

**Pathways to Second Chances: A Multidisciplinary Integrative Review of 25 Years of
Research on the Employment of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals**

Abstract

In this paper, we present an integrative review of the research literature on the challenges and opportunities surrounding the employment of formerly incarcerated individuals (FIIs). Our primary aim is to integrate 25 years of multidisciplinary evidence into vocational behavior scholarship, offering an employment life-cycle framework that identifies research gaps and practical implications for employers. Grounded in a multidisciplinary approach, we synthesize research across various domains, including criminal justice, psychology, sociology, law, economics, and management, to provide a holistic understanding of the systemic barriers that hinder FIIs' reintegration into the workforce. We introduce an integrative framework that examines the employment life cycle of FIIs, encompassing recruitment, selection, onboarding, development, and retention. We also highlight the critical role of social stigmatization, lack of access to vocational training, and the systemic disconnection between correctional institutions and labor market demands. Furthermore, our review emphasizes the importance of employer engagement and policy interventions in fostering inclusive hiring practices that support the successful reintegration of FIIs. We conclude with a call for future research and practical recommendations focusing on individual, organizational, and systemic factors that influence successful FII employment, highlighting the necessity of tailored vocational programs, social network support, and supportive workplace practices.

Keywords: formerly incarcerated; employment; second chance hiring; re-entry; reintegration

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“I think everybody deserves a second chance. Sometimes we make a mistake in our life. It doesn’t matter the mistake. Sometimes the mistakes are made in the environment, in a context, they have an explanation. Maybe we are in a hard time of our life and something happens. I think when people show regret for what’s happened in the past and they want to move on and want to start again, I think they deserve a second chance.” - quote from an employer as reported in Goodstein and Petrich (2019, p. 163)

Introduction

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), approximately 1.2 million individuals were incarcerated in the United States in 2023 (December, 2024). Annually, approximately 600,000 incarcerated individuals are released from state and federal correctional facilities (Carson, 2020). Although society often views currently incarcerated individuals through a negative lens, empirical data indicate that 95% will ultimately re-enter society (Martin & Garcia, 2022), a reality that highlights the importance of effective re-entry planning. This also further underscores the critical need for organizations and communities to develop and implement innovative, evidence-based strategies that facilitate reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals (FIIs). The process of reintegration, commonly referred to as re-entry, has been a focal point of scholarly inquiry and policy development for decades (Holzer et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis et al., 2001), yet societal and organizational barriers to FII employment remain. Our review seeks to respond by translating insights from outside traditional vocational behavior research and providing an organizing framework for scholars and practitioners focused on FII employment.

From an employer perspective, the rationale for hiring FIIs is compelling, offering potential benefits that extend across economic, operational, and social domains. At the organizational level, employing FIIs can serve as a strategic solution to labor shortages, facilitate the filling of positions that are typically difficult to staff, and contribute to enhanced corporate social responsibility and financial performance (Orlitzky et al., 2003; Young & Powell, 2015). Employers of FIIs can apply for tax credits, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), which can serve as a tangible incentive for creating pathways to employment for FIIs (Internal Revenue Service, 2023). Furthermore, at a societal level, economic analyses indicate that exclusion of FIIs from the labor market imposes a substantial financial burden on the economy. A 2021 report by the U. S. Chamber of Commerce estimated that the exclusion of FIIs from employment opportunities results in a reduction of the U. S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by approximately \$78 billion to \$87 billion annually (U. S. Chamber, 2021). Once employed, FIIs are frequently perceived as valuable contributors to the workforce, often described as grateful, hardworking, and beneficial to business operations (Lutman et al., 2015). Research has found that employers who have hired FIIs reported improvements in their workforce, attributing these positive changes to the strong work ethic demonstrated by FIIs (Goodstein & Petrich, 2019).

Nonetheless, research has documented that FIIs encounter numerous challenges in securing and sustaining employment (Harding, 2003; Holzer et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Travis et al., 2001; Visser et al., 2011). Among many barriers, FIIs struggle with a lack of reliable transportation (Visser et al., 2005), lack of cell phone access and knowledge of use (Brodsky, 2020), lack of access to reliable nutritious food (Shivy et al., 2007), lack of appropriate interview attire (Benecchi, 2021), and a lack of funds to pay for expenses and outstanding debts (Wang & Bertram, 2022). Extended periods of incarceration exacerbate these challenges, as FIIs often experience significant detachment from social and professional

networks that facilitate employment opportunities, coupled with prolonged lapses in work experience (Zakaria et al., 2018). Empirical evidence even suggests that incarceration has a more profound negative impact on employment outcomes than the failure to complete high school (Western & Beckett, 1999). Despite these well-documented barriers, there is a dearth of research on vulnerable workers such as the formerly incarcerated in the vocational behavior literature (Casper & Swanberg, 2011; De La Haye et al., 2023; Restubog et al., 2021). A recent review by Restubog et al., (2021) identified only two published articles addressing the employment experiences of FIIs in leading vocational behavior and industrial-organizational psychology journals since 2000, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

However, to move the field towards the societal objective of meaningful employment for FIIs, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to comprehensively examine the literature documenting their experiences and challenges throughout the employment process (De La Haye et al., 2023). Thus, to bring these external insights into the vocational behavior literature, we introduce an integrative multidisciplinary framework for understanding FII employment across the entire employment life cycle. Additionally, we propose evidence-based policy recommendations and outline a research agenda to address existing gaps in the literature. Unlike prior narrative reviews that offered sweeping calls for ‘fair-chance hiring,’ our framework maps research at each employment stage to specific employer recommendations rather than overly broad generalizations. Our integrative review of the FII employment literature contributes to the vocational behavior and management literatures in three primary ways. First, we synthesize and critically analyze a broad body of interdisciplinary research on the employment barriers faced by FIIs. We structure our review around the distinct phases of the employment life cycle, providing actionable recommendations for employers at each stage, thereby translating multidisciplinary evidence into the research and practice agenda of the domain of vocational behavior.

Second, our review adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the employment of FIIs, acknowledging that research in this domain spans a diverse array of disciplines. Whereas prior reviews in criminology (e.g., Visser & Travis, 2011), economics (Doleac, 2018), and management (e.g., De La Haye et al., 2023) examine only single employment phases or single disciplines, ours is the first to integrate evidence across all five employment phases and translate this evidence into a research and practice agenda for the discipline of vocational behavior. We acknowledge that an evidence-based approach to understanding FII employment necessitates an appreciation of the unique theoretical and methodological perspectives contributed by a variety of disciplines, while also emphasizing the critical importance of incorporating the lived experiences of FIIs, a perspective that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Our review synthesizes insights from various philosophically distinct and methodologically diverse bodies of literature including criminal justice, sociology, social work, occupational therapy, economics, law, public policy, psychology, and management/HR/I-O/OB, offering a comprehensive framework aimed at enhancing awareness and fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers that impede successful employment outcomes for FIIs. In this paper, we use the term systemic barriers to denote structural features of the broader policy and societal environment (e.g., statutory hiring restrictions, public stigma, etc.) that operate above the organizational level yet cascade downward to shape employer practices and individual FII experiences.

Finally, by surfacing questions that vocational scholars have not yet tackled, we chart a program of research that is rooted in, but distinct from, the broader multidisciplinary literature. While existing research has primarily focused on broad sociological and economic factors influencing employment outcomes of FIIs, there remains a lack of research addressing the nuanced individual, organizational, and systems-level interventions that can facilitate long-term workforce reintegration. Thus, our review provides a foundation for scholars to explore

underexamined areas such as the role of employer attitudes, the effectiveness of tailored vocational training programs, and the impact of supportive workplace policies on employment retention and career advancement for FIIs. Furthermore, our proposed research agenda highlights the need for longitudinal studies that can capture the dynamic and evolving nature of FII employment challenges over time, offering a more holistic understanding of the reintegration process. This contribution is critical in advancing a more inclusive and evidence-based approach to addressing the employment needs of FIIs within the broader vocational behavior and management disciplines.

A Multi-Level Integrative Systems Perspective

To guide interpretation of the evidence that follows, we anchor our review in an integrative systems perspective. Prior research on FII employment has emphasized the need to move beyond broad economic and sociological trends to examine how individual, organizational, and systems-level influences shape workforce reintegration across the employment life cycle (Travis et al., 2014). Thus, we structure our review around the sequential phases of the employment life cycle (recruitment, selection, onboarding, development, retention), while explicitly acknowledging that each phase unfolds at the intersection of the individual-employer level, but also each phase can be constrained or sometimes enabled by forces operating at multiple levels (individual, interpersonal/social, organizational/employer, community/intermediary, and policy/societal), in accordance with the social-ecological model (SEM; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). See Table 2 for a cross-level summary of the major systemic influences at each phase of the employment life cycle.

A Brief Review of the Barriers to FII Employment

Employment is widely recognized as a critical factor in reducing recidivism, defined as the tendency of a person who has previously been convicted of a crime to reoffend, among FIIs

(Berg & Huebner, 2011; Davis et al., 2013; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013, Nally et al., 2014).

However, FIIs encounter numerous obstacles, or “invisible punishments” (Burt, 2010), which manifest both directly and indirectly in relation to their employment prospects upon reintegration into society (see Table 1). Paradoxically, while securing employment is frequently a mandated condition of parole or supervised release, societal structures and systemic barriers significantly limit their access to meaningful employment opportunities (Pryor & Thompkins, 2012).

Research indicates that FIIs face significant barriers to employment, with their likelihood of being considered for job opportunities estimated to be one-half to one-third that of individuals without a criminal record (Pager, 2003). Pager’s findings point out the profound impact of a criminal record on labor market participation, aptly concluding that “criminal records close doors in employment situations” (p. 956). The adverse effects of a criminal record are further exacerbated for FIIs who belong to visible racial minority groups (Holzer et al., 2006; Pager, 2003; Pager et al., 2009; Visser et al., 2011), with African-American males being disproportionately affected. Specifically, research by Pettit and Western (2004) indicates that among African-American males, one-third of those without a college degree and 60% of those who did not complete high school have experienced incarceration. As Roberts (2004) argues, the mass incarceration of African-American males has profound socio-economic consequences, systematically eroding their social citizenship by restricting access to labor market opportunities and perpetuating economic disenfranchisement.

One of most significant barriers to employment for FIIs is the pervasive social stigmatization they encounter (Ajunwa & Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Beasley & Xiao, 2023; Cerda-Jara & Harding, 2024; Pager & Quillian, 2005; Uggen et al., 2004). This stigma not only hampers their job search efforts but also adversely affects their ability to retain employment (Ross et al., 2011; Visser et al., 2005). Despite having completed their sentences and avoiding

further involvement with the criminal justice system, many FIIs continue to face persistent difficulties in securing and maintaining employment years after their release (Ross et al., 2011; Visser et al., 2005; Visser et al., 2008). Zakaria et al. (2018) highlight that, in addition to challenges related to limited work experience and skills, negative employer perceptions and the lack of supportive hiring policies further exacerbate employment barriers for FIIs. Surprisingly, although organizational diversity initiatives have become increasingly prevalent, FIIs have historically been overlooked in these efforts, despite their unique challenges and needs (Blessett & Pryor, 2013; Lam & Harcourt, 2003). Even when policies are implemented to promote the hiring of FIIs, the process of obtaining and maintain stable employment remains one of the most formidable obstacles they face during their reintegration into society (Albright & Deng, 1996; Fletcher, 2001; Graffam et al., 2008; Harding, 2003; Travis et al., 2001; Uggen, 2000).

Cross-Disciplinary Review of FII Employment Research

To evaluate the existing multidisciplinary research on the employment of FIIs, we conducted a systematic integrative review in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) across a range of relevant disciplines, including criminal justice, sociology, social work, occupational therapy, economics, law, public policy, psychology, and management/HR/I-O/OB (see the PRISMA flow chart in Figure 1). Given the extensive scope of the literature spanning multiple disciplines, and given the major policy reforms and growth of electronic background checks, Ban-the-Box advocacy, and large scale reentry policy initiatives that emerged in the early 2000s that continue to influence FII employment (Holzer et al., 2004; Jacobs, 2015; Legal Action Center, 2004; Pager, 2003; Petersilia, 2003; Western, 2006), we focused our review on publications from the year 2000 to the present.

To capture multidisciplinary perspectives, a comprehensive search was performed across six academic databases that catalog and index research relevant to the employment of FIIs (Criminal Justice Database, Sociological Abstracts, ABI/INFORM, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Business Source Premier) and one federal website (Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA); <https://bja.ojp.gov/>). Our review process involved the identification of relevant articles within each domain using a comprehensive set of search terms encompassing various descriptors related to incarceration (e.g., *prisoner, formerly incarcerated, justice-involved, returning citizen, ex-offender, ex-convict, criminal record, parolee*) and employment-related terms (e.g., *hiring, staffing, employment, reentry, reintegration, job training, apprenticeship, workforce, vocational training, job search*). An initial search of the databases and the federal website yielded 3,667 potential records. We removed 2,049 theses and dissertations in addition to 632 duplicate records, resulting in 980 records being screened for relevance by title and abstract. Of these, 827 were eliminated and an additional 7 could not be retrieved. The full texts of the remaining 146 records were assessed for further eligibility based on relevance to adult FII employment, and further excluding any student works (e.g., e.g., theses, conference presentations). A manual citation search within the references of each reviewed article revealed an additional 90 eligible articles. This final step resulted in 224 articles being included in our review (see the Supplementary Appendix for a list of all articles included in the review by discipline).

In the sections below, we review the multidisciplinary research on FIIs relevant to each of the core phases of the employment life cycle (see Figure 2 for an integrative systems framework for research and practice on FII employment). In each section, we include actionable recommendations that emerge from our synthesis of the extant literature.

Recruitment of FIIs

Recruiting FIIs can be a challenge for organizational leaders because FIIs differ from the general job-seeking population in several significant ways. For example, their employment histories are often characterized by irregular work patterns, including frequent resignations, interpersonal conflicts, and employer-initiated terminations (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Railey & Peterson, 2000). Furthermore, the employment opportunities available to FIIs are predominantly low-wage, low-skill positions that are highly susceptible to elimination during periods of economic downturn (Bumiller, 2015; Western et al., 2015). Lynch and Sabol (2001) estimated that about a third of FIIs are unemployed prior to incarceration, and Harlow (2003) estimated that only about 60% of FIIs had attained a high school diploma or GED, highlighting significant educational deficits that further hinder their labor market prospects. Additionally, many FIIs reenter society burdened with financial obligations, including court-ordered fees, restitution payments, and child support, which exacerbates the economic pressures they face and heighten the urgency of securing and maintaining stable employment (Shivy et al., 2007; Visher et al., 2005). With the urgency to secure employment to avoid reincarceration, many FIIs are reentering the community with the perception that this essential employment will not be attainable. Washington et al. (2020), for example, asked 114 women in a correctional facility about their vocational aspirations and perceived barriers they expected to face when reentering the workforce. They found that 70.8% of participants anticipated that their incarceration history would result in unequal treatment, difficulty securing employment, and negative treatment compared to other employees.

Evidence from our review indicates that relatively few employers actively and knowingly recruit FIIs (Fletcher et al., 2001; Holzer et al., 2003). Furthermore, among employers who express a willingness to hire FIIs, the actual follow-through on such commitments remains limited (Pager & Quillian, 2005). A study conducted by Goodstein and Petrich (2019) on

employer experiences in Canada with FII recruitment revealed that when organizations provided targeted support to assist employers in both recruiting and retaining FIIs, along with ongoing follow-up assistance, employers reported positive outcomes including perceptions of FIIs as demonstrating a strong work ethic. These findings suggest that employer commitment to hiring FIIs, when coupled with structure support mechanisms, can yield mutually beneficial outcomes for both employers and employees. Goodstein and Petrich (2019) further emphasize that employment-based reentry programs not only facilitate the recruitment process but also allow employers to systematically evaluate candidates and gain deeper insights into their qualifications and potential, an opportunity that may not be available through conventional hiring processes.

FII Recruitment in Practice. Our review uncovered many applied examples of FII recruitment initiatives and suggests that the recruitment of FIIs appears to be experiencing a steady increase (see Table 3 for an illustrative list of FII recruitment initiatives in practice). After reviewing the various programs, several themes relevant to our review emerged. First, nearly all of the initiatives rely on collaborations among employers, community partners, and public agencies, suggesting multi-sector partnerships are essential for linking job candidates to hiring opportunities. Second, several of the programs offer mentoring, coaching, transportation, housing, and career advancement assistance, (e.g., Cara, HIRE, Momentum) that extend beyond day of hire resources, reflecting a recognition that early tenure job stability is critical for retention and preventing recidivism. In addition, program evaluation metrics indicate that some of these initiatives can provide data that may help persuade employers of the value of hiring FIIs. HIRE, for example, reports reductions in recidivism and growth in FII wages, and Dave's Killer Bread has documented lower policy/attendance violations among their employees with criminal records. Moreover, there appears to be a shift in employer mindsets from hiring FIIs as corporate social responsibility to a talent strategy. For example, Alabama's Reentry 2030 and SHRM's

national campaign explicitly encourage employers to view second chance hiring as a driver of economic development and not just corporate philanthropy. Finally, community entry points can be a catalyst for broader systems change. Local second chance hiring fairs, for example, provide a visible, relatively low-cost opportunity to connect employers with job seekers, and when coupled with follow-up resources, they can spur longer-term partnerships and pipelines.

Recruitment recommendations: 1) Partner with community-based re-entry organizations, public agencies, and willing employers to build dedicated FII talent pipelines; 2) Use “second chance” hiring fairs and other community entry points to connect job seekers and energize longer-term employer pipelines; 3) Frame second-chance hiring internally as a strategic talent and economic development initiative, not just corporate social responsibility; 4) Bundle wrap-around supports such as mentoring, transportation, housing, and coaching into early recruitment efforts to improve placement and early tenure success; 5) Track and publicize retention, performance, and recidivism metrics from FII hires to build sustained employer buy-in.

Selecting a FII Workforce

Compared to recruitment, relatively less is known about the selection of members of the FII population in employment contexts. A promising approach to job interviews that has emerged in the personnel selection literature and may be particularly advantageous for FII selection is the increasing adoption of automated video interviews (AVIs). AVIs are conducted entirely online and do not necessitate direct interpersonal interaction (Gorman et al., 2018; Scott & Roulin, 2024), making them a potentially accessible option for FIIs, who may have limited mobility or financial resources but can likely access smartphone technology through personal networks. AVIs present several advantages over traditional face-to-face interviews, including cost effectiveness (eliminating travel expenses for applicants), increased flexibility (enabling

applicants to complete interviews at their convenience from any location with internet access), and the potential to expand the applicant pool by reaching a broader and more diverse population (Basch & Melchers, 2019; Gorman et al., 2018; Lukacik et al., 2022). Moreover, recent research by Scott and Roulin (2024) suggests that factors such as the professionalism of an applicant's background or the presence of "blurred" backgrounds do not significantly influence initial interviewer impressions or final hiring decisions. This finding is particularly relevant for FIIs, who may be residing in shared or modest living environments and may lack access to professional interview settings.

Research has found that FIIs often possess educational backgrounds and literacy levels that are below national averages for the general population (Baldry et al., 2018; Harlow, 2003; Uggen et al., 2005; Western, 2007), placing them at a significant disadvantage in commonly used employment selection procedures, including assessments of cognitive ability or basic skills. To address this disparity, evidence-based strategies such as providing FIIs with extended time allowances or multiple opportunities to retake assessments have been proposed as effective accommodations (Schleicher et al., 2010; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is critical for employers to ensure that any assessments used in the selection process are designed with an appropriate reading level, considering the lower literacy rates typically observed within the FII population (Baldry et al., 2018). In addition, by rigorously validating selection assessments and documenting their direct job relevance, as mandated by legal guidelines and professional standards, employers can reduce bias and minimize adverse impact on formerly incarcerated job applicants in the selection process (EEOC, 2012; SIOP, 2018). Research also suggests that selection assessments that include personality and honesty/integrity measures may pose challenges for FIIs, particularly when test items reference criminal behavior, potentially leading

to biased outcomes (Bangerter et al., 2012; Fine et al., 2016; Gardner et al., 2023; Holloway & Weiner, 2021).

Our review highlighted the importance of hiring managers being cognizant of the traumatic experiences that FIIs may have endured during their incarceration, as many continue to experience symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including specific manifestations such as post-incarceration syndrome or post-conviction traumatic stress (Levenson & Harris, 2024; Liem & Kunst, 2013). Individuals affected by post-incarceration syndrome often exhibit heightened anxiety in environments where they cannot clearly see entry and exit points, due to persistent fears of potential threats that may be concealed behind closed doors. In a qualitative study by Levenson and Harris (2024), FIIs reported experiences of hypervigilance and intrusive thoughts, including discomfort with having their back to a door. These findings suggest that hiring managers might consider the psychological triggers associated with the physical setup of interview environments, as certain spatial arrangements may inadvertently exacerbate anxiety symptoms among FIIs.

A critical challenge identified in our review regarding the employment of FIIs during the selection phase is the reliance on criminal records in hiring decisions (Burch, 2022; Chien, 2020; Flake, 2019; Hickox, 2016; Hickox & Roehling, 2013; Kimpel, 2022). Despite a renewed research focus on the implications of “Ban-the-Box” policies and criminal background disclosures, a review by De La Haye et al. (2023) suggests that such discussions often present a limited perspective on the broader complexities of FII employment. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that “Ban-the-Box” policies, while well-intentioned, have demonstrated limited effectiveness in improving employment outcomes for individuals with criminal records (Agan & Starr, 2018; De La Haye et al., 2023; Doleac & Hansen, 2018). Research has shown that these policies can produce unintended consequences, such as widening racial disparities in

hiring by assuming a higher likelihood of a criminal record for African-American men when disclosure is not permitted (Agan & Starr, 2018; Doleac & Hansen, 2018). Moreover, “Ban-the-Box” policies do not provide legal protection against negligent hiring liability, which is frequently cited by employers as a primary justification for conducting background checks (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012). In a study conducted by Schneider et al. (2022), thirty individuals were interviewed, and 305 job applications submitted between 2008 and 2016 to the same workplaces were analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of state-level “Ban-the-Box” legislation. The findings indicated that 20% of employers failed to comply with the policy, and no significant changes in hiring practices or employer attitudes were observed between 2008 and 2016, despite the implementation of “Ban-the-Box” policies. Additionally, the study found that following the adoption of these policies, some employers began incorporating explicit warnings regarding criminal background checks later in the hiring process, potentially offsetting the intended benefits of the legislation.

Findings from our review indicate that while “Ban-the-Box” initiatives represent an initial step toward fairer employment practices, they fail to address the underlying systemic barriers faced by FIIs and should be regarded as a temporary or transitional measure rather than a comprehensive solution to employment access. That is, “Ban-the-Box” may be useful for reducing premature exclusions at the applicant stage but is insufficient on its own to remove entrenched barriers (De La Haye et al., 2023). Evidence from our review suggests that meaningful and lasting change will require complementary reforms such as record-clearing processes that actually translate into opportunities, narrowing overly broad occupational licensing restrictions, and widespread adoption of using validated, job-related, and individualized selection procedures (Burch, 2022; Chien, 2020; Flake, 2019; Hickox, 2016; Hickox & Roehling, 2013; Kimpel, 2022).

As recommended by Blessett and Pryor (2013), FIIs “should be evaluated on an *individual* basis based on the type of job, skills needed, type of crime committed, and personal background” (p. 446, emphasis added). Research covered in our review suggests a clear path forward, including using structured, individualized assessment protocols where clear linkages between specific offenses and specific job duties are documented, and relevant contexts are explicitly considered, including the nature/gravity of the offense, time elapsed, and rehabilitation evidence (Blessett & Pryor, 2013; Hickox & Roehling, 2013). Using targeted, job-related initial screens to evaluate risk rather than blanket exclusions can keep more FIIs eligible at each stage of the selection process (e.g., not considering theft-related convictions if unsupervised money handling is not a job duty). Moreover, selection procedures should be validated against actual job performance. Recent evidence, for example, shows that workers with criminal records are not systematically worse performers and that assumptions about FIIs often overstate the risk (Burch, 2022; Chien, 2020). Furthermore, training decision makers and providing consistent communication can keep job pathways open. For example, providing hiring managers with scenario-based training on offense-job relevance and communicating the organization’s fair-chance philosophy can maintain consistency and reduce idiosyncratic gatekeeping (Flake, 2019; Kimpel, 2022). Thus, we argue that a shift toward holistic, individualized assessment practices may provide a more equitable and evidence-based framework for facilitating the successful workforce reintegration of FIIs.

Selection recommendations: 1) Replace blanket criminal-record exclusions with narrow, job-related offense-task linkages that document business necessity; 2) Conduct structured, individualized assessments that weigh the nature of offense, recency, and rehabilitation evidence alongside the job context; 3) Validate every selection tool and keep documentation to demonstrate predictive validity; 4) Offer plain-language hiring tests and extra

time or retakes to accommodate lower than average literacy and numeracy levels among FIIs; 5) Train hiring managers on fair-chance protocols, offense-job relevance, and consistent communication with job applicants; 6) Leverage asynchronous video interviewers to widen geographic reach and cut applicant costs.

Onboarding FIIs

The process of new employee socialization, commonly referred to as onboarding, is a critical phase for both organizations and organizational newcomers, facilitating their integration into the workplace (Bauer et al., 2007; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Effective newcomer adjustment involves navigating both task-related and social transitions, leading to increased role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance within the organization (Bauer et al., 2007). However, research suggests that the socialization process can be particularly challenging for employees who belong to stigmatized groups, such as FIIs, who may encounter additional barriers such as unrealistic expectations, social avoidance, and low expectations from coworkers and workgroups (Colella, 1994; Hurst et al., 2012).

As FIIs reintegrate into the workforce, they often undergo the complex process of reconstructing their identities, not only as employees but also as contributing members of society. Research has found that employment plays a fundamental role in shaping this sense of identity, purpose, and belonging through routine behaviors and social interactions in the workplace (Brehmer & Strauser, 2023; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Luyckx et al., 2008; Morash et al., 2020; Uggen, 2000; Uggen & Staff, 2001; Visher et al., 2005). Eimicke and Cohen (2002) point out that prolonged immersion in correctional settings, which are markedly different from those of most civilian workplaces, can result in FIIs losing touch with or having to relearn the expectations of the modern workplace. Haney (2006), for example, notes that FIIs may experience difficulties in adapting to the social dimensions of the workplace, exhibit anxiety in

social interactions, or struggle with the ambiguity and autonomy typical of many work environments. Moreover, the structured routines of correctional facilities may provide a sense of stability that some FIIs find lacking in less structure work settings, leading to feelings of discomfort and unease (Haney, 2006). Paradoxically, research by Shivy et al. (2007) suggests that the coping mechanisms developed to adjust to incarceration may, in fact, serve as predictors of greater difficulty during the re-entry process.

Our review identified peer mentoring as an effective mechanism for FIIs to develop a renewed sense of identity and facilitate their reintegration into the workforce (Kavanagh & Borril, 2013; LePage et al., 2024; Nixon, 2020; Webster, 2013). Mentoring within organizational contexts has been linked to a broad spectrum of positive outcomes, including improvements in attitudes, behaviors, motivation, and career advancement (Eby et al., 2008, Eby et al., 2013). Within the criminal justice system, peer mentoring programs leverage the lived experiences of FIIs by positioning them as mentors to others with similar backgrounds, with the objective of reducing recidivism and fostering successful reintegration (Nixon, 2020). Research has found that participation in peer mentoring initiatives enables FIIs to cultivate meaningful social bonds, fostering a sense of mutual reliance, support, and validation (Nixon, 2020; Webster, 2013). Moreover, FIIs serving as a mentor enhances the mentor's own sense of self-worth and purpose, as they utilize their experiences to guide and support others (Nixon, 2020), and evidence suggests that mentoring roles in organizations are positively associated with increased job satisfaction and improved job performance (Eby et al., 2006). Findings from our review suggest that organizations seeking to support the employment and retention of FIIs may consider partnering with local criminal justice organizations to establish mentoring opportunities within the community. Additionally, employers with a substantial number of FII hires may benefit from

developing internal peer mentoring programs to facilitate onboarding and socialization, thereby enhancing the adjustment process and promoting long-term employment success.

Onboarding recommendations: 1) Assign each new FII a peer mentor, preferably someone with lived experience, to accelerate socialization and rebuild identity; 2) Provide a structured, trauma-informed orientation that clarifies workplace norms and reduces anxiety linked to post-incarceration stress triggers; 3) Establish internal or community peer-mentoring programs to sustain support and sense of belonging beyond the first weeks.

Development of FIIs

Despite an extensive body of literature examining the hiring of FIIs, there remains a notable paucity of research addressing work-related outcomes beyond the initial hiring phase (Baur et al., 2018; Giguere & Dundes, 2002; Pager, 2003). FIIs enter the workforce at a significant disadvantage due to limited access to vocational training opportunities during incarceration (Kenemore & Roldan, 2006; Pager & Quillian, 2005) and systemic barriers that restrict their participation in education programs post-release (Couloute, 2018).

A review of the FII employment literature by Baur et al. (2018) suggests that the persistent stigma associated with a criminal record can negatively impact FIIs' job performance, further diminishing their opportunities for professional development and career advancement. Additionally, research suggests that individuals belonging to stigmatized groups are frequently provided with lower-quality training (Shapiro et al., 2007), and prevailing negative stereotypes surrounding FIIs may result in managerial biases that hinder their access to training programs and career development opportunities (Baur et al., 2018; Friese et al., 2020). This lack of access to training and development can, in turn, limit opportunities for promotions and challenging work assignments (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Furthermore, research suggests that FIIs may encounter social exclusion and discrimination from coworkers, which can further impede their

career progression (Link & Phelan, 2001; Stone & Colella, 1996). Workplace stigmatization may result in FIIs being overlooked for leadership roles, team-based opportunities, and advancement prospects, particularly in organizational contexts that rely on peer evaluations or nominations for promotion decisions.

The professional and leadership development of FIIs within the workforce remains an underexplored area in both academic literature and organizational practice (Fox et al., 2023; Grosholz et al., 2024; Lindsay, 2022). However, emerging evidence suggests that FIIs can excel in professional environments when provided with appropriate support and opportunities for advancement. As mentioned previously, a study conducted at Dave's Killer Bread revealed that formerly incarcerated employees outperformed their non-justice involved counterparts across three key performance categories and achieved promotions at a faster rate (Swindler, 2017). Similarly, research by Minor et al. (2018) examining call center employees found that FIIs demonstrated greater job tenure and lower turnover rates compared to employees without a history of incarceration. These findings indicate that, within organizations that actively support the employment and development of FIIs, they can not only succeed but also contribute meaningfully to organizational performance.

Development recommendations: 1) Guarantee FIIs equitable access to skills training and high-quality developmental assignments to offset prior educational gaps and stigma; 2) Train supervisors to recognize and counteract bias so FIIs are considered for promotions and leadership roles; 3) Monitor internal advancement metrics for FIIs and showcase success stories that demonstrate their performance and potential.

Retention of FIIs

FIIs face significant challenges not only in securing employment but also in maintaining long-term job stability (Eren & Owens, 2024; Holzer et al., 2003; Kolbeck, 2022; Petersilia,

2003). Once employed, FIIs are often subjected to persistent stigmatization and discrimination from both coworkers and supervisors, which can hinder their professional integration and development (Baur et al., 2018). In organizational environments characterized by a culture of “work siloing,” where employees are segregated based on perceived differences, FIIs may experience heightened stress, feelings of stigmatization, distrust, unworthiness, and social isolation (Holton et al., 2006).

Despite prevailing negative stereotypes, empirical evidence indicates that FIIs are no more likely to leave a job due to performance-related issues or misconduct compared to their non-justice-involved counterparts (Goodstein, 2019; Lundquist et al., 2018). In fact, FIIs often exhibit higher job retention rates, remaining in their positions longer than other employees (Minor et al., 2018). However, disparities in job quality and work arrangements contribute to challenges in sustaining employment, as employers frequently conflate FII turnover concerns with the precarious nature of the unstable and unpredictable work conditions (De La Haye et al., 2023). Notably, research suggests that higher wages alone do not predict job stability for FIIs (Cox, 2016), supporting findings that FIIs prioritize meaningful and stable employment opportunities over solely financial incentives (Ramakers et al., 2017). These findings align with Doleac’s (2018) assertion that “access to *good* jobs, not just any jobs, reduces recidivism” (p. 15, emphasis in original), highlighting the critical need for policies and initiatives that facilitate access to sustainable and fulfilling employment opportunities for FIIs.

Moreover, Atherton and Buck (2021) found that the employment of FIIs can foster social and personal connections within the workplace while enhancing empathy among colleagues. The integration of FIIs into organizational settings has been shown to reduce stigma and alleviate fears associated with employing FIIs (Atherton & Buck 2021). This aligns with the stigma reduction hypothesis, which posits that organizations with prior experience in hiring FIIs are

more likely to continue such practices in the future. Moreover, evidence indicates that the presences of hiring managers with personal incarceration experience significantly increases the likelihood of hiring FIIs, as they may possess a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by this population and advocate for their employment (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013).

Once employed, FIIs are frequently characterized as demonstrating strong work ethic, gratitude, and adding value to their organizations (Lutman et al., 2015). Furthermore, research by Goodstein and Petrich (2019) found that the successful hiring and retention of FIIs not only enhances organizational culture but also reinforces the organization's commitment to social responsibility. Taken together, our review suggests that the presence of FIIs in the workforce is associated with many broader positive societal impacts, including strengthened community relations and contributions to economic reintegration efforts.

Retention recommendations: 1) Place FIIs in stable, meaningful jobs to lower turnover and recidivism; 2) Cultivate an inclusive culture that reduces stigma and builds empathy among coworkers and organizational leaders; 3) Provide ongoing development and supportive supervision, recognizing evidence that FIIs often stay longer when working conditions are fair and equitable.

Discussion

Our review presented a comprehensive, multidisciplinary analysis of the FII employment literature, emphasizing the structural, social, and organizational barriers that hinder their workforce reintegration. Consistent with our integrative aim, our findings demonstrate how translating research from adjacent fields can help to sharpen vocational behavior models of reintegration. We put forward a multilevel framework of five key phases within the employment life cycle (recruitment, selection, onboarding, development, and retention), and we synthesized research findings across various disciplines within the framework. In doing so, we offered

several evidence-based recommendations to support successful FII workforce reintegration at each phase of the employment life cycle. Our findings highlighted the profound impact of social stigmatization, lack of vocational training opportunities, and systematic disconnects between correctional institutions and labor market needs.

The review also highlighted the need for a holistic, systems-level approach that integrates pre-release job training, post-release support, and employer partnerships to facilitate sustainable employment outcomes. Additionally, our findings emphasized the role of social networks in aiding job placement and retention, as well as the importance of employer education and policy initiatives aimed at reducing bias and enhancing workplace inclusivity. Below, we discuss three key systems-level themes that emerged from our review, as well as associated potential future research directions and practical recommendations.

Emergent Themes: Advancing Theory, Research, and Practice on the Employment of FIIs

Our review identified several systems-level challenges that span all phases of the employment life cycle, offering critical considerations for vocational behavior researchers and practitioners seeking to integrate FII employment research from diverse disciplinary perspectives. The findings emphasize that addressing the employment challenges faced by FIIs cannot be solely the responsibility of correctional systems, nor can the burden be placed entirely on the economically disadvantaged communities to which many FIIs return post-incarceration. Similarly, employers cannot be expected to resolve the FII employment gap in isolation; rather, successful reintegration into the workforce necessitates robust collaboration among correctional institutions, local communities, and employers. Addressing such multifaceted, systems-level challenges requires comprehensive systems-level interventions.

Before turning to the three systems-level themes highlighted below, we note that the

fourth domain represented in Figure 2, stigmatization, bias, and discrimination toward people with criminal records, has been extensively documented in prior work (e.g., Holzer et al., 2003; Jacobs, 2015; Pager, 2003; Travis et al., 2014; Visser & Travis, 2011; Western, 2006). Rather than re-review this vast literature, we instead build on its central conclusion, that criminal-record stigma remains a pervasive structural barrier, by focusing on three emerging cross-level responses intended to mitigate or work through the stigma.

Therefore, to advance future research and practice in this area, we present three key systems-level themes that emerged from our review. Specifically, we explore (a) the role of pre-hire training programs and educational opportunities in preparing FIIs for workforce reentry, (b) the significance of social networks in facilitating employment opportunities and workplace reintegration, and (c) the potential of strategic organizational partnerships with correctional systems to bridge existing gaps in employment support and access. These themes provide a conceptual frame for future scholarly inquiry and the development of evidence-based interventions aimed at enhancing the employment outcomes of FIIs.

Pre-Employment Training Initiatives and Educational Interventions

Facilitating employment opportunities for FIIs is widely recognized as one of the most effective strategies for reducing recidivism (Goodstein & Petrich, 2019). However, the capacity of correctional facilities to adequately prepare FIIs for employment remains limited, with educational and vocational training opportunities often restricted to the attainment of a general equivalency diploma (GED) (Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Ross et al., 2011). Furthermore, the availability of prison libraries, an important resource linked to improved post-release employment outcomes, has declined significantly in recent decades despite evidence supporting their positive impact (Zaki, 2019). Indeed, the absence of robust vocational training programs within many correctional institutions, coupled with the widespread reduction of prison-based

higher education programs (Richards et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2006; Rose et al., 2005) places the burden of pursuing further education primarily on the initiative of the relatively few FIIs who aspire to obtain undergraduate or graduate degrees (Ross et al., 2011). Even for those motivated to pursue educational and vocational advancement, access is frequently hindered by vague and inconsistently applied institutional policies. Although the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) expanded educational programs by 35% between 2022 and 2023, significant access barriers persist, with over 28,500 incarcerated individuals currently on waitlists for literacy programs alone (Nellis & Komar, 2023). These challenges underscore the persistent structural limitations within correctional systems that hinder the development of human capital and the successful reintegration of FIIs into the workforce.

Moreover, existing research on in-prison job training programs has yielded mixed and often inconclusive findings regarding their effectiveness in improving employment outcomes and reducing recidivism among FIIs (Baloch & Jennings, 2018; Bozick et al., 2018; Bushway & Reuter 1997; Farabee et al., 2014; Flatt & Jacobs, 2018; Gaes et al. 1999; Wilson et al. 1999, 2000). These inconsistent results suggest that the relationship between job training and recidivism is multifaceted and influenced by a range of moderating and mediating factors that require further systematic investigation.

A critical limitation of existing vocational programming within correctional settings is its primary focus on skill acquisition and job search strategies rather than comprehensive career development. Vernick and Reardon (2001) argue that these programs often lack components that facilitate meaningful career exploration, such as fostering awareness of career interests, values, and abilities. As a result, FIIs may enter the workforce in roles for which they are inadequately prepared or that do not align with their long-term career goals, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction and early turnover (Shivy et al., 2007).

Further complicating this issue, labor market conditions at the time of release play a crucial role in shaping employment outcomes (Eren & Owens, 2024; Laine et al., 2025). Buck (2000) posits that during periods of economic growth, employer interest in hiring FIIs tends to increase, as businesses seek to fill labor shortages. However, this trend may place FIIs in precarious employment positions, making them more vulnerable to job loss during economic downturns due to insufficient job preparation and suboptimal organizational fit. Supporting this perspective, studies by Yang (2017) and Schnepel (2018) indicate that FIIs are less likely to reoffend when released into a strong low-skilled labor market, highlighting the potential confounding influence of economic conditions on the perceived effectiveness of in-prison job training programs.

Several large-scale federally funded education and training initiatives have been implemented with the objective of facilitating gainful employment for FIIs; however, evaluations of these programs have yielded mixed and largely disappointing outcomes (Atkin-Plunk, 2024; Bushway & Reuter, 2002; Connell et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2015; LePage et al., 2024; Uggen et al., 2002). A meta-analysis of eight employment intervention programs found no statistically significant effect on the likelihood of rearrest among FIIs (Visher et al., 2005). Scholars have suggested that the limited effectiveness of these programs may be attributed to their broad, one-size-fits-all approach, which often fails to address the individualized needs of FIIs or to integrate services that support holistic reintegration efforts (Baldry et al., 2018). Consequently, a more targeted and individualized approach to post-incarceration employment support, one that aligns with the specific skills, aspirations, and challenges of FIIs, may prove to be a more effective strategy for federal, state, and local initiatives aimed at improving employment outcomes and reducing recidivism.

The Critical Influence of Social Capital and Interpersonal Networks

FIIIs often experience exclusion from essential social networks that could facilitate their reintegration into the labor market (Granovetter, 1973; Graffam et al., 2004; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Rhodes, 2008; Western et al., 2001). Incarceration disrupts pre-existing social ties, and upon release, many FIIIs face considerable challenges in re-establishing connections that are critical for securing employment. Furthermore, parole conditions frequently impose restrictions on interactions with other FIIIs, effectively limiting access to a potentially valuable peer support network during the job search process (Harding, 2003).

Empirical evidence indicates that FIIIs rely heavily on family members for housing, financial assistance, and emotional support in the initial months following release (Braman, 2004; Curtis et al., 2021; Fahmy et al., 2022; Travis, 2005). Social connections through friends and family members have been identified as crucial pathways to employment, with studies reporting that over half (57%) of FIIIs secure employment through these networks (Niven & Stewart, 2005; Visser & Courtney, 2007; Visser et al., 2011). These findings highlight the critical role of social capital in mitigating the employment challenges associated with a criminal record

For those FIIIs who successfully obtain employment, social networks serve as an important mechanism for overcoming the stigma association with incarceration (Blessett & Pryor, 2013). Moreover, Doleac (2018) hypothesized that better labor markets reduce recidivism by improving the financial stability of FIIIs's social networks, thereby enhancing their capacity to provide support during reintegration. However, navigating the complex system of social networks, including interactions with probation officers, social workers, and employment service providers, remains a challenging yet essential component of the reentry process (Shivy et al., 2007).

Forging Strategic Alliances with Regional Correctional Institutions

The successful implementation of employment initiatives for FIIs requires comprehensive education, training, and resource provision from the correctional system to support workforce reintegration efforts (Shivy et al., 2007). A review of re-entry employment programs by Buck (2000) emphasizes that for re-entry programs to be effective, they must establish a distinct identity separate from the broader correctional system, as FIIs often exhibit distrust toward institutional structures associated with the incarceration experiences.

Re-entry employment programs are particularly beneficial to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which may lack the resources and formalized human resource functions necessary to support the hiring and retention of FIIs (Buck, 2000). Despite their potential advantages, many re-entry programs are implemented in isolation, often serving as singular initiatives within a large geographic area. This geographic dispersion can contribute to a sense of isolation and frustration among participating FIIs, who may lack access to a broader support network and employment opportunities (Buck, 2000).

Findings from our review suggest that re-entry programs are unlikely to significantly enhance employment outcomes for FIIs if employment-related services are offered solely after release from incarceration (Cook et al., 2015; Dewey et al., 2020; DiLoreto et al., 2017; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). Effective reintegration requires a seamless continuum of “wraparound” services that begin during incarceration and extend into the post-release period. Research has emphasized the critical need for pre-release employment services, including job search, interview skills training, and career planning, as well as the provision of essential employment documentation, such as educational and vocational certifications and standardized test and assessment results from prison-based training programs. (Baldry et al., 2018; Buck, 2000, Cook et al., 2015).

A potential strategy to facilitate this process is the implementation of a portfolio-based approach within correctional systems. This approach would involve systematically compiling each FII's employment-relevant documentation, such as certifications, assessment scores, and records of course completions, prior to release. Making such information accessible to potential employers through job boards and recruitment platforms could enhance the employability of FIIs by providing verified credentials and facilitating a smoother transition into the labor market. Establishing such integrated and proactive measures within correctional settings may improve FII employment outcomes and contribute to long-term workforce reintegration.

Additional Future Research Avenues

In addition to the future research opportunities relevant to each of the themes discussed above, our multidisciplinary integrative review also highlights numerous understudied and unanswered research areas pertinent to the employment of FIIs, offering several testable propositions for future inquiry. For instance, a critical avenue for longitudinal research is the identification of factors that contribute to the successful long-term employment of FIIs (Visser & Courtney, 2007; Visser et al., 2011). Specifically, it is essential to examine whether individual differences, such as personality traits, resilience, or prior work experience, predict variations in employment outcomes among FIIs. Furthermore, the organizational characteristics that facilitate the effective recruitment and retention of FIIs warrant systematic investigation (Goodstein & Petrich, 2019). Future research could explore whether organizational culture, leadership support, and diversity and inclusion policies serve as critical determinants of FII hiring success. Additionally, situational and environmental factors such as labor market conditions, industry-specific hiring practices, and local community support, should be analyzed to determine their influence on FII employment outcomes (Buck, 2000; Yang, 2017; Schnepel, 2018).

Another important area of investigation involves the job search strategies utilized by FIIs in their pursuit of meaningful employment (Shivy et al., 2007). Research could empirically examine the effectiveness of various job search techniques, such as networking, online applications, and vocational training programs, in relation to employment success. From an organizational perspective, it is important to define and measure hiring success, exploring whether it is characterized by retention rates, performance outcomes, or social integration within the workplace. Given our findings of the importance of social networks in employment outcomes (Niven & Stewart, 2005; Visser & Courtney, 2007), future studies should assess the structural and functional characteristics of strong versus weak FII social networks. Employing social network analysis methodologies could provide valuable insights into the key attributes of robust social connections and their potential role in enhancing employment opportunities for FIIs (Blessett & Pryor, 2013; Doleac, 2018). Addressing these research gaps will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dynamics influencing FII workforce reintegration.

From a corrections standpoint, our review identified several critical areas for future research that warrant systematic investigation. One key area of inquiry involves examining the characteristics of successful transitional employment programs within correctional facilities, with success operationalized through the placement of FIIs into meaningful, long-term employment roles post-release (Cook et al., 2015; Petersilia, 2003). Specifically, future research could explore the extent to which program design features, such as curriculum content, industry alignment, and duration, contribute to employment outcomes. Furthermore, an important avenue for future investigation is the perceptions and reactions of FIIs who have completed these programs, with a focus on how their subjective experiences correlate with key learning and behavioral work

outcomes, including skill acquisition, job readiness, and workplace adaptability (Baldry et al., 2018).

Additionally, research should seek to identify the essential elements that define effective transitional employment programs and examine the scalability of these components to reach a larger population of FIIs (Buck, 2000; Cook et al., 2015). Empirical studies could test whether program features such as individualized career counseling, employer partnerships, and ongoing post-release support are critical determinants of long-term employment success. Furthermore, understanding the contextual factors that influence program scalability, such as resource allocation, institutional support, and policy frameworks, could provide valuable insights into the broader applicability and impact of these initiatives. Addressing these questions through rigorous empirical research will contribute to the development of evidence-based correctional policies and interventions aimed at enhancing the employment prospects of FIIs.

Our review also identifies several critical areas for future research that can inform organizational strategies for the successful employment and integration of FIIs. One key research direction involves examining the characteristics of organizations that are amenable to hiring FIIs, with testable propositions exploring how these organizations differ in terms of policies, procedures, and organizational culture compared to those that do not explicitly engage in FII hiring practices (Atkinson & Armstrong, 2013; Goodstein & Petrich, 2019). Understanding the specific structural and cultural factors, such as diversity and inclusion initiatives, leadership commitment, and corporate social responsibility policies, that facilitate FII employment could provide actionable insights for broader implementation across various industries.

Additionally, further research is needed to identify the attributes of effective managers of FIIs and how managerial competencies, such as empathy, communication skills, and supportive leadership behaviors, influence FII job satisfaction, performance, and retention. Another

important area of investigation involves determining which recruitment messages are most effective in attracting FIIs and how organizations can design recruitment strategies that align with their unique needs and career aspirations. Empirical research could also explore how FIIs' job attitudes, such as job satisfaction, commitment, and engagement, compare to those of non-FII employee populations, as well as the extent to which FIIs demonstrate job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors relative to their non-FII peers (Shivy et al., 2007). These inquiries will provide a deeper understanding of how organizations can create inclusive employment pathways and foster long-term success for FIIs within the workforce.

Additional Practical Implications

In addition to the recommendations that followed from our review of each of the employment phases, our comprehensive review of decades of research revealed that despite their well-intentioned objectives, federally and state-funded programs aimed at improving employment outcomes for FIIs have largely failed to produce meaningful and sustainable results. In some cases, these initiatives have been found to be counterproductive, potentially exacerbating the very challenges they aim to address. Existing evaluations suggest that such programs often attempt to address multiple complex issues simultaneously, ultimately diluting their impact and failing to effectively serve the targeted population (Doleac, 2018). A critical limitation of these programs is their lack of integration with the communities they are intended to support, as they frequently operate with minimal engagement or buy-in from local organizations that have the potential to employ FIIs. As a result, their effectiveness in facilitating successful workforce reintegration remains limited.

To address these shortcomings, the development of strategic public-private partnerships between correctional systems, private sector businesses, and community-based nonprofit organizations presents a promising pathway for closing the FII employment gap while fostering

stronger, more resilient communities (Cole, 2022; Duran et al., 2013). Such partnerships can facilitate the reintegration of FIIs by aligning workforce training efforts with industry demands, ensuring that individuals are equipped with relevant skills and certifications that meet employer needs (Duran et al., 2013). Our review underscores the need for a paradigm shift in justice system policies, emphasizing collaboration with local communities and potential employers to support the transition of the 95% of incarcerated individuals who will eventually return to society. Given that employment is a key determinant of recidivism reduction, a concerted effort to prioritize meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities must become a central focus of the justice system. As Phelps (2018) eloquently articulates, “a justice system which reorientates in this direction (in partnership with employers) has the potential to bring real improvements to the lives of families in distressed communities, where criminal justice has been far too extensive and repressive” (cited in McNeill, 2019, p. 173).

The research we reviewed also suggests that educational interventions alone are insufficient in altering employer attitudes toward hiring FIIs (Batastini et al., 2017). A fundamental transformation in organizational mindsets and workplace cultures is essential to fostering greater acceptance and inclusion of FIIs. As highlighted by Goodstein and Petrich (2019), cultivating a workplace culture of inclusion can mitigate the effects of stigma, promote social acceptance, and enhance the long-term success of FIIs within organizations. However, initiating this cultural shift presents a significant challenge, yet it is a critical first step in achieving sustainable change. Evidence from our review indicates that organizations are more inclined to hire FIIs when they have prior experience employing at least one formerly incarcerated individual (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013), suggesting that demonstrating successful FII integration may serve as a catalyst for broader organizational change.

Conclusion

The employment of FIIs is not merely an economic imperative but a moral and social responsibility that requires the collective effort of policymakers, employers, and communities. This review highlights the critical need to move research beyond well-intentioned but fragmented programs and adopt holistic, evidence-based strategies that support the entire employment life cycle, from recruitment to retention. Employment is more than just a job for FIIs; it is a pathway to stability, dignity, and reintegration into society. By embracing inclusive hiring practices, fostering supportive workplace cultures, and forming meaningful partnerships between correctional systems, businesses, and community organizations, we can create sustainable opportunities that benefit not only FIIs but also their families, communities, and the broader economy.

A future where second chances are a reality for all individuals leaving the justice system is within reach, but it requires commitment, innovation, and a willingness to challenge deeply ingrained stigmas. Employers who take the initiative to hire FIIs are not just filling vacancies, they are investing in people, strengthening communities, and helping to break cycles of incarceration. As our review suggests, the time for action is now. By providing the right support, resources, and opportunities, society can harness the potential of FIIs and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable workforce.

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Table 1Summary of Employment Challenges Faced by Formerly Incarcerated Individuals at Each Phase of the Employment Life Cycle

Employment Phase	Employment Challenge
Recruitment	Lack of commitment to hiring FIIs (Goodstein & Petrich, 2019)
	Difficulty finding organizations willing to hire FIIs (Visher et al., 2005)
	Lack of a job ready FII workforce (Ross et al., 2011)
Selection	Lack of reliable transportation (Visher et al., 2005)
	Lack of appropriate interview attire (Benecchi, 2021)
	Difficulty scheduling and attending in-person job interviews (Visher et al., 2005)
	Higher likelihood of scoring lower on typical employment selection assessments (Baldry et al., 2018)
Onboarding	Lack of cell phone access and knowledge of use (Brodsky, 2020)
	Lack of access to reliable nutritious food (Shivy et al., 2007)
	Lack of social networks (Rhodes, 2008)
	Lack of social identity (Kavanagh & Borril, 2013)
Development	Lack of skill development or opportunities to display skills (Baur et al., 2018)
	Manager and coworker stereotypes of FIIs (Baur et al., 2018)
	Stigmatization of FIIs (Baur et al., 2018)
Retention	Lack of funds to pay for expenses/outstanding debts (Wang & Bertram, 2022)
	Increased likelihood of PTSD symptoms that impact work behavior (Liem & Kunst, 2013)

FIIIs in positions that are not inherently meaningful to them (Ramakers et al., 2017)

Note. Some employment barriers may be faced at multiple points in the employment process (e.g., lack of transportation). Here, for ease of presentation, we have included the barrier in the phase that is most relevant to that barrier.

Table 2Summary of Critical Systemic Influences at Each Level of the Integrative Systems Framework

Level	Recruitment	Selection	Onboarding	Development	Retention
Policy/Societal	Ban-the-Box	Background check regulation	Subsidized wage programs	Training subsidies	Tax credits for retention
	Funding for reentry placement	Negligent hiring liability		Licensing reform	Record sealing/expungement
Community/Intermediary	Job skill development	Referral vetting	Case management	Up-skilling programs	Wraparound supports
	Job fairs	Employer matching	Transportation	Mentoring	Recidivism reduction services
Organizational/Employer	Second-chance recruiting strategy	Individualized assessment	Structured onboarding	Career ladders	Inclusive climate
		HR policy	Parole accommodation	Tuition/credential support	Performance feedback
Interpersonal/Social	Family encouragement	Advocacy by insiders	Supervisor support	Sponsorship	Advancement Social belonging
	Prosocial peers		Coworker acceptance	Networks for advancement	Peer retention groups
Individual (FII)	Readiness	Disclosure strategy	Role clarity	Skill acquisition	Career goals
	Credentials	Stigma management	Basic needs stability	Identity development	Job satisfaction

Table 3Illustrative FII Recruitment Initiatives in Practice

Initiative/Location	Lead Organizations/Partners	Core Services/Supports	Employer Engagement Mechanism	Reported Outcomes
Community “Second Chance” Hiring Fairs (e.g., Houston, TX; Compton, CA; Birmingham & Huntsville, AL)	Local workforce and community coalitions	Centralized events connecting FIIs to multiple employers	Employers publicly signal inclusive hiring	Increase awareness of opportunities
	Participating employers	On-site applications and information	Direct recruiter-candidate interaction reduces screening frictions	Lowers access barriers by bringing employers together in one place
Cara (Chicago, IL)	Cara Collective (workforce development nonprofit)	Job readiness, placement, up to 12 months post-placement coaching	Long-term wraparound partnership with employers hiring program graduates	Sustained employment focus beyond placement
		Career advancement		Supports those with limited community ties
		Alumni network		
Hoosier Initiative for Re-Entry (HIRE) (Indiana)	Indiana Department of Workforce Development and Indiana Department of Corrections	Job placement	State-agency–brokered connections to over 3,000 businesses since 2012	Over 15,000 placements
		Housing, clothing, and transportation supports		Approximately 14% recidivism (below the state average)
		1-year post-placement mentoring		Wages up over 40% since program inception
Momentum Urban Employment Solutions (Michigan)	Office of Community Corrections and local partners	Community mentors throughout search, hire, and early employment	Mentor-bridged introductions to employers	Designed to support high-barrier FIIs

		Wraparound supports	Sustained follow-up	Community linkage emphasis
Milwaukee JobsWork (Wisconsin)	JobsWork Milwaukee (nonprofit)	Workforce and entrepreneurial training (business planning, accounting) FII participation approximately 33%	Employer placements plus self-employment pathways	Builds economic self-sufficiency via small-business skills
JPMorgan Chase Community Pilot (multi-site; launched 2019)	JPMorgan Chase and local community organizations	Co-designed talent pipelines Recruiter collaboration with community intermediaries	Corporate recruiters source with trusted local partners	Emphasis on local co-design to fit community needs
Walmart Community Pilots (select markets)	Walmart and community-based nonprofits	Interview preparation, application assistance, and skill development tailored to FIIs	Retail hiring pipelines built with nonprofit referrals and candidate supports	Scalable corporate-community partnership model
Dave's Killer Bread - Second Chance Project (Oregon)	Dave's Killer Bread	Hire, develop, and promote FIIs Supportive culture	Direct company hiring Internal development pathways	1 in 3 employees with records 3-year review showed fewer policy/attendance/behavior violations among employees with records versus those without
SHRM - Getting Talent Back to Work Initiative (national)	Society for Human Resource Management	Employer pledge campaign HR guidance	Mobilizes HR professionals to adopt inclusive hiring	HR willingness to hire people with records rose from 37% (2018) to 53% (2021)

		Certification (“Building Better Opportunities for People with Criminal Records”)		
Reentry 2030 - Alabama Workforce Reintegration (Alabama)	Bipartisan state coalition: policymakers, higher education, nonprofits, business (including Alabama Power, Waste Management, BSHRM)	Workforce development Second-chance hiring fairs Perception change campaigns	State-level public-private strategy aligns employers with reentry goals	Goal: cut recidivism 50% Approximately 300,000 residents with convictions Framing FII employment as an economic development strategy

Note. Initiatives are summarized in CSG Justice Center Staff (2018), Engel (2018), Hackbarth (2021), Office of Community Corrections: Momentum Urban Employment Initiative (2025), Society for Human Resource Management (2021), and Wallerstein & Taylor (2024).

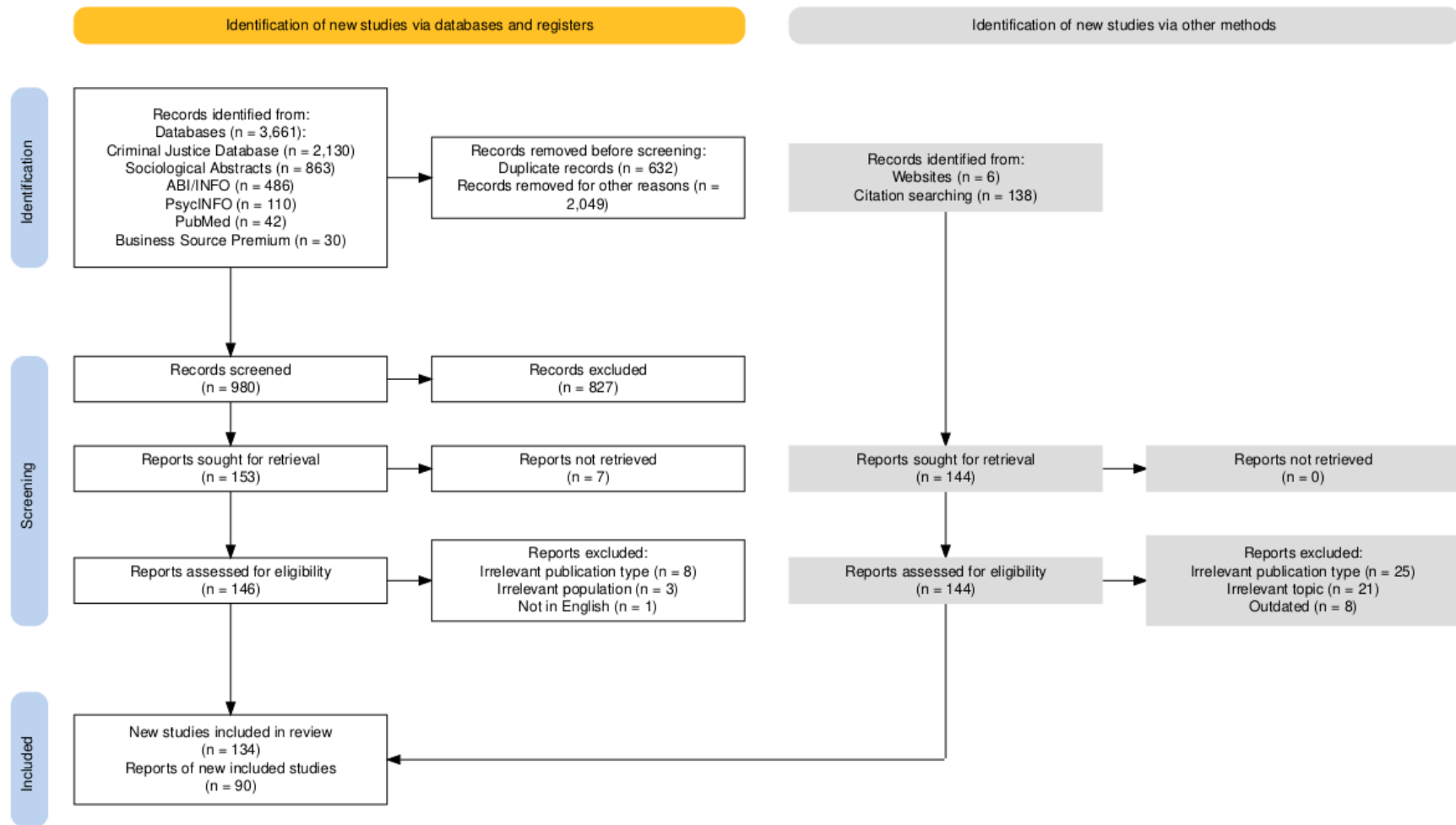
Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Chart

Figure 2. Integrative Systems Framework of the Employment Life Cycle of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals