

## Article 33: Human Development and Adult Incarceration and Adult Incarceration Re-entry Programs

**Adult incarceration** often creates a cycle of recidivism, given that the high barriers to employment and housing after release can lead to repeat offenses (Muller & Roehrkasse, 2025; Smith, 2018; Yin, 2024). Therefore, **adult incarceration re-entry programs** act as a critical bridge, offering essential services like job training and mental health care to help individuals navigate these post-release challenges. Research suggests that when these programs are successfully implemented, they can reduce re-offending rates by a large margin (Reichert et al., 2025; Redcross et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2025). Ultimately, effective re-entry support transforms incarceration from a difficult life constraint into a genuine opportunity for long-term community reintegration.

### Causes and Scope of Adult Incarceration in the United States

The United States locks up more adults than almost any other country—a trend driven by tough sentencing laws and limited social support systems. While the number of people in prison has shifted in recent years, the system remains massive and continues to impact certain communities much harder than others. Rather than just reflecting crime rates, this high level of adult incarceration is often the result of older policies that favor long-term punitive procedures. Ultimately, this crisis is fueled by a mix of deep-rooted socio-economic, educational, and systemic factors that shape who enters the justice system (Muller & Roehrkasse, 2025; Smith, 2018; Yin, 2024).

On that note, a study examined the causes and scope of adult incarceration in the United States, focusing on how structural inequalities shape who is most likely to be incarcerated. Using secondary, nationally representative data from 2022, the researcher analyzed information from U.S. sources such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the American Community Survey, and related public datasets. The data were collected through existing government surveys and institutional records. Particularly, the study explored how income inequality, race, family structure, and levels of policing and prison spending relate to incarceration rates and racial disparities. Findings showed that lower income and higher proportions of Black adults were strongly associated with higher incarceration rates, even when other factors were accounted for. Increased investment in policing was linked to higher incarceration, while prison spending showed mixed effects, sometimes reducing overall incarceration but worsening racial disparities. The results indicate that race remains a significant predictor of incarceration independent of income, pointing to systemic bias within the criminal justice system. Therefore, the researcher concluded that adult incarceration in the United States is driven largely by structural economic and racial inequalities. Furthermore, they argued that lasting reform must address these root causes rather than rely solely on sentencing changes or expanded policing (Yin, 2024).

Another study examined how racial and educational inequalities have shaped adult prison admissions in the United States from 1984 to 2019, focusing on long-term patterns in incarceration across major offense types. Following that lead, the researchers used long-run administrative data from national corrections reporting systems and population surveys to calculate prison admission rates by race and level of education. Particularly, the analysis centered on admissions for drug, violent, and property crimes, allowing them to assess how different offenses contribute to overall incarceration trends. The findings showed that racial disparities in prison admissions have declined over time, largely due to reductions in drug-related admissions that once drove much of the Black–White gap. At the same time,

educational inequality in prison admissions has increased substantially, with adults lacking a college education experiencing far higher incarceration rates than those with more education. This educational divide now exceeds racial inequality for several offense categories, especially violent crime. The results indicate that educational disadvantage has become a central factor shaping who is incarcerated, reflecting broader structural inequalities. The researchers concluded that while racial disparities remain significant, the scope of adult incarceration in the U.S. is increasingly driven by class and educational inequality, highlighting shifting structural causes behind prison admissions (Muller & Roehrkaase, 2025).

On a different note, a study examined the relationship between early contact with the U.S. criminal justice system—specifically, arrests and convictions before age 26—and outcomes that shape the broader scope of adult incarceration in the United States. The study used data from ongoing Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) along with a retrospective module added in 2014. Thus, the module asked respondents about their arrest and conviction histories, including offense types and sentencing experiences. Data were collected over decades through repeated interviews with the same individuals and supplemented with detailed retrospective reports on early criminal justice contact. The findings showed that arrests and convictions during childhood and early adulthood increased across birth cohorts, indicating an expanding reach of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, arrest rates were consistently higher among men than women and higher among Black men than White men, though increases occurred across all groups. The analysis also revealed a strong educational gradient, with lower educational attainment linked to higher arrest risk. Ultimately, early criminal justice contact was associated with lower employment, reduced earnings, and lower family income in adulthood, demonstrating lasting economic consequences. Hence, the researchers concluded that widespread early criminalization contributes to the causes and scope of adult incarceration, reinforcing socioeconomic inequality and shaping long-term life opportunities (or lack thereof) in the United States (Smith, 2018).

### **Effectiveness and Impact of Adult Incarceration Re-entry Programs**

Adult incarceration re-entry programs serve as a vital lifeline that helps formerly incarcerated adults overcome significant barriers, such as finding steady work and stable housing. Moreover, these programs break the cycle of repeated offenses and keep people out of the system through the delivery of essential resources like job training and counseling. When individuals receive these targeted forms of support, they are more likely to successfully transition back into their communities and stay out of prison permanently. Ultimately, adult incarceration re-entry programs turn the focus from punishment to progress, offering a proven way to reduce incarceration rates and help individuals improve their life trajectories (Reichert et al., 2025; Redcross et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2025).

For instance, a study examined the effectiveness of Missouri’s Community Re-entry Initiative (CRI) in reducing re-offending and long-term prison returns among adults on probation and parole. The researchers analyzed administrative data from the Missouri Department of Corrections universe file, tracking individuals for up to five years after program participation. These data were collected from official state correctional records and linked to information on the specific re-entry services individuals received. Furthermore, the study focused on services addressing employment, education, and essential needs such as housing and transportation. Findings showed that receiving essential services significantly reduced the likelihood of re-offending within the first year following supervision. Additionally, employment and education services were associated with fewer re-offenses among

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individuals on parole and lower rates of prison return among those on probation. The results indicate that re-entry support can meaningfully improve post-release outcomes when services align with participant needs. The researchers concluded that tailored, community-based re-entry programs can be effective in mitigating adult incarceration by reducing repeat offenses and supporting successful reintegration (Taylor et al., 2025).

Another study evaluated the impact of Illinois' Adult Transition Centers (ATCs)—a series of residential work-release programs designed to support adults transitioning from prison back into the community. Thus, the researchers used administrative correctional data from Illinois to examine post-release outcomes for individuals who participated in ATCs. Moreover, data were collected from official state records and subsequently analyzed to compare ATC participants with a similar group of non-participants. Individuals were tracked for up to five years to assess long-term effects on criminal justice involvement. The findings showed that ATC participation was associated with a 15.5% lower probability of rearrest compared to non-participants. The program also produced a substantial 36.9% reduction in the likelihood of reincarceration, indicating strong long-term benefits. These outcomes suggest that structured residential re-entry environments can reduce repeated incarceration. Therefore, the researchers concluded that combining employment opportunities with pre-release planning offers an effective alternative to traditional incarceration. Additionally, the study demonstrated that residential and work-focused re-entry programs can successfully mitigate adult incarceration by lowering recidivism rates and supporting stable reintegration into the community among incarcerated adults (Reichert et al., 2025).

Lastly, a study assessed the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), consisting of a re-entry program in New York City that provides immediate, paid transitional employment and supportive services to adults returning from prison. The researchers used administrative criminal justice records and program data to track participants' arrests, convictions, and returns to prison over a three-year follow-up period. Furthermore, the analysis focused on how access to stable employment after release influenced continued involvement with the criminal justice system. The findings showed that participation in the CEO program led to significant reductions in recidivism, especially among individuals at high risk of re-offending. More specifically, participants experienced 16% to 22% fewer new convictions and reincarcerations compared to those who did not receive services. These reductions were most evident during periods when participants were actively employed through the program. Overall, results indicate that immediate access to legal income and structured work helps reduce reliance on illegal activity. Therefore, the researchers concluded that employment-based re-entry programs are an effective tool for mitigating adult incarceration, demonstrating how stable economic opportunities can stop cycles of reoffending and support successful community reintegration (Redcross et al., 2012).

## References

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