

Correctional education continuity across incarceration and reentry: A narrative review of best practices

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Abstract

Each year, hundreds of thousands of people are released from prisons in the United States, and correctional education is widely used to support successful reentry and reduce recidivism. Although correctional education has been linked to positive outcomes, less is known about what happens to educational participation after release. Many studies examine outcomes such as recidivism and employment, but few examine whether individuals continue their education during reentry or the factors that affect continuity. This narrative review examined 20 studies published between 2005 and 2025. It used thematic narrative synthesis to identify best practices for sustaining educational engagement across the transition from incarceration to reentry and to locate gaps in continuity. The analysis identified four themes: program models, institutional and structural barriers, policy frameworks, and post-release outcomes. It found that postsecondary education was associated with lower recidivism, especially among individuals who completed their programs. Notwithstanding, facility transfers, funding instability, stigma, and financial barriers limited educational continuity. More policy and research attention is needed on the transition from prison to the community, particularly on the factors that support continued educational participation after release.

Keyword: Correctional Education; Education Continuity; Prisoner Reentry; Recidivism; Postsecondary Education; Prison

1. Introduction

The United States incarcerates more people than any other nation, and hundreds of thousands of individuals leave federal and state prisons every year (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). Re-entering society after incarceration is rarely straightforward. People returning from prison face high unemployment, housing instability, and limited access to the social supports that most take for granted (Couloute, 2018). Community-based support services can play an important role in reducing reentry challenges (Pinamang, 2026a). In such a context, recidivism remains a challenge, and addressing the social conditions associated with it remains a broader public policy concern in the United States (Pinamang, 2026b). Education is one of the most consistently studied responses to this problem. The incarcerated population in the United States is considerably less educated than the general public. In 2004, more than a third of state prison inmates had not completed high school, compared to 19 percent of the broader adult population (Davis et al., 2013). That educational deficit compounds every barrier people face after release because, without credentials, stable employment is harder to obtain. Without employment, the risk of returning to crime is higher. Employer recognition of correctional education remains important for post-release employment outcomes (Kumi et al., 2026). Formerly incarcerated people face an overall unemployment rate of around 27 percent, and those without a high school credential face rate far beyond that (Couloute, 2018).

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Research has established that correctional education can interrupt this cycle (Bozick et al., 2018). Despite this evidence, access to postsecondary correctional education in the United States has historically been fragile (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). When Congress revoked incarcerated students' eligibility for Pell Grants in 1994, postsecondary programs collapsed across the country. College course participation fell from 14% of the prison population in 1991 to 7% by 2004 (Oakford et al., 2019). Even with recent policy shifts, including the 2015 Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative and the eventual restoration of Pell Grant eligibility, access remains uneven and largely dependent on where an individual is incarcerated (Davis & Linton, 2021). Access to education during incarceration is only part of the challenge because even when people participate in prison education programs, many cannot continue their education after release (Visher & Travis, 2011). Many still want further education but face barriers such as stigma, which can make college admission and financial aid more difficult (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). As a result, educational attainment among formerly incarcerated people remains lower than that of the general population, even years after release, suggesting that reentry systems are failing to sustain the educational momentum that correctional programs generate (Couloute, 2018). This gap in continuity is the central problem this review addresses. Correctional education research has produced a strong evidence base on program effectiveness, but far less attention has been paid to how educational engagement can be sustained across the incarceration-to-reentry transition. This narrative review synthesizes existing literature on correctional education models in the United States, with specific attention to the factors that either support or undermine educational continuity across that transition.

2. Methods

2.1. Rationale for a Narrative Review

A narrative review was the appropriate approach since the literature on correctional education spans multiple disciplines, including criminal justice, adult education, public policy, and sociology. Studies within this field vary considerably in design, ranging from quantitative meta-analyses and quasi-experimental studies to qualitative accounts, institutional case studies, and policy reports. Narrative review permits the synthesis of evidence across heterogeneous study designs and allows for the interpretation of patterns and contradictions in the literature for contextual analysis (Ahmad, 2025).

2.2. Search Strategy

Search was conducted across three databases: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus, and Google Scholar. Google Scholar was included specifically to capture grey literature, policy reports, and institutional documents that peer-reviewed databases may not index but that are central to understanding correctional education policy and practice in the United States. Search terms combined concepts related to *correctional education*, *prison education*, *reentry*, *postsecondary education in prison*, *educational continuity*, *formerly incarcerated adults*, and *recidivism*.

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be included, a source had to be a peer-reviewed article, policy report, or grey literature document published in English between 2005 and 2025. The twenty-year period was chosen to capture recent literature relevant to current policy and practice. Sources had to address educational programming within U.S. correctional or reentry settings and focus on adults aged 18 and above. Studies addressing academic, literacy, GED, or postsecondary education within correctional contexts were eligible. Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on juvenile justice education without any crossover to adult populations, were opinion pieces or editorials lacking empirical or policy evidence or were conducted outside the United States.

2.4. Study Selection

Following database searches, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance against the inclusion criteria. Duplicate publications and earlier versions superseded by updated reports were excluded. Full-text review was then applied to sources that passed initial screening. The final set of included studies comprised 20 sources, including peer-reviewed empirical studies and reports from research institutions with established records in correctional education.

2.5. Data Analysis

Each included source was read in full and coded for themes related to program models, institutional and structural barriers, policy frameworks, and reentry outcomes. Codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, and sources within each category were examined for convergence and contradiction. The themes presented in the findings reflect patterns that emerged consistently across multiple sources rather than from any single study.

3. Findings

3.1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Table 1 Characteristics of Included Studies

Source (author, year)	Source type	Focus	Evidence base / method	Population setting /	Theme(s)
Binda et al. (2020)	Qualitative study	Lived experience and impact of college-in-prison	Semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated students; thematic analysis	Formerly incarcerated college students, northeastern United States	Program models; Institutional and structural barriers
Bozick et al. (2018)	Meta-analysis	Effect of correctional education on postrelease recidivism and employment	Meta-analysis of U.S. correctional education evaluations	Incarcerated adults, United States	Program models; Post-release outcomes
Castro et al. (2015)	Conceptual / critical article	Higher education access under mass incarceration	Critical conceptual analysis	Incarcerated postsecondary learners, United States	Institutional and structural barriers
Castro & Gould (2019)	Conceptual essay	Building prison higher-education scholarship and practice	Field-building commentary	Prison higher-education field, United States	Policy frameworks
Cho & Tyler (2013)	Quasi-experimental study	Postrelease outcomes of prison adult basic education	Quasi-experimental analysis of administrative ABE records	Male state prisoners in ABE, Florida	Institutional and structural barriers; Program models
Couloute (2018)	Policy report (secondary data analysis)	Educational exclusion and attainment after release	Secondary analysis of the National Former Prisoner Survey	Formerly incarcerated adults, United States	Institutional and structural barriers; Post-release outcomes
Davis et al. (2013)	Meta-analysis (research report)	Effectiveness of correctional education (recidivism, cost)	Meta-analysis of programs educating incarcerated adults	Incarcerated adults, United States	Program models; Post-release outcomes
Davis & Linton (2021)	Practice guide	Establishing in-prison college programs	Synthesis and practitioner guidance	Corrections–college partnerships, United States	Program models; Policy frameworks
Duwe & Clark (2014)	Quasi-experimental study	Degree attainment effects on recidivism and employment	Propensity-score matching; survival and logistic regression	Prison releasees, Minnesota (2007–2008)	Program models; Post-release outcomes

Erisman & Contardo (2005)	Policy report (50-state analysis)	State postsecondary correctional education policy	50-state policy and survey analysis	Postsecondary correctional education across 50 states	Institutional and structural barriers; Policy frameworks
Flatt & Jacobs (2018)	Quantitative study (secondary data analysis)	Training types and post-release employment	Secondary analysis of NLSY97; generalized linear mixed models	Formerly incarcerated individuals, United States	Post-release outcomes
Halkovic & Greene (2015)	Qualitative study (participatory action research)	Stigma and inclusion of students with records	Participatory action research	Students with incarceration experience, U.S. college campuses	Institutional and structural barriers; Post-release outcomes
Oakford et al. (2019)	Policy/research report	Economic and fiscal case for postsecondary prison education	Economic and fiscal analysis; National Corrections Reporting Program data	Incarcerated postsecondary population, United States	Policy frameworks; Institutional and structural barriers
O'Hear (2007)	Policy / legal analysis	Second Chance Act and reentry reform	Legal and policy analysis	Federal reentry policy, United States	Policy frameworks
Pompoco et al. (2017)	Quasi-experimental study	Facility education effects on misconduct and prison returns	Propensity-score matching; program evaluation	Incarcerated participants, Ohio prisons	Program models; Institutional and structural barriers
Tietjen et al. (2018)	Quantitative study	Social engagement and educational participation (gendered)	Quantitative analysis of survey data	Incarcerated learners, U.S. correctional facilities	Institutional and structural barriers
Visher & Travis (2011)	Narrative/synthesis review article	Reentry experience and needs after release	Synthesis of the Returning Home longitudinal study and reentry research	Returning prisoners, United States (multi-state)	Post-release outcomes
Hyder (2023)	Policy / regulatory fact sheet	Pell reinstatement framework for prison education programs	Summary of federal regulation (Prison Education Programs rule; FAFSA Simplification Act)	Incarcerated students and prison education programs, United States (federal regulation)	Policy frameworks
Taber & Muralidharan (2023)	Policy / research data brief	Six-year expansion of Second Chance Pell, 2016–2022	Descriptive analysis of survey responses from 75 participating	Incarcerated postsecondary students across Second Chance	Policy frameworks

			colleges (2021–2022 aid year)	Pell colleges, United States	
Bowling et al. (2024)	Peer-reviewed empirical study (mixed methods)	Financial barriers to reenrollment and degree completion after Pell reinstatement	Focus groups, student surveys, and stakeholder interviews (2018–2022 process evaluation)	College-in-prison students and stakeholders, New York State	Policy frameworks; Post-release outcomes

3.2. Program Models and Their Measured Effects

The literature documented a range of correctional education models, spanning adult basic education, GED and secondary programs, vocational and career technical education, and postsecondary college programs. Findings indicated that effects differed by program type, by whether participants completed the program, and by the outcome measured.

At the broadest level, the synthesised evidence supported a reduction in recidivism. Correctional education participants were 28% less likely to recidivate than non-participants when only the highest-quality studies were considered (Bozick et al., 2018). An earlier meta-analysis reported that participants had 43% lower odds of recidivating, equivalent to a 13 percentage-point reduction in the risk of returning to prison (Davis et al., 2013). The same body of work found that the effect was even stronger for in-prison college programs, with participants roughly half as likely to recidivate as those who took part in no correctional education (Davis & Linton, 2021).

When program types were separated, the evidence pointed to meaningful differences between them. Earning a secondary degree in prison raised the odds of post-release employment but did not significantly reduce recidivism, while earning a postsecondary degree was associated with more hours worked, higher overall wages, and lower recidivism (Duwe & Clark, 2014). College-level programming was found to be the only type with a significant recidivism effect when secondary, GED, and vocational programming were examined together (Duwe & Clark, 2014).

Completion emerged as a decisive factor across program types. Inmates who completed GED programs experienced 6.1% fewer prison returns within three years, those who completed college classes experienced 5.6% fewer, and those who completed vocational training and apprenticeships experienced 4.2% fewer; participation without completion offered no measurable benefit relative to non-participation (Pompoco et al., 2017). Completion of college classes or GEDs within the first year of incarceration was also associated with lower rates of violent misconduct inside the facility (Pompoco et al., 2017).

Program structure and delivery also varied. Guidance for establishing in-prison college programs identified centralized, decentralized, and intermediary management structures governing partnerships between correctional departments and colleges, with the chosen structure shaped by the configuration of the state community college system (Davis & Linton, 2021). The format of instruction ranged from in-person to online and blended models using tablets, each carrying distinct resource and security requirements (Davis & Linton, 2021). Beyond measurable outcomes, qualitative work documented changes that recidivism data do not capture, with college-in-prison participation associated with increased self-confidence, a stronger sense of connectedness, and a greater orientation toward civic leadership (Binda et al., 2020).

Education is associated with lower recidivism and better employment outcomes, particularly when participants complete their programs. The evidence suggests that college-level education produces the strongest effects (Davis et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of program design and completion rather than simply providing educational opportunities.

3.3. Institutional and Structural Barriers

The literature identified barriers operating at the point of entry, inside facilities, and after release that limited participation and disrupted educational engagement.

Most people in prison report wanting to participate in educational programs, yet nearly six in ten do not advance their education while incarcerated (Oakford et al., 2019). This challenge is not new, as earlier research found that incarcerated individuals generally entered prison with lower levels of education than the general population, with many

lacking a high school diploma or equivalent (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Inside facilities, the routine movement of incarcerated people between institutions interrupted instruction. In the Florida adult basic education data, roughly 96% of involuntary program dropouts left because they were transferred to another facility (Cho & Tyler, 2013). Noncompletion was also linked to motivation and support, with the absence of tutoring and the timing of program entry relative to sentence length identified as factors shaping whether participants finished (Pompoco et al., 2017). Social context mattered as well. Membership in organized prison groups predicted greater educational participation, and the effect was gendered, with parenting-group participation a stronger predictor of college and vocational enrollment for women than for men (Tietjen et al., 2018).

The institutional environment itself shaped access. Even well-intentioned practices in carceral settings were found to constrain the recognition of incarcerated individuals as potential degree completers (Castro et al., 2015). Qualitative findings indicated that the relationship between correctional administration and college staff conditioned whether programs could function, with positive institutional relationships identified as necessary for program success (Binda et al., 2020). Staff buy-in operated similarly, with correctional staff understanding of program purpose described as an ongoing requirement rather than a one-time step (Davis & Linton, 2021).

The structural challenges that limit educational participation in prison often continue after release. Formerly incarcerated people have lower levels of education than the general population, and these differences remain evident years after reentry. One-quarter have no educational credential, and the gap shows little sign of narrowing even four or more years after release (Couloute, 2018). Lower levels of education are also associated with higher unemployment, particularly among those without a high school credential and among people of color (Couloute, 2018). Continuing education after release can be difficult. Individuals with criminal records may face obstacles in gaining college admission, securing financial aid, and finding a sense of belonging on campus (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). At the same time, many are trying to meet immediate needs related to employment, housing, and daily living. Research also suggests that employer-based, job-specific training is more likely to improve employment outcomes than school-based programs (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018). As a result of these challenges, many individuals are unable to complete their studies despite wanting to continue.

3.4. Policy Frameworks That Shape Access

The literature showed that federal and state policy strongly shaped the availability of correctional education, particularly at the postsecondary level.

The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act barred incarcerated students from receiving Pell Grants, and participation in college programs declined sharply afterward, falling from 14% of the prison population in 1991 to 7% by 2004 (Oakford et al., 2019). In 2015, the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative restored access on a limited basis, and subsequent federal legislation reinstated Pell eligibility for incarcerated students regardless of conviction or sentence length (Davis & Linton, 2021).

The restoration of Pell funding was done through legislation and regulation. The FAFSA Simplification Act removed the federal restriction on eligibility, while the Prison Education Programs rule established standards that institutions must meet to access Pell funds (Hyder, 2023). As these changes took effect, college-in-prison programs expanded substantially. Between 2016 and 2022, the Second Chance Pell initiative grew to include about 200 colleges and served more than 40,000 students nationwide (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). Despite these gains, expanded access did not guarantee educational continuity after release. Financial barriers continued to limit reenrollment and degree completion, leaving many students unable to sustain their educational progress in the community (Bowling et al., 2024). The literature therefore distinguishes between access and continuity. While Pell restoration increased opportunities to study in prison, it did not address many of the barriers that emerged after release.

The Second Chance Act came close to addressing this gap because it emphasized prerelease planning and coordination between correctional and community services to support successful reentry (O'Hear, 2007). State policies, however, varied considerably as some states encouraged educational participation by linking academic achievement to sentence reductions, while others restricted the types of degrees incarcerated students could pursue (Davis & Linton, 2021). Castro & Gould (2019) also raised concerns about program quality and equitable access as funding expanded. It has therefore been demonstrated that policy decisions play a decisive role in shaping correctional education. Federal funding changes have repeatedly influenced the expansion and contraction of prison-based postsecondary programs (Oakford et al., 2019). However, using policy to restore access to funding does not by itself create a pathway from prison education to continued study after release. The evidence suggests that future policy must focus not only on access but also on sustaining educational participation across the transition from prison to community life.

3.5. Program Outcomes After Release

This examines the outcomes associated with correctional education after release. The findings varied across studies and often depended on the level of education attained, the type of program, and whether participants completed it.

Participation in correctional education was associated with lower rates of reoffending, with the strongest effects reported for postsecondary programs (Davis et al., 2013). Program completion also mattered. Individuals who completed educational programs while incarcerated were less likely to return to prison, whereas those who enrolled but did not finish showed little benefit (Pompoco et al., 2017).

Employment outcomes were less consistent. Duwe and Clark (2014) found that the effect depended on the credential earned. A secondary degree increased the likelihood of employment after release but had no significant effect on recidivism. A postsecondary degree, however, was associated with higher wages, more hours worked, and lower rates of reoffending. Bozick et al. (2018) reported that correctional education increased the likelihood of employment after release by 12 percent, but the effect disappeared when the analysis was restricted to studies with the strongest research designs. Results also varied by training type. Flatt and Jacobs (2018) found no significant relationship between employment and either school-based training or pre-employment programs. In contrast, employer-delivered post-employment training increased both employment and earnings.

Some studies pointed to benefits that standard measures such as recidivism and employment do not capture. Participants in college-in-prison programs reported greater self-confidence, stronger social connections, and a stronger sense of agency and civic engagement (Binda et al., 2020). Evidence on what happened after release was less encouraging. Degree completion remained uncommon both during incarceration and after reentry. Formerly incarcerated students also reported financial barriers that interrupted their studies and made degree completion more difficult (Bowling et al., 2024).

This suggests that completion was closely linked to positive outcomes. Postsecondary education was associated with the most consistent benefits, while the evidence on employment remained mixed. Many students also struggled to continue their education after release, particularly when financial barriers limited reenrollment and degree completion.

Table 1 Summary of Main Findings by Theme

Key finding	Source
Theme One: Program Models and Their Measured Effects	
Across the highest-quality evaluations, education participants were about 28% less likely to recidivate than non-participants.	Bozick et al., 2018
Program participation was associated with 43% lower odds of recidivism, roughly a 13 percentage-point reduction in returns to prison.	Davis et al., 2013
In-prison college participants were roughly half as likely to recidivate as those who received no correctional education.	Davis & Linton, 2021
Postsecondary degrees were linked to lower recidivism, more hours worked, and higher wages, whereas secondary degrees raised employment without reducing recidivism; college was the only program type with a significant recidivism effect.	Duwe & Clark, 2014
Completion drove outcomes. Returns within three years fell 6.1% for GED completers, 5.6% for college completers, and 4.2% for vocational or apprenticeship completers, with no measurable benefit from participation alone.	Pompoco et al., 2017
College-in-prison participation was associated with gains that recidivism data did not capture, including greater self-confidence, connectedness, and civic orientation.	Binda et al., 2020
Theme Two: Institutional and Structural Barriers	
The incarcerated population was far less educated than the general public and clustered at the lowest levels of attainment.	Erisman & Contardo, 2005
Nearly six in ten people in prison did not advance their education while incarcerated, despite a majority expressing interest in enrolling.	Oakford et al., 2019

About 96% of involuntary dropouts from Florida adult basic education left because they were transferred between facilities.	Cho & Tyler, 2013
Participation in organized prison groups predicted higher educational enrollment, with parenting-group effects stronger for women than for men.	Tietjen et al., 2018
Even well-meaning practices in carceral settings limited the recognition of incarcerated people as potential degree completers.	Castro et al., 2015
After release, a quarter of formerly incarcerated people held no credential and remained at the lowest attainment levels.	Couloute, 2018
Students entering college after release carried criminal-record stigma that complicated admission, funding, and finding a supportive community.	Halkovic & Greene, 2015
Theme Three: Policy Frameworks Shaping Access	
After the 1994 crime law barred incarcerated students from Pell Grants, college participation fell from 14% of the prison population in 1991 to 7% by 2004.	Oakford et al., 2019
The 2015 Second Chance Pell initiative and subsequent federal legislation restored Pell eligibility regardless of conviction or sentence length.	Davis & Linton, 2021
Federal regulations defined eligible prison education programs and conditioned Pell access on program-quality and data-reporting standards.	Hyder, 2023
Second Chance Pell expanded from 67 to 200 colleges across 48 states between 2016 and 2022, serving more than 40,000 students.	Taber & Muralidharan, 2023
Theme Four: Post-Release Outcomes	
Adult basic education was associated with higher post-release earnings and employment, strongest under uninterrupted instruction, but showed no recidivism effect.	Cho & Tyler, 2013
A 12% employment advantage from correctional education became null under the strongest research designs, leaving the employment evidence inconclusive.	Bozick et al., 2018
Employer-provided postemployment training raised the odds of working by about 37% and income by about 15%, while school-based and pre-employment training showed no significant employment effect.	Flatt & Jacobs, 2018
Expanding postsecondary education in prison was projected to lower combined state reincarceration spending by about \$365.8 million per year while raising former prisoners' earnings.	Oakford et al., 2019
Educational attainment among formerly incarcerated people stayed well below that of the general public even four or more years after release.	Couloute, 2018
Returning individuals continued to rank education among their highest-priority needs in the months following release.	Visher & Travis, 2011

4. Discussion

The evidence that correctional education produces positive outcomes during incarceration is generally consistent. Participation was associated with lower rates of recidivism, particularly for individuals enrolled in postsecondary programs (Davis et al., 2013). Program completion also appeared to be important. Pompoco et al. (2017) found that individuals who completed educational programs were less likely to return to prison, whereas those who did not complete their studies showed little benefit.

At the same time, completion is vulnerable to disruption. Cho and Tyler (2013) found that transfers between correctional facilities frequently interrupted educational participation, with most involuntary withdrawals linked to transfers. The transition from prison to the community may create even greater disruption, yet relatively few studies followed participants beyond release or examined whether they continued their education afterward. Several studies

measured post-release outcomes such as recidivism and employment, but they did not track educational participation after release (Duwe & Clark, 2014). As a result, there is limited evidence on how educational continuity is maintained during reentry.

The studies reviewed also highlighted several factors that affect continuity. Funding has played a major role in shaping access to postsecondary education in prison. The removal of Pell Grant eligibility in 1994 led to a sharp decline in participation, while later policy changes expanded access again (Oakford et al., 2019). However, access to educational programs inside prison does not necessarily ensure that individuals can continue their studies after release. The Second Chance Act addressed this issue more directly by emphasizing prerelease planning and continuity of services across the transition to the community (O'Hear, 2007).

Several studies also pointed to practices that may support continuity. These included maintaining educational records across transfers, developing credentials that can be transferred between institutions, and connecting incarcerated learners to educational opportunities before release (Davis & Linton, 2021). However, evidence on the effectiveness of these approaches remains limited. The review also suggests that commonly used outcome measures do not fully capture the educational experience. Recidivism remains an important indicator, but it provides little information about whether individuals continued their education after release (Castro et al., 2015). Evidence on employment was less consistent, with some positive findings becoming statistically insignificant when only the strongest studies were considered (Bozick et al., 2018). Other studies identified benefits that extended beyond employment and recidivism, including greater self-confidence, stronger social relationships, and increased civic engagement (Binda et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that completion is closely linked to positive outcomes, and that continuity may play an important role in supporting completion.

Recommendations and Future Research Directions

More longitudinal studies are needed to follow individuals through the transition from incarceration to reentry. Rather than ending at release or focusing only on recidivism, such work should also examine whether people continue, complete, or discontinue their education after returning to the community. This would require linking prison and post-release data systems and using longitudinal designs that treat the reentry process as continuous rather than a single outcome point.

These findings also have implications for policy and practice. If completion is central to outcomes, programs need to be designed to support it. Educational records should be transferable across facilities and follow individuals after release so that progress is not lost during transitions. Credits earned in prison should be recognized by community colleges and integrated into formal academic pathways rather than remaining isolated coursework. Reentry planning could also place greater emphasis on educational continuation, including early enrollment support before release.

5. Conclusion

This narrative review examined what the literature reveals about best practices for sustaining educational engagement across the incarceration-to-reentry transition in the United States and the factors that support or undermine that continuity. The literature consistently showed that correctional education is associated with lower recidivism and positive post-release outcomes. However, these benefits depend on participation and completion of academic programs. The review also identified several barriers that disrupt educational progress. During incarceration, prison transfers can interrupt coursework, and after release, individuals face financial constraints that limit their access to educational opportunities. The main significance is that education during incarceration and education after release are often treated as separate areas of policy and practice. The evidence suggests that for better reentry outcomes, program designs should treat prison education and post-release education as a continuous path. Overall, the evidence suggests that improving educational outcomes requires greater attention to how educational opportunities are maintained across the transition from prison to the community.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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