



What evidence exists on reintegration programs for ex-detainees?

Major concerns about ex-detainees, including ex-prisoners, ex-combatants, former rebels, and high-risk persons, are the high risk of recidivism and high rate of reincarceration. The recidivism rates around the world are higher than 50 percent¹, and more than half of released detainees are reincarcerated within 5 years.² In fact, ex-detainees face significant challenges after their release such as discrimination, rejection by family members, legal restrictions on employment, limited access to financial resources, high rates of substance use and mental health challenges. **These factors make their reintegration difficult and increase the likelihood of recidivism. To address these issues, governments implement comprehensive reintegration programs.** This brief reviews evidence on the effectiveness of reintegration programs and highlights gaps in the literature.

Key findings

- Most reintegration programs focus on providing education, employment services, financial support, or health and social care to detainees before and after their release.
- Evidence shows that reintegration programs have positive effects on housing, social support and the reduction of substance use, but have not shown a significant effect on recidivism.
- Reintegration interventions focused on behavioral change are more effective than those focused on employment and job skills.
- Reintegration programs have positive effects on transitional or non-sustained employment.

Key recommendations

- Ensure reintegration interventions focus on behavior change and integrate multi-faced support addressing education, employment, financial support, and health.
- Strengthen long-term employment support: Include potential employers in the design of reintegration interventions. Offering incentives might encourage more employers to hire and maintain ex-detainees.
- Design and implement context-based reintegration programs.
- Conduct rigorous independent research on and evaluations of reintegration programs in developing countries to ensure optimal policy decisions.

Background

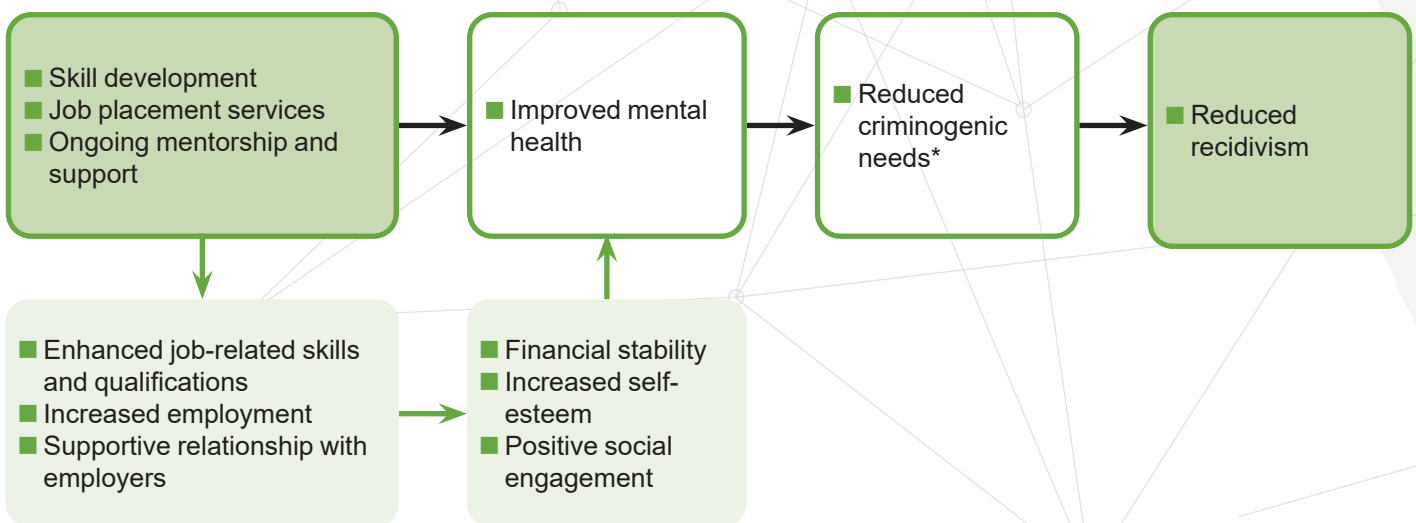
Ex-detainees face numerous challenges in reintegrating into society, including broken relationships, unemployment, lack of after-care services,³ stigma, health issues, and financial difficulties.⁴ Ex-detainees struggle to meet basic needs and achieve economic security, often coupling employment and public benefits with familial social support.⁵ Moreover, a criminal record itself is a major barrier to employment.^{6, 7} Employers are often unwilling to hire ex-detainees,⁸ although those with higher education and skills have better chances.⁹ Even when employed, ex-detainees often face lower wages and job instability.¹⁰

These issues have drawn varying levels of attention over time, influenced by regional contexts and evolving judicial systems. After World War II, awareness of human rights and rehabilitation needs grew,¹¹ while in Africa, the focus on reintegration became more pronounced between 1980 and 2000ⁱ due to armed conflicts and democratic transitions. In fact, armed conflicts in some African countries have led to a rise in the number of detainees, making the reintegration of ex-combatants and ex-detainees vital for stability and reconstruction. Additionally, the end of apartheid and democratic transitions have sparked renewed interest in human rights and penal reform.^{12,13} Therefore, research and pilot programs began to explore reintegration issues more systematically.

Reintegration programs for former detainees

Reintegration programs are interventions “conducted to prepare an offender to return safely to the community and live as a law-abiding citizen.”¹⁴ Figure 1 suggests a causal chain of reintegration programs. The theory of change developed is based on two recent systematic reviews.^{15,16} Following the green and black causal chains, education and employment activities inside and outside prison are assumed to enhance the financial stability and self-esteem of ex-detainees in short-term. This would improve their mental health and would reduce factors that could lead to criminal behavior in the medium term and would reduce recidivism in long term. Some behavioral interventions skip the job-related steps and focus on mental health. The effectiveness of reintegration interventions is based on the assumptions that ex-detainees are motivated to find and retain a job, and employers are incentivized to hire ex-detainees.

Figure 1: Theory of change of reintegration programs



Note : *Factors like substance abuse or lack of housing that contribute to criminal behavior.

Reintegration programs for former detainees

These programs focus on a gradual transition from prison to society for better reintegration. They are based on a correctional approach when the detainee is incarcerated and supervision and community approaches when he is released.¹⁷ While these programs use a variety of approaches, they are mainly focused on ex-detainees' employment and well-being.

In developing nations, particularly in Africa, reintegration programs are predominantly designed to support ex-combatants and individuals impacted by conflict and political crises. A variety of post-conflict demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs have been implemented. In Liberia, the DRR program¹⁸ provided high-risk men with agricultural training and capital inputs following the civil wars of 1989-1996 and 1999-2003. After Burundi's civil war (1993-2004), the government¹⁹ offered male former rebels reinsertion allowances, psychological counseling, education, vocational-training, or start up materials for income generating activities. The Rwandan government²⁰ supplemented these interventions with church services, reconciliation sessions, forgiveness and healing as components for genocide ex-detainees. In South-Africa, the reintegration program for apartheid ex-detainees²¹ includes recreational activities (sport, art, culture), daily participation in production workshops, and agricultural work.

Programs targeting criminal convicts, especially those implemented in developed countries, have great heterogeneity. In studies included in European meta-analysis,²² interventions provided to criminal convicts, have been categorized as non-behavioral, educational, behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, dissuasion theory, therapeutic community, or diversion. Reintegration programs in United States^{15,16} provided ex-prisoners with assistance with employmentⁱⁱ and/or mental health care, substance abuse treatment, or social support, including financial support, housing²³, sexual health education, and faith-based interventions.

Effectiveness of reintegration programs

Research on reintegration programs shows mixed results in reducing recidivism and employment. The outcome "recidivism" is defined as reincarceration, reconviction and rearrest. Meta-analyses of European studies²² found a 12 percent reduction in the recidivism rate. Another meta-analysis¹⁶ revealed that reintegration programs in the United States had no significant effect on recidivism. The effects found on social outcomes (housing, social support) were significant and positive. However, the effects on employment and substance use, were non-significant.

Some studies on ex-combatants in post-conflict African countries found positive impact on social outcomes. The DDR program implemented in Liberia has reduced mercenary work in nearby wars and increased employment and income¹⁸. The same program that offered education and financial support in Burundi, reduced poverty incidence.¹⁹ In Rwanda, the combination of within-prison and outside-prison programs has led to successful achievements. In addition to reduced recidivism among ex-prisoners, there was also evidence of joining cooperatives and intermarriage between Hutu and Tutsi people.²⁰ The program implemented in Sierra Leone²⁴ had no effect on mobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants. The research²¹ on the South African prisoner rehabilitation program does not provide evidence of any significant and positive effect on ex-convicts.

Regarding the mixed results on employment, a recent meta-analysis¹⁵ of studies in United States found that reintegration programs help ex-detainees to find jobs after their release but do not help them to maintain them in the long-term. The reasons for non-sustained employment include stigma within the workplace, non-qualified ex-detainees for the job they were hired, access to non-stable job. Regarding stigma within workplace, employers' concerns about the risk of recidivism, make them hesitant to hire ex-detainees, to offer long-term contracts. In turn, this limits the effectiveness of reentry programs in securing stable employment for ex-detainees. However, it is crucial that reintegration interventions focus not just on starting a job, but on ensuring that work is of good quality and that the individual has the skills and support to sustain employment. Policy makers may collaborate with employers to reduce stigma within workplace. In the absence of effects, some studies^{2,25} suggested that interventions focused on behavioral change are more effective to reduce recidivism, than those focused on employment and job skills^{2,22}.

Case study from Côte d'Ivoire

A recent reintegration program in West Africa was the *Civic Service of Action for Employment and Development program* established by the government of Côte d'Ivoire after political crisis²⁶. The program provided high-risk young people (those aged 16-35 who had antisocial or violent behavior) with vocational training, housing, food, transportation, and health care to promote their soft skills and social rehabilitation. As result, the program led to reduced crime, drug abuse, alcohol consumption, and violence²⁷. It had positive effect on altruism, positive reciprocity, risk preference, and life satisfaction. Some additional positive effect on women underlines the necessity of considering gender in future interventions.

Recommandations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations can be made:

1. **Expand behavioral change interventions and integrate multi-faceted support:** Given that reintegration interventions focused on behavioral change are more effective, programs should prioritize and expand components that address cognitive-behavioral skills, emotional regulation, and decision-making processes. Moreover, education, employment, financial support, and health care are essential. Combining these with strong behavioral change components can enhance overall effectiveness, particularly in reducing recidivism.
2. **Strengthen long-term employment support:** Since current programs have a positive impact on transitional or non-sustained employment, there should be a greater emphasis on creating pathways to long-term, stable employment. Policies should also target potential employers in the design of reintegration interventions. Offering incentives might encourage more employers to hire and maintain ex-detainees.
3. **Design and implement context-based reintegration programs:** Since reintegration programs in one country may not be transferable to other contexts due to differences in justice systems and labor markets, it's essential to design and implement context-based reintegration programs.
4. **Conduct rigorous independent research on and evaluations of reintegration programs in developing countries to ensure optimal policy decisions:** Although several reintegration interventions were conducted across the world, only a few causal studiesⁱⁱⁱ (experimental or quasi experimental) were identified in Africa.^{18,19,24} The studies focused on African countries are mostly qualitative.^{20,28,29} They describe reintegration program management, outputs and implementation challenges. Some reintegration programs are implemented but have not yet been evaluated³⁰. This fact highlights the need of additional research throughout the world, but especially in African countries.

Limitations

Systematic reviews on studies conducted in the United States had concerns regarding bias, necessitating cautious interpretation of the findings. They did not detail information on Cochrane Risk of Bias tool. Another limitation is that program implementation in different contexts making group comparability difficult to assess. In fact, employment levels before programs implementation and the timing of participants' release from prison varied. The sample size for some studies conducted in African countries was small and the sampling was not detailed.

This rapid response brief is primarily based on the following studies

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The WACIE helpdesk, an initiative led by 3ie's WACIE program, provides rapid synthesis and evidence translation to help policymakers in West Africa understand what evidence exists for specific policy questions. The helpdesk can also connect interested policymakers with further resources to meet additional needs. It is staffed by the WACIE Secretariat in Cotonou with engagement from the wider 3ie technical staff and other experts as needed.

To submit a policy question, or for additional information, contact wacie@3ieimpact.org.

What is WACIE?

The West Africa Capacity Building and Impact Evaluation (WACIE) program was launched to help build evaluation capacity in the eight countries that comprise the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU): Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo. Program goals include increasing evaluation capacity in targeted countries, ensuring that policymakers have access to relevant evidence and promoting take-up of high-quality evidence by relevant stakeholders.

Endnotes

ⁱ Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo

ⁱⁱ Education and employment support include formal education, vocational education, job training, and mentoring.


ⁱⁱⁱ Studies published in journals.



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