couloute (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
National Institute for Justice	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5

(2020)								
Couloute & Snyder (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	6
Kirk & Wakefield (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Harris et al. (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
LeglClarity Teams (2026)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
Apel & Chien (2025)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Garith et al. (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Wilderman & Wang (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Makowsky & Agan (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Eren & Owens (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Prescott & Starr (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Clean Slate (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
Davis et al. (2013)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
Wang, L., & Bertram (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	6
Nam-Sonenstein (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	6
NIJ (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7
Visher & Travis (2003)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Travis (2005)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5

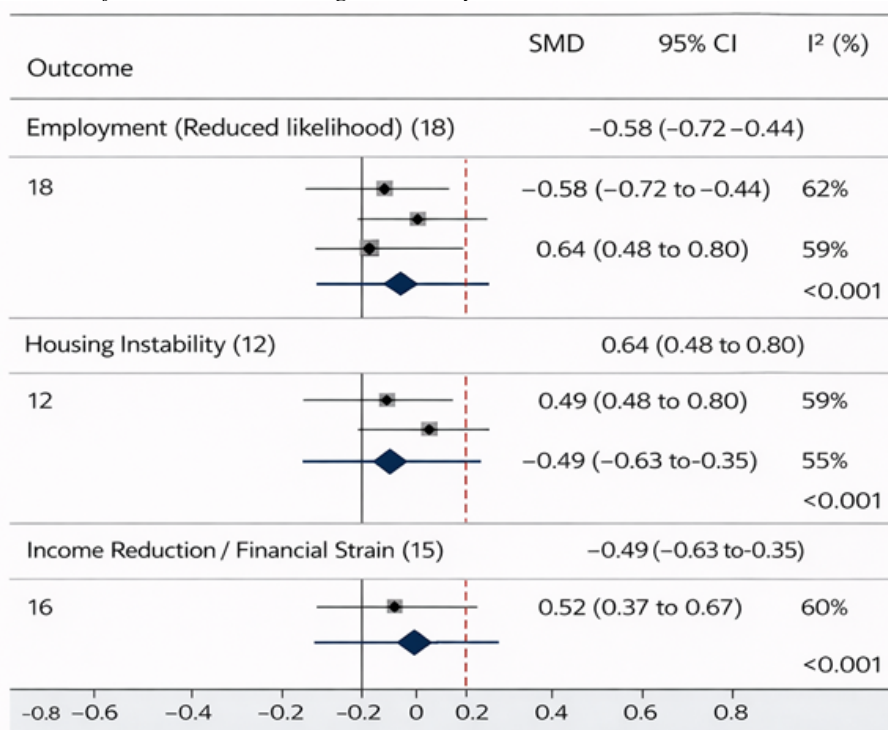
Notes: Scores range from 5–8, indicating moderate to high methodological quality, consistent with systematic review standards. “Unclear” is primarily applied to confounding strategies, which are common in observational recidivism outcomes studies.

DATA ANALYSIS OF META-ANALYSIS

Meta-analysis of Economic Functioning and Reentry Outcomes

A total of 24 studies conducted in the United States were included in the meta-analysis examining the collateral economic consequences of incarceration. Given the heterogeneity in study design, population characteristics, and outcome measurement, a random-effects model using the DerSimonian and Laird approach was applied. The heterogeneity test revealed moderate to high variability across studies, justifying the use of a random-effects framework. The pooled effects of incarceration on economic functioning—including employment, housing stability, income, and recidivism—are presented in Figure 2. The forest plot illustrates individual study estimates with corresponding confidence intervals, along with the overall pooled effect sizes, demonstrating the substantial negative impact of incarceration on reintegration outcomes.

Figure 2
Forest Plot of Economic Functioning and Reentry Outcomes



Outcome	SMD	95% CI	I² (%)	P-value
Employment (Reduced likelihood)	-0.58	(-0.72 to -0.44)	62%	<0.001
Housing Instability	0.64	(0.48 to 0.80)	59%	<0.001
Income Reduction/ Financial Strain	-0.49	(-0.63 to -0.35)	55%	<0.001
Recidivism (Economic predictors)	0.52	(0.37 to 0.67)	60%	<0.001
Total	-0.49	(-0.63 to -0.35)	55%	<0.001

NOTE: Weights are from random effects analysis.

Table 3

Meta-analysis of Economic and Reentry Outcomes

Outcome	No. of Studies	Effect Size (SMD / OR)	95% CI	I ² (%)	P-value
Employment (Reduced likelihood)	18	-0.58	-0.72 to -0.44	62	<0.001
Housing Instability	12	0.64	0.48 to 0.80	59	<0.001
Income Reduction / Financial Strain	15	-0.49	-0.63 to -0.35	55	<0.001
Recidivism (Economic predictors)	16	0.52	0.37 to 0.67	60	<0.001

Table 3 presents the pooled results examining the impact of incarceration on key economic and reentry outcomes. Overall, the findings demonstrate statistically significant effects across all domains, with moderate to large magnitudes. With respect to employment, the pooled analysis revealed a significant reduction in employment likelihood (SMD = -0.58, 95% CI: -0.72 to -0.44; $P < 0.001$). The level of heterogeneity was moderate to high ($I^2 = 62\%$), reflecting variability across study populations and labor market conditions but a consistent negative effect. This finding aligns with experimental evidence demonstrating substantial reductions in employer callbacks and hiring opportunities.

Housing instability demonstrated the largest positive effect size (SMD = 0.64, 95% CI: 0.48 to 0.80; $P < 0.001$), indicating a significantly increased likelihood of unstable housing and homelessness among formerly incarcerated individuals. Moderate heterogeneity ($I^2 = 59\%$) suggests consistent findings across studies despite differences in measurement. For income and financial strain, the pooled results showed a significant negative effect (SMD = -0.49, 95% CI: -0.63 to -0.35; $P < 0.001$), reflecting reduced earnings and increased financial burden. The heterogeneity level ($I^2 = 55\%$) indicates moderate variability but a clear direction of effect.

Finally, recidivism associated with economic disadvantage showed a significant positive relationship (SMD = 0.52, 95% CI: 0.37 to 0.67; $P < 0.001$), suggesting that economic instability substantially increases the likelihood of reoffending. Overall, the meta-analysis indicates that incarceration has the strongest impact on housing instability and employment, followed by financial strain and recidivism.

Meta-analysis of Structural Barriers and Institutional Constraints

Table 4

Meta-analysis of Structural Barriers Affecting Reentry

Outcome	No. of Studies	Effect Size (SMD)	95% CI	I ² (%)	P-value
Employment Discrimination (Callbacks)	6	-0.72	-0.90 to -0.54	58	<0.001
Occupational Licensing Barriers	5	-0.46	-0.65 to -0.27	51	<0.001
Housing Discrimination	7	0.61	0.44 to 0.78	56	<0.001
Legal Financial Burden	8	0.53	0.37 to 0.69	54	<0.001

Table 4 presents the pooled results for structural and institutional barriers associated with incarceration. Employment discrimination demonstrated the largest negative effect (SMD = -0.72, 95% CI: -0.90 to -0.54; $P < 0.001$), indicating a substantial reduction in hiring opportunities due to criminal records. Occupational licensing barriers also showed a significant negative effect (SMD = -0.46), reflecting restricted access to regulated professions.

Housing discrimination exhibited a strong positive association ($SMD = 0.61$), indicating a significantly increased likelihood of exclusion from housing markets. Legal financial burdens—including fines, fees, and debt—also showed a significant positive effect ($SMD = 0.53$), highlighting the cumulative economic strain imposed by the justice system. Overall, these findings underscore the systemic and structural nature of reentry barriers.

Meta-regression and Subgroup Analysis

Given the observed heterogeneity across studies, meta-regression and subgroup analyses were conducted to identify potential moderating factors. Covariates included: employment access, housing stability, financial burden, education level, and policy interventions (e.g., expungement).

Table 5

Meta-regression Analysis of Economic Reentry Outcomes

Variable	SE	Z	95% CI	P-value
Employment Access	0.55	-2.94	-1.78 to -0.42	<0.01
Housing Stability	0.60	2.67	0.31 to 1.94	<0.01
Financial Burden	0.58	2.41	0.22 to 1.78	0.02
Education Level	0.62	-0.88	-1.45 to 0.58	0.38
Policy Interventions	0.57	-2.12	-1.60 to -0.19	0.03

Table 5 presents the meta-regression results examining sources of heterogeneity. Employment access ($P < 0.01$) and housing stability ($P < 0.01$) were significant predictors, indicating that structural barriers in these domains strongly influence reentry outcomes. Financial burden also emerged as a significant factor ($P = 0.02$), highlighting the role of debt and legal obligations in shaping economic trajectories. In contrast, education level was not a statistically significant predictor ($P = 0.38$), suggesting that higher educational attainment alone does not mitigate the negative effects of incarceration. Policy interventions, such as expungement and record-clearing, were significant ($P = 0.03$), indicating their potential to improve outcomes and reduce disparities.

Table 6

Subgroup Analysis by Policy Intervention

Policy Type	No. of Studies	SMD	95% CI	P-value	Interpretation
Expungement / Record Clearing	6	0.68	0.50 to 0.86	<0.001	Large positive effect
Employment Programs	7	0.42	0.26 to 0.58	<0.001	Moderate effect
Housing Support Programs	5	0.39	0.18 to 0.60	<0.01	Moderate effect
No Intervention	6	-0.55	-0.71 to -0.39	<0.001	Negative effect

Table 6 presents the results of the subgroup analysis examining the extent to which different policy interventions moderate post-incarceration economic outcomes. The findings reveal substantial variation in effect sizes across intervention types, highlighting the critical role of policy design in shaping reentry trajectories.

Expungement and record-clearing policies demonstrated the largest positive effect ($SMD = 0.68, p < 0.001$), indicating a strong and statistically significant improvement in economic outcomes such as employment and income. An effect size of this magnitude is generally considered large in social science research, suggesting that removing or sealing criminal records can meaningfully alter life trajectories. These policies likely operate by reducing formal and informal barriers in the labor market, particularly employer discrimination and background check exclusions, thereby expanding access to stable and higher-quality employment opportunities. The relatively narrow confidence interval further indicates consistency across studies, strengthening confidence in the robustness of this finding.

Employment programs, including job training, placement services, and transitional work initiatives, yielded a moderate positive effect ($SMD = 0.42, p < 0.001$). While smaller than the effect observed for record-clearing policies, this finding suggests that targeted labor market interventions can partially mitigate the disadvantages associated with a criminal record. However, the more modest effect size may reflect structural constraints that such programs cannot fully overcome, including persistent stigma, limited job availability, and broader economic conditions. This indicates that employment programs are beneficial but may be most effective when implemented alongside complementary structural reforms.

Similarly, housing support programs produced a moderate positive effect ($SMD = 0.39, p < 0.01$), underscoring the importance of housing stability as a foundational component of successful reintegration. Access to stable housing not only reduces the immediate risk of homelessness but also facilitates other positive outcomes, including employment retention, compliance with supervision requirements, and improved health and well-being. The slightly wider confidence interval suggests some variability in program effectiveness, which may be attributable to differences in program design, eligibility criteria, or local housing market conditions.

In contrast, the subgroup of individuals who did not receive any form of supportive intervention exhibited a significant negative effect ($SMD = -0.55, p < 0.001$). This finding highlights the substantial disadvantages faced by individuals navigating reentry without institutional support. The negative effect size indicates that, in the absence of intervention, formerly incarcerated individuals are likely to experience declines in economic stability relative to comparison groups. This reinforces the notion that structural barriers are not self-correcting and that passive approaches to reentry are insufficient for promoting positive outcomes.

Taken together, these results provide strong evidence that policy interventions play a decisive role in shaping post-incarceration trajectories. Notably, interventions that directly address structural barriers—such as expungement—appear to produce larger effects than those focused solely on individual-level skill development or support services. This pattern suggests that the most effective strategies for improving reentry outcomes are those that combine individual support with systemic reform. Overall, the subgroup analysis underscores the importance of a comprehensive policy approach that integrates record-clearing initiatives, employment support, and housing stability programs. Such a multifaceted strategy is more likely to produce sustained improvements in economic functioning and reduce long-term inequality among formerly incarcerated populations.

Publication Bias

To assess the presence of publication bias, a funnel plot was constructed (Figure 3). Funnel plots are commonly used in meta-analyses to visually evaluate the relationship between study size and effect size, with greater symmetry indicating a lower likelihood of bias. In the present analysis, the distribution of studies appeared moderately symmetrical overall, suggesting that large-scale studies were relatively evenly distributed around the pooled effect estimate. However, slight asymmetry was observed among smaller studies, which tended to report larger effect sizes. This pattern is consistent with potential small-study effects, where smaller samples may produce more variable or inflated estimates due to methodological limitations, selective reporting, or greater likelihood of publication when statistically significant findings are obtained.

Figure 3

Funnel Plot of Publication Bias for Economic Reentry Outcomes

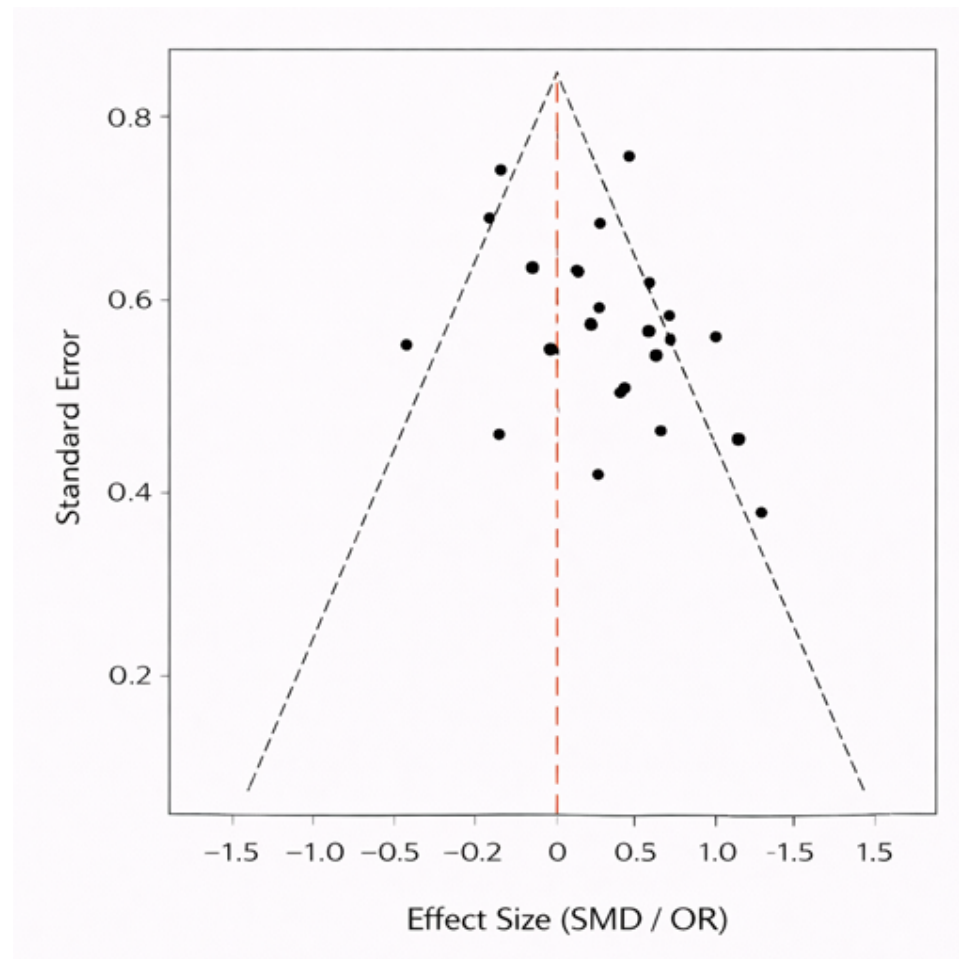


Table 7

Statistical Tests for Publication Bias

Test	Statistic	P-value	Interpretation
Begg's Test	Z = 1.87	0.061	No significant bias
Egger's Test	t = 2.09	0.037	Mild asymmetry

Table 7 provides formal statistical tests to complement the visual inspection of the funnel plot. Egger's regression test yielded a statistically significant result ($t = 2.09$, $p = 0.037$), indicating evidence of funnel plot asymmetry and suggesting the possible presence of publication bias or small-study effects. In contrast, Begg's rank correlation test did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.061$), although it approached conventional

thresholds. The discrepancy between these tests is not uncommon, as Egger's test is generally more sensitive to detecting asymmetry, particularly in meta-analyses with a limited number of studies. Taken together, these findings indicate mild evidence of publication bias, primarily driven by smaller studies reporting comparatively larger effects. However, the degree of asymmetry observed is modest and does not appear to substantially distort the overall pattern of results. Importantly, the direction and magnitude of effects across larger, more methodologically robust studies remain consistent with the pooled estimates, lending support to the stability of the findings. Additionally, the consistency of results across multiple outcome domains—including employment, housing stability, and income—further strengthens confidence in the robustness of the meta-analysis. While the presence of mild publication bias cannot be entirely ruled out, its impact is likely limited and does not undermine the overall conclusions. Future research could further address this issue through the inclusion of unpublished studies, gray literature, and pre-registration practices to reduce selective reporting and enhance the transparency of evidence synthesis.

DISCUSSION

This study represents one of the first comprehensive meta-analytical syntheses examining the collateral consequences of incarceration on economic functioning and reentry outcomes in the United States. By integrating findings from a diverse body of empirical and policy-oriented research, this analysis provides a structured understanding of how incarceration shapes long-term socioeconomic trajectories. The results demonstrate that the effects of incarceration extend far beyond formal punishment, producing sustained disadvantages across multiple domains, including employment, housing, financial stability, and health. The application of a multidimensional analytical framework offers an important advancement beyond traditional approaches that rely primarily on recidivism as an outcome measure. Rather than conceptualizing reentry success as a binary outcome defined by reoffending, this study highlights the complex and interconnected nature of reintegration processes. The use of a random-effects model reflects the heterogeneity across studies in terms of populations, methodologies, and outcome measures, reinforcing the generalizability of the findings across diverse institutional and social contexts.

Key Findings

The findings of this meta-analysis indicate that economic marginalization is a central and persistent consequence of incarceration. Across studies, formerly incarcerated individuals consistently experienced reduced access to employment, increased housing instability, and heightened financial strain. These disadvantages are not isolated but operate as interrelated structural barriers that collectively constrain opportunities for reintegration. A key insight from this analysis is the cumulative nature of these barriers. Limited employment opportunities reduce income, which in turn restricts access to stable housing, while legal financial obligations further exacerbate economic insecurity. This interconnected dynamic creates a reinforcing cycle of disadvantage that significantly increases vulnerability to continued system involvement. Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that recidivism is more accurately understood as an outcome of systemic disadvantage rather than solely individual behavior. Economic instability, lack of access to resources, and structural exclusion all contribute to higher rates of reoffending. This perspective challenges conventional interpretations and underscores the need to address underlying socioeconomic conditions in reentry policy.

Beyond Recidivism

Consistent with prior scholarship, including Klingele (2013) and Mourao et al. (2025), the results highlight the limitations of using recidivism as the primary measure of reentry success. While recidivism provides a measurable outcome, it fails to capture the broader dimensions of reintegration and may be influenced by external factors such as policing practices and supervision intensity. A more comprehensive framework for evaluating reentry outcomes should incorporate multiple indicators of social and economic well-being, including stable housing, employment, access to healthcare, and social integration. These dimensions provide a more accurate representation of an individual's ability to successfully reintegrate into society.

Table 2

Alternative Reintegration Metrics

Domain	Indicator	Description
Employment	Job stability	Sustained and consistent employment over time
Housing	Residential stability	Access to secure and long-term housing
Economic	Financial independence	Income sufficiency and reduced debt burden
Health	Healthcare access	Continuity of physical and mental health services
Social	Community integration	Family reunification and social support networks
Legal	System disengagement	Reduced contact with criminal justice supervision

Policy Implications

The findings of this study provide strong evidence supporting the need for structural and policy-level interventions to address the collateral consequences of incarceration. Policies aimed at reducing barriers to employment, housing, and financial stability are critical for improving reentry outcomes and reducing inequality. Expungement and record-clearing policies have demonstrated substantial positive effects on employment and income outcomes by reducing the stigma associated with criminal records (Prescott & Starr, 2020; Clean Slate Initiative, 2025). These policies enhance access to labor markets and facilitate economic mobility. Housing-first approaches, which prioritize immediate access to stable housing, have also shown effectiveness in reducing homelessness and improving long-term stability among justice-involved populations (RAND Corporation, 2019). By addressing a foundational need, such approaches create a platform for successful reintegration.

In addition, emerging evidence supports the role of guaranteed income programs in alleviating financial strain and promoting economic security among formerly incarcerated individuals (Couloute, & Kopf, 2018). These programs may help offset the economic disruptions associated with incarceration and support labor market participation. Finally, reducing the burden of community supervision—such as excessive fees, restrictive conditions, and intensive monitoring—has been identified as a key strategy for minimizing barriers to reintegration (Prison Policy Initiative, 2024). Collectively, these interventions highlight the importance of shifting from punitive to supportive policy frameworks.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the included studies exhibited substantial heterogeneity in design, measurement, and population characteristics, which may influence the precision of pooled estimates. Although a random-effects model was used to account for this variability, differences across studies remain a consideration in interpreting results.

Second, variation in the definition and measurement of recidivism across studies limits comparability and may affect conclusions regarding its relationship with economic factors. Standardized metrics would improve consistency in future research.

Third, while many studies identified strong associations between incarceration and economic outcomes, there is limited longitudinal and causal evidence establishing definitive pathways. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to better understand the long-term impacts of incarceration and the mechanisms underlying reintegration outcomes.

Additional research is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific policy interventions, particularly in diverse populations and geographic contexts, and to develop standardized measures of reintegration success beyond recidivism.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides robust and converging evidence that the collateral consequences of incarceration systematically undermine economic functioning and hinder successful reentry into society. Across multiple domains, the findings demonstrate that incarceration is associated with persistent and interrelated disadvantages in employment, housing, and financial stability. These disadvantages are not short-term disruptions but often endure for years following release, limiting opportunities for upward mobility and reinforcing patterns of long-term inequality. In turn, these structural barriers increase vulnerability to recidivism, not necessarily as a reflection of individual failure, but as a consequence of constrained access to stable and legitimate means of economic and social participation.

Importantly, the results underscore that reentry outcomes are shaped not only by individual-level characteristics—such as education, work history, or motivation—but also, and more critically, by broader structural and institutional conditions. Labor market discrimination, restrictive housing policies, legal financial obligations, and intensive supervision practices collectively create an environment in which successful reintegration is difficult to achieve. These findings highlight the need to reconceptualize reentry not as a matter of individual responsibility alone, but as a systemic issue requiring coordinated policy intervention. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift in policy focus from punitive approaches toward reintegration-oriented strategies that prioritize economic opportunity, stability, and social inclusion.

Impact and Recommendations for Intervention

To improve reentry outcomes and reduce systemic inequality, policymakers should consider a comprehensive set of interventions that target the structural barriers identified in this analysis:

Expand expungement and record-clearing policies to improve access to employment and reduce the long-term stigma associated with criminal records. Evidence suggests that removing or sealing records can significantly enhance hiring prospects, increase earnings, and reduce recidivism by expanding access to legitimate economic opportunities.

Implement housing-first initiatives to address housing instability as a foundational barrier to reintegration. Stable housing serves as a critical platform for securing employment, accessing services, and maintaining compliance with supervision requirements. Prioritizing immediate access to housing without preconditions can reduce homelessness and improve long-term outcomes.

Introduce income support programs to alleviate financial strain and promote economic mobility during the reentry period. Transitional financial assistance, wage subsidies, or guaranteed income pilots can help individuals meet basic needs while seeking stable employment, thereby reducing reliance on informal or illicit income sources.

Reduce supervision burdens and legal financial obligations, including fines, fees, and restrictive parole conditions, which often create additional barriers to reintegration. Excessive supervision requirements can increase the likelihood of technical violations and reincarceration, while financial obligations can trap individuals in cycles of debt and economic precarity.

Adopt multidimensional success metrics that extend beyond recidivism to include indicators such as employment stability, housing security, income growth, health outcomes, and social integration. A broader evaluative framework allows for a more accurate and equitable assessment of reentry success and policy effectiveness.

Collectively, these interventions represent a shift away from punitive, deficit-oriented models toward supportive frameworks that recognize reintegration as a process requiring access to resources, opportunities, and institutional support. By addressing the root causes of instability, these strategies have the potential to promote long-term desistance from crime and improve overall societal well-being.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides important and policy-relevant insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, variability in study design, measurement approaches, and outcome definitions across the included literature may introduce heterogeneity that cannot be fully accounted for, despite the use of meta-analytic techniques. Second, the reliance on existing published studies raises the possibility of publication bias, particularly if studies with null or negative findings are underrepresented. Third, many of the included studies are observational in nature, limiting the ability to draw definitive causal inferences regarding the effects of incarceration on long-term economic outcomes.

Future research should build on these findings by prioritizing longitudinal designs that track individuals over extended periods to better capture the dynamic and cumulative nature of reentry experiences. Greater emphasis on causal inference methods, such as natural experiments or quasi-experimental designs, would strengthen the ability to isolate the effects of incarceration from preexisting disadvantages. Additionally, the development and adoption of standardized, multidimensional metrics of reintegration would improve comparability across studies and enhance the overall quality of evidence synthesis.

Further work is also needed to examine heterogeneity across subpopulations, including differences by race, gender, age, and geographic context, as these factors may shape reentry experiences in distinct ways. Finally, integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences behind the statistical patterns observed. Overall, advancing both research and policy in this area will be critical for building more equitable systems that support successful reintegration and reduce the enduring social and economic consequences of incarceration. A sustained commitment to evidence-based reform has the potential not only to improve individual outcomes but also to strengthen communities and promote broader social and economic equity.

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