

Correctional Education and Certification in the U.S.: Employer Recognition and Post-Release Labor Market Outcomes - A Scoping Review

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Abstract:

This scoping review synthesizes U.S.-based evidence on correctional education, in-custody certification, and employer recognition to evaluate their impact on post-release employment and recidivism. Drawing on studies and reports published between 2018 and 2025, the review follows the Arksey and O'Malley framework, incorporating sources from academic databases and policy organizations. Studies were screened and thematically analyzed to map program types, employer perspectives, labor-market outcomes, systemic barriers, and policy gaps. Findings indicate that vocational and accredited postsecondary programs, particularly those aligned with industry standards and supported by employer partnerships, consistently improve employment prospects and reduce reoffending, though effect sizes vary and long-term wage outcomes remain mixed. Employer recognition is strongest for nationally recognized and licensed credentials, especially when formal employer linkages are present; informal or non-accredited training often fails to translate into hirability. Persistent barriers include occupational licensing restrictions, background-check practices, stigma, discontinuities between prison training and community credentialing, and uneven access to programs and funding. Policy recommendations emphasize restoring and expanding Pell-eligible postsecondary offerings, standardizing credential portability, implementing fair-chance licensing reforms, scaling employer-linked apprenticeships and hiring pipelines, and investing in reentry supports, such as case management and pre-release licensing assistance. The review calls for rigorous empirical research, including longitudinal cohort studies, employer field experiments, cost-effectiveness analyses, and comparative state-level evaluations to identify which credential types and employer-facing interventions yield durable labor-market returns and equitable outcomes. Coordinated policy, sustained funding, and strengthened accreditation-to-licensure pathways are essential to convert in-custody learning into meaningful employment opportunities for individuals reentering society.

Keywords: Certification, Employment, Recidivism, Licensing, Stigma, Correctional Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States continues to lead globally in incarceration, with approximately 1.2 million individuals held in state and federal prisons and over 600,000 released annually (Kaiser et al., 2024). These justice-involved individuals face significant challenges reintegrating into society, particularly in securing stable employment. Correctional education, comprising adult basic education, vocational training, and postsecondary programs, has emerged as a crucial intervention aimed at improving post-release outcomes.

Research consistently shows that incarcerated individuals are disproportionately undereducated and underemployed compared to the general population. For example, only a minority of prisoners possess a high school diploma or GED, and even fewer hold postsecondary credentials (Kaiser et al., 2021). Notwithstanding the documented benefits of correctional education, including reduced recidivism and improved employment prospects (Bozick et al., 2018), systemic barriers persist. These include institutional constraints such as limited program availability, staff shortages, and restrictive eligibility criteria (Kaiser et al., 2021), as well as individual motivational challenges and inconsistent program delivery (Kaiser et al., 2024). Reentry barriers such as housing instability, lack of social support, and limited access to employment services further complicate the transition from prison to the labor market (Buck et al., 2022). Additionally, persistent funding gaps and racial disparities in prison higher education undermine equitable access and outcomes (Castro et al., 2024). Understanding the role of correctional certifications and employer recognition is essential for designing effective reentry strategies and informing policy reforms. This scoping review aims to synthesize existing literature from 2018 to 2025 on the intersection of correctional education, certification, employer recognition, and post-release labor market outcomes in the U.S. The review will map key themes, identify research gaps and provide a foundation for future empirical studies and policy interventions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This scoping review situates its findings within three complementary theoretical lenses, Human Capital Theory, Labeling Theory, and evidence on programmatic synergies, to interpret the relationship between correctional education, employer recognition, and post-release labor market outcomes. It also considers implications for cost-effectiveness and policy design.

Human Capital Theory holds that education and training increase individuals' productive skills and thereby their employability. The mapped literature generally supports this: vocational and postsecondary programs administered in custody show the most consistent positive associations with post-release employment and reductions in reoffending, and recent meta-analytic and quasi-experimental work finds measurable employment and wage gains tied to vocational or college-level programming (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). These studies suggest that credentialed skills acquired in custody can improve labor-market attachment when matched to demand.

Labeling Theory highlights how social stigma and employer responses to criminal records can erode the signaling value of credentials. Employer-facing studies and field experiments reveal a persistent aversion to hiring justice-involved individuals, even when they possess relevant qualifications. Employers often engage in cautious hiring practices and rely on background checks that disproportionately disadvantage applicants with records (Cerdeira-Jara et al., 2020). This creates a "credential-stigma paradox," where increased human capital fails to translate into employment due to reputational concerns and liability fears. (Cerdeira-Jara et al., 2020).

The most promising outcomes emerge at the intersection of these two theories, where accredited, industry-aligned credentials are combined with employer partnerships and supported transitions. Programs that integrate training with local labor market needs, offer recognized certifications or licensure pathways, and include direct employer engagement, such as hiring guarantees, internships, and apprenticeships, report significantly better placement and retention outcomes. For instance, collaborative governance models that link corrections, workforce boards, and employers have been shown to reduce administrative frictions and improve credential portability (Lacoe & Betesh, 2019).

On cost-effectiveness, the evidence is cautiously optimistic but conditional. Meta-analyses and program evaluations calculate favorable returns when programs lead to sustained employment and recidivism reductions (Stickle & Schuster, 2023); however, economic benefits depend heavily on program quality, completion rates, and post-release supports (case management, job development). Where credentials do not lead to jobs because of licensing barriers or stigma, cost-effectiveness declines sharply. Thus, investments in credentialing must be paired with policies that improve employer demand and credential recognition to realize net social returns (Stickle & Schuster, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

This scoping review was conducted using a structured and transparent approach to map the existing literature on correctional education, in-custody certification, and employer recognition in the United States. This scoping review followed the five-stage framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which includes: (i) identifying the research question, (ii) locating relevant studies, (iii) selecting studies, (iv) charting the data, and (v) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. The study selection process adhered to the PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018) to ensure transparency and reproducibility. A comprehensive search strategy was employed across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus, as well as targeted organizational websites such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics, RAND Corporation, and the Vera Institute of Justice. The search focused on empirical studies, policy reports, and government publications published between 2018 and 2025. Reference lists of selected studies were manually screened to identify additional sources. Databases such as EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and ProQuest were not included due to institutional access limitations and overlap with indexed content available through Google Scholar and Web of Science.

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria:

- Published between 2018 and 2025
- Focused on the U.S. context
- Addressed one or more of the following: correctional education, in-custody certification, employer recognition, or post-release labor market outcomes
- Provided empirical findings, policy evaluations, or thematic insights relevant to the review objectives

Both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed sources (government reports and policy briefs) were considered to ensure a comprehensive mapping of available evidence. No restrictions were placed on study design. Included studies encompassed:

- Meta-analyses
- Randomized controlled trials
- Quasi-experimental designs
- Longitudinal analyses
- Field experiments
- Qualitative reviews
- Descriptive evaluations

Studies were excluded if they:

- Were conducted outside the U.S.
- Were theoretical-only papers without empirical grounding

- Fell outside the specified publication timeframe

Study selection was conducted independently by two reviewers who screened titles and abstracts for relevance. Full-text reviews were performed for potentially eligible studies, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Data extraction was carried out using a standardized charting form that captured key information such as study design, population, type of educational or certification program, employer attitudes, labor market outcomes, for example, employment, wages, retention, and reported limitations.

A total of 120 records were identified from academic databases and 20 from other sources. After removing 10 duplicates, 130 records were screened, with 90 excluded. Forty full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 12 were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 28 studies were included in the synthesis. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA-ScR flow diagram summarizing the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Thematic synthesis was used to identify recurring patterns, gaps, and policy-relevant insights across the included studies. The final synthesis reflects a diverse range of evidence, including meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, field experiments, and policy evaluations, which collectively inform the review's findings and recommendations.

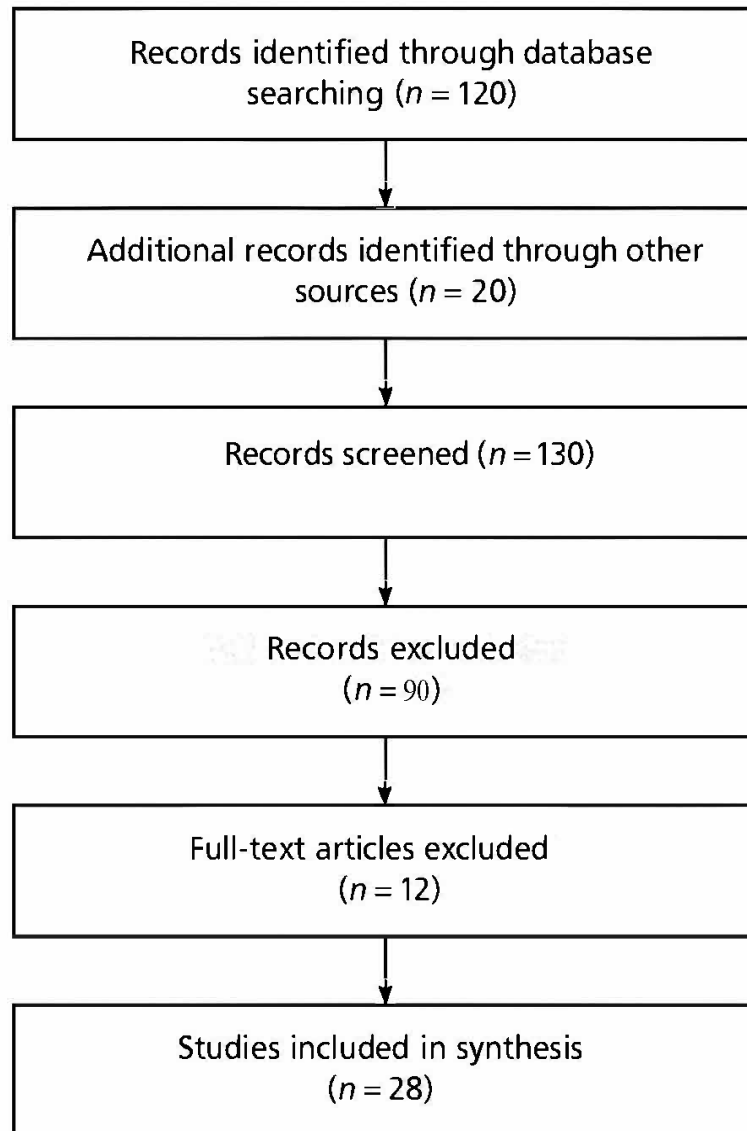


Figure 1 presents the PRISMA-ScR flow diagram summarizing the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

4. RESULTS

The following subsections (A–E) represent the key thematic findings derived from the scoping review. These themes emerged from a synthesis of the included studies and are presented as part of the broader Results section to highlight distinct dimensions of correctional education and its labor-market implications.

A. Types of correctional education

Correctional education programs in the United States typically fall into five categories: basic education and GED preparation, vocational trades (example, construction, culinary arts, information technology), postsecondary offerings such as Second Chance Pell and college-in-prison programs, soft-skills and job-

readiness training, and registered apprenticeships or apprenticeship-style workforce initiatives (Vandala, 2019). Program availability and enrollment vary by state and facility, with recent growth in postsecondary education driven by federal Pell Grant restoration efforts (Castro et al. 2024).

B. Employer recognition

Employer recognition of correctional credentials varies. Nationally accredited and industry-aligned certifications are generally more accepted, while informal or non-accredited training receives limited recognition (Lacoe & Betesh 2019). Licensing laws and accreditation status influence hirability, with restrictive policies reducing the value of in-custody training.

Studies confirm that stigma and liability concerns affect employer decisions. Field experiments show employers hesitate to hire justice-involved individuals despite relevant qualifications (Cerdeira-Jara et al., 2020). Goodstein & Petrich (2019) note that incarceration stigma often overshadows educational achievements. The University of Nebraska Omaha (2023) finds that employers prefer credentials with clear accreditation and relevance to job roles.

Programs with employer partnerships and credential transparency improve recognition and placement outcomes (Lacoe & Betesh, 2019). Without such engagement, correctional education may not translate into meaningful employment.

C. Labor-market outcomes

Participation in correctional education, particularly vocational and postsecondary programs, is generally associated with improved post-release employment and reduced recidivism (Castro et al. (2024). However, the magnitude and consistency of these effects vary across studies. For instance, Bozick et al. (2018) and McNeeley (2023) report significant improvements in job placement and retention, while Vandala (2019) notes limited long-term wage effects without strong reentry supports. Stickle & Schuster (2023) emphasize that cost-effectiveness depends on program quality and continuity of support. These findings imply that while correctional education can be a powerful tool for reintegration, its success is contingent upon the presence of complementary supports such as case management, credential portability, and employer engagement. Programs that are well-aligned with labor market needs and include pathways to licensure or certification tend to yield more durable employment outcomes. Conversely, without these supports, the benefits of education may be short-lived, leading to unstable employment and increased risk of recidivism. Thus, the evidence underscores the importance of designing correctional education initiatives that deliver instruction and facilitate transition into the workforce through strategic partnerships and policy reforms.

D. Barriers and variability

Several structural and systemic barriers hinder the effectiveness of correctional education. These include occupational licensing restrictions, persistent employer stigma, inadequate transitional supports, such as case management and job placement services, and administrative discontinuities between prison-based training and community credentialing systems. Kaiser et al. (2021) highlights institutional barriers such as limited program availability, staff shortages, and restrictive eligibility criteria that prevent inmates from participating in educational programs. Their findings from a private southern U.S. prison underscore how facility-level constraints can undermine program access. Kaiser et al. (2024) further explore individual motivational factors and institutional challenges, revealing that lack of incentives, poor communication, and inconsistent program delivery reduce inmate engagement. Buck et al. (2022) emphasize the difficulties faced during reentry, including housing instability, lack of social support, and limited access to employment services, which compound the challenges of converting in-custody education into labor-market success. Castro et al. (2024) discuss persistent funding gaps and racial disparities in prison higher

education, arguing that without equitable investment and policy reform, correctional education will remain inaccessible to many. Program access and outcomes also vary by region and facility type (urban vs. rural), with notable disparities by gender and race, highlighting critical equity gaps. These studies collectively demonstrate that addressing barriers to correctional education requires multi-level interventions targeting institutional practices, policy frameworks, and reentry supports.

Table 1: Studies and key Findings

Study (Year)	Design/Setting	Program/ Credential Type	Main Findings	Quality/notes Implications
Bozick et al., 2018	Meta-analysis of US correctional education evaluations	Vocational & academic programs	Correctional education associated with improved post-release employment and reduced recidivism (moderate effect sizes).	Robust meta-analytic evidence; used as baseline evidence for program effectiveness.
Duwe, 2018	Program evaluation or national-level summary	Various correctional education types	Education linked to better post-release outcomes; documents undereducation among incarcerated populations.	Descriptive and program evaluation support the need for expanding education.
Vandala, 2019	Descriptive review	Vocational trades and job-readiness	Vocational programs increase placement, but long-term wage gains are mixed without strong reentry supports.	Highlights the need for continuity-of-care post-release.
Goodstein & Petrich, 2019	Qualitative or policy review	General correctional education	Stigma often negates signaling value of in-custody credentials; accreditation matters.	Emphasizes employer perception barriers.
Cerda-Jara et al., 2020	Field experiments on	Employer response studies	Employers are hesitant to hire	Strong evidence for

	employer behavior		justice-involved applicants even with qualifications.	labeling/stigma effects on hiring.
Avery & Lu, 2019	Policy review	Licensing reform proposals	Occupational licensing restrictions reduce credential portability and limit jobs in licensed professions.	Policy-actionable; suggests fair-chance licensing.
Stickle & Schuster, 2023	Meta-analytic cost-effectiveness review	Multiple program types	Cost-effective programs lead to sustained employment and recidivism reduction; conditional supports.	Important for funding arguments.
University of Nebraska Omaha, 2023	Employer survey or perspectives	Employer-facing study	Employers prefer accredited, industry-aligned credentials, and clear pathways to licensure.	Useful for designing employer-linked programs.
California Workforce Dev. Board, 2023	Program or policy brief	Prison-to-employment initiatives	Employer partnerships and local alignment improve placement outcomes.	Program implementation lessons; state-level model.
Castro et al., 2024	Policy evaluation	Postsecondary programs (Pell restoration)	Pell restoration increased program availability; scaling constrained by funding & administration.	Supports expansion but notes operational limits.
McNeeley, 2023	Longitudinal analysis	Postsecondary and vocational programs	Positive associations with employment; heterogeneity by	Reinforces need for longitudinal follow-up

			program quality and region.	
Prosser et al., 2025	Annotated bibliography or review	Multi-stakeholder perspectives	Fragmented accreditation and weak portability limit credential utility after release.	Recent synthesis highlights systemic barriers.
Vera Institute (2022, 2023, 2025)	Program and policy reports	Second Chance Pell; employer engagement models	Employer engagement and recognized certification improve placement; evidence for scaling through partnerships.	Policy practice evidence; multiple reports across years

Table 2: Synthesis of Themes

Themes	Synthesis or What the Evidence shows	Studies (Years)
Accredited or industry-aligned credentials increase employer recognition	Studies consistently show national or accredited credentials and licensure-linked programs lead to higher employer acceptance and placement.	Bozick et al. 2018; Unruh et al., 2023.
Stigma or labeling reduces credential signaling value	Field experiments and qualitative work find employers penalize applicants with records despite relevant credentials.	Cerda-Jara et al. 2020; Goodstein & Petrich 2019.
Licensing and credential portability are critical blockers	Licensing restrictions and mismatches between in-custody training and community licensure reduce job access in licensed trades.	Avery & Lu 2019; Prosser et al. 2025.
Employer partnerships & local labor-market alignment improve outcomes	Programs with employer engagement, apprenticeships, or hiring pipelines show better placement and retention.	Vera 2022/2023; California Workforce Dev. Board 2023; Bozick et al. 2018.
Cost-effectiveness is conditional on supports & sustained employment	Economic returns are favorable when training leads to durable employment and reduced recidivism; absent	Stickle & Schuster 2023; Vandala 2019; McNeeley 2023.

	reentry supports gains are limited.	
Variation by jurisdiction and program quality	Outcomes vary widely by state, facility, program type and quality, underscoring the need for standardization and evaluation.	Castro et al.2024; Duwe et al. 2021; Prosser et al. 2025.
Data and evaluation gaps	Many studies call for longitudinal, linked administrative data and randomized or quasi-experimental designs to measure durable effects.	McNeeley 2023; Prosser et al. 2025; Stickle & Schuster 2023.

E. Policy gaps

Recent studies highlight several policy gaps that limit the effectiveness and scalability of correctional education in the United States. Castro et al. (2024) identifies uneven funding and program access across jurisdictions, as well as the absence of standardized recognition pathways for in-custody credentials, which undermines portability and employer acceptance.

Walker (2024) adds that administrative discontinuities between correctional institutions and community licensing boards often result in delays or denials of credential recognition, creating barriers to employment for justice-involved individuals. Similarly, Avery & Lu (2019) emphasize the lack of fair-chance licensing reforms in many states, which restrict access to licensed professions despite relevant training completed during incarceration.

Prosser et al. (2025) document how fragmented accreditation systems and inconsistent credentialing standards across jurisdictions prevent incarcerated learners from converting their training into actionable qualifications upon release. The California Workforce Development Board (2023) further notes that weak linkages between correctional training programs and local employers or workforce boards reduce the relevance and impact of prison-based education.

These studies underscore the need for coordinated policy reforms that address credential portability, licensing barriers, funding stability, and employer engagement. Without such reforms, even well-designed educational programs may fail to produce durable labor-market outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals.

5. DISCUSSION

This review synthesizes recent U.S.-based evidence on correctional education and in-custody certification, emphasizing empirical outcomes and operational implications. The literature consistently shows that accredited, industry-aligned postsecondary and vocational programs yield the most durable improvements in post-release employment and reductions in recidivism (Bozick et al., 2018; McNeeley, 2023). Programs incorporating employer partnerships, registered apprenticeships, and direct pathways to community licensure demonstrate stronger placement and retention outcomes than short-term, non-accredited trainings (California Workforce Development Board, 2023).

Three recurrent barriers limit the translation of credentials into sustained employment. First, occupational licensing restrictions and administrative discontinuities hinder credential portability (Walker, 2024; Avery & Lu, 2019). Second, employer stigma and liability concerns reduce hiring opportunities, even for qualified candidates (Cerdeira et al., 2020; Goodstein & Petrich, 2019). Third, insufficient pre-release and post-release support, such as case management, licensing assistance, and job development, undermine continuity and employment readiness (Vandala, 2019).

Higher-performing programs integrate accreditation, employer engagement, work-based learning, and transitional services that bridge custody-to-community gaps. When in-custody training aligns with recognized credentials or licensure pathways, employer confidence and hiring willingness increase significantly (Lacoe & Betesh, 2019).

However, findings also reveal that cost-effectiveness is conditional. Programs that produce sustained employment and lower recidivism offer favorable returns, but equity concerns persist if funding and implementation exclude resource-poor facilities or marginalized populations (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). This scoping review has several limitations. First, the review is restricted to U.S.-based studies published between 2018 and 2025, which may limit generalizability to other jurisdictions with different correctional education systems and labor market conditions. Second, most included studies are observational or descriptive, with few randomized or quasi-experimental designs, reducing the ability to infer causality. Third, heterogeneity in program types, credentialing standards, and outcome measures complicates direct comparisons across studies. Fourth, publication bias may exist, as programs with positive outcomes are more likely to be reported. Finally, the review did not include gray literature beyond selected organizational reports, which may omit relevant insights from practice-based evaluations. This review included both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., government and policy reports) to ensure comprehensive coverage of practice-relevant evidence, though this may introduce variability in methodological rigor.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance post-release employment outcomes and reduce recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals, this review recommends a coordinated and evidence-informed strategy. Correctional education programs should be closely aligned with labor market needs through active employer engagement and the integration of work-based learning opportunities. Standardizing credentialing and licensing policies across jurisdictions is essential to improve portability and reduce administrative barriers. Expanding access to accredited postsecondary education within correctional facilities, particularly programs that lead to industry-recognized certifications, will ensure broader reach and impact. Structural barriers such as restrictive licensing laws and employer stigma must be addressed through policy reform and targeted incentives that promote fair hiring practices. Transitional support, including case management, job placement assistance, and credential verification should be embedded into correctional education to facilitate continuity and employment readiness. Program effectiveness must be monitored through consistent evaluation frameworks that inform ongoing improvements. Finally, equity must be prioritized by addressing disparities in access and outcomes across race, gender, and geography, ensuring that correctional education serves as a meaningful pathway to reintegration for all justice-involved individuals.

Future Research Directions

Future research should build a stronger evidence base connecting correctional certification to labor-market returns. Longitudinal studies are needed to track employment and recidivism over several years, linking corrections and labor data to capture durable outcomes across credential types and demographic groups. Employer-focused research should move beyond surveys to include field audit studies, experiments, and qualitative interviews that reveal how attributes such as accreditation, portability, and industry alignment shape hiring decisions. Comparative state-level analyses can highlight how differences in licensing regimes, Pell Grant access, and workforce investment influence outcomes, while cost-benefit studies should evaluate program returns by credential type, completion rate, and regional labor demand. Cross-cutting priorities include creating a standardized taxonomy for credentials, building stronger data-sharing partnerships, embedding equity measures, and testing employer and licensing-side interventions alongside training programs. These research directions can generate actionable insights for policies that expand correctional education and ensure credentials translate into sustainable employment pathways.

7. CONCLUSION

Correctional education in the United States has been shown to significantly enhance employability and reduce recidivism, particularly when programs are accredited, aligned with industry standards, and integrated with employer partnerships. However, several structural barriers, such as limited credential portability, restrictive occupational licensing, employer stigma, and uneven access to programs, continue to constrain labor-market outcomes for justice-involved individuals.

In response to these challenges, targeted policy actions are essential. These include restoring and expanding Pell-eligible postsecondary programs, standardizing credential recognition across jurisdictions, implementing fair-chance licensing reforms, and scaling employer-linked apprenticeships. Effective implementation will require sustained funding, coordinated accreditation and reentry supports, and rigorous evaluation through longitudinal and experimental research. Prioritizing equity and proactive employer engagement will be critical to maximizing both social and economic returns.

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