

The Mark of a Criminal Record: Unpacking Stigma and Barriers to Reentry

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Abstract: A criminal record brings about substantial reentry obstacles for formerly incarcerated persons, which continues to fuel systemic marginalization and inequality. This review combines existing literature to analyze the various challenges faced by this group, such as workplace discrimination, social rejection, and institutional impediments. The paper uses research from multiple fields to detail how criminal record stigma affects psychological well-being, social dynamics, and structural systems during the reentry process. Research shows that stigma exists prominently in both societal views and organizational systems while exerting a greater negative impact on marginalized communities such as racial minorities, women, and people from low-income backgrounds. Despite the potential shown by reentry programs and policy changes like “Ban the Box” and expungement laws to decrease stigma, they frequently face challenges because of inadequate funding and scaling issues, alongside unexpected outcomes like heightened racial discrimination. The review highlights the critical need for systematic reform to tackle stigma origins and support fair reentry into society. This article augments social sciences and humanities by pointing out literature gaps, including an absence of longitudinal studies and intersectionality research while suggesting directions for future research. The article provides practical strategies for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers that highlight the necessity of integrated methods combining personal support services with community involvement and policy modification to decrease stigma and support effective reentry.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition of former inmates into society is one of the most urgent social issues we face today. People who have completed their sentences still contend with widespread stigma, which poses substantial obstacles to finding jobs and securing housing while blocking their full participation in society (Pager, 2003; Harding et al., 2019). The societal stigma about crime and punishment represents Goffman's (1963) definition of an attribute that deeply discredits

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a person while converting them from a complete human being to someone perceived as tainted and devalued. The "mark of a criminal record" stigma maintains cycles of exclusion and marginalization, which weaken reentry success and recidivism reduction initiatives (Western, 2018). The compounded effects become greater due to intersecting factors such as race combined with gender and socioeconomic status, which intensify obstacles for marginalized populations (Crenshaw, 1989; Richie, 2012).

Empirical evidence underscores the repercussions of this stigma. Studies demonstrate that individuals who have criminal records experience hiring difficulties despite having appropriate qualifications (Pager et al., 2009), while institutional policies like background checks and housing restrictions perpetuate systemic discrimination (Alexander, 2010; Travis et al., 2014). The repercussions reach beyond the affected person to impact their families and society as a whole (Clear, 2007), fueling social isolation and mental health challenges (LeBel, 2012).

Despite these barriers, research highlights potential pathways for change. Reentry programs have shown promise in reducing stigma and supporting reintegration (Visser & Travis, 2003; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005), though their potential remains underrealized due to inadequate funding and scalability (Bushway & Apel, 2012). However, critical gaps persist in the literature. The long-term psychological consequences of stigma—particularly its effects on identity formation and self-esteem—remain understudied. Similarly, limited research examines the intersectionality of stigma (how race, gender, and class combine to create distinctive challenges) or rigorously evaluates reentry programs' capacity to reduce stigma at scale.

This article provides a comprehensive review to address these gaps. It synthesizes current research on criminal record stigma, critically appraises its effects on reentry outcomes, and advances three key objectives:

1. Exploring how stigma manifests through psychological, social, and structural barriers.
2. Examining its impact on employment, housing, and social inclusion;
3. Assessing how marginalized groups experience stigma's multiplicative effects.

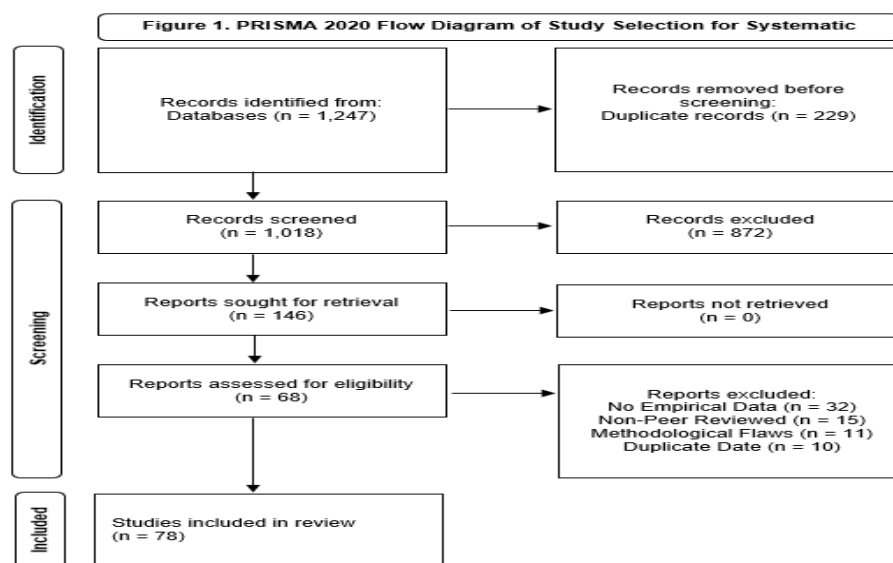
Doing so contributes to social science and policy by proposing actionable measures to counter stigma. The findings underscore those policymakers, practitioners, and researcher must collaborate to implement systemic changes supporting effective reintegration.

RESEARCH METHOD

The author executed a systematic methodology to examine scholarly work on criminal record stigma's impact on post-incarceration outcomes. The single reviewer identified 1,247 studies through database searches, with 78 meeting the final inclusion criteria after rigorous screening. The process included a systematic search from January 2000 to December 2023, strict inclusion/exclusion criteria, and thematic analysis to identify patterns and gaps.

A comprehensive search spanned academic databases including PubMed (health/psychological impacts), PsycINFO (psychological aspects of reentry), JSTOR (interdisciplinary perspectives), Sociological Abstracts (sociological studies), and ProQuest Social Sciences (broad social science literature). Google Scholar supplemented these searches, though the review was limited to English-language publications.

The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) summarizes study identification. Of 1,247 records from six databases, 229 duplicates were removed (183 via EndNote automation, 46 manually). Screening excluded 872 records (523 by automation, 349 manually), with 146 advancing to full-text review. After excluding 68 ineligible studies, 78 were included in the synthesis (42 qualitative, 22 quantitative, nine mixed-methods, and five theoretical) (see Figure 1 for database distribution).



The Boolean search string combined key phrases ("criminal record stigma" OR "felony stigma") with related terms ("reentry barriers" OR "housing discrimination") and intersectional factors ("race," "gender," "class"). To ensure consistency in study selection, the reviewer applied inclusion criteria at multiple time points with a two-week gap between screenings to minimize bias.

Studies focused on criminal record stigma's effects on reentry outcomes, provided empirical data or theoretical frameworks, and were peer-reviewed (with exceptions for seminal works like Goffman, 1963). Excluded studies lacked focus on stigma/reentry, were non-peer-reviewed (unless seminal), or predated 2000 without seminal status.

The reviewer employed reflexivity practices throughout the process, maintaining an audit trail of decision-making to enhance transparency. Data extraction proceeded through title/abstract screening followed by a full-text review, with findings organized into six key themes: stigma dimensions, employment challenges, social exclusion, institutional barriers, intersectionality, and reentry program effectiveness.

The quality assessment used the Critical Appraisal Skills Program checklist for qualitative studies and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool for mixed-methods research. Eleven studies were excluded post-appraisal due to methodological concerns, with rationales documented in the audit trail.

FINDINGS

The literature presents a detailed understanding of the various aspects of criminal record stigma and how it affects reentry outcomes. The findings are organized around six key themes: (1) the nature and dimensions of criminal record stigma, (2) employment discrimination and economic barriers, (3) social exclusion and mental health impacts, (4) institutional barriers and policy implications, (5) intersectionality and the compounding effects of race, gender, and class, and (6) the effectiveness of reentry programs and interventions. Each theme is discussed in detail below, focusing on synthesizing the key insights from the literature.

The Nature and Dimensions of Criminal Record Stigma

The social stigma associated with criminal records remains a powerful barrier that continues to affect people long after they complete their sentences. According to Goffman (1963), criminal records serve as a “spoiled identity” that causes individuals to be stigmatized and discredited. The stigma associated with criminal records appears through multiple channels, such as negative stereotypes, social exclusion from communities, and systemic discrimination within institutions (Link & Phelan, 2001). LeBel (2012) demonstrates that people internalize their criminal record stigma, which results in shame and reduced self-esteem while eroding their sense of agency. The psychological effects of societal rejection establish substantial obstacles to reintegration because individuals find it difficult to rebuild their lives.

Contemporary studies have built on Goffman’s framework by examining how stigma changes. LeBel (2012) revealed that different crimes produce varying levels of stigma, with violent offenses generating stronger negative responses compared to non-violent crimes. The stigma surrounding individuals changes through time as it responds to public opinion shifts alongside media representations and legislative alterations (Harding et al., 2019). Because stigma demonstrates dynamic characteristics, we must create interventions that work at both personal and societal levels.

Employment Discrimination and Economic Barriers

Employment discrimination represents one of the most extensively recorded effects of criminal record stigma. Pager’s (2003) pioneering field experiment showed that employers called back job candidates with criminal records at significantly lower rates than those without records despite having equivalent qualifications. The employment discrimination experienced by racial minorities becomes even more severe because they encounter both racial bias and the stigma attached to criminal records (Pager et al., 2009). Discrimination against job applicants with criminal records leads to significant economic outcomes because

steady employment helps lower recidivism rates and supports successful societal reentry (Holzer et al., 2006).

The "Ban the Box" policy, which postpones criminal background checks throughout the hiring process, has not eliminated employment discrimination as a major hurdle for formerly incarcerated people (Agan & Starr, 2018). Agan and Starr (2018) discovered that "Ban the Box" policies, which allow more callbacks for applicants with criminal records, also result in higher racial discrimination since employers might infer criminal history based on racial identity. The unexpected outcome demonstrates the intricate nature of employment discrimination issues and indicates the necessity for broader remedial strategies.

Social Exclusion and Mental Health Impacts

Social exclusion stems from both economic barriers and the stigma attached to criminal records. People who have been released from prison experience both strained family and friend relationships and experience social ostracism from the wider community (Harding et al., 2019). Social isolation worsens mental health issues like depression and anxiety, which makes the reentry process more complex (LeBel, 2012). Western (2018) examines the emotional impact of stigma on individuals as they work to rebuild their lives while encountering societal rejection.

Limited social networks restrict resource access and opportunity availability, creating a persistent cycle of marginalization that resists breaking. Socially isolated people often struggle to find adequate housing and employment opportunities and obtain necessary healthcare services, essential for successful reintegration (Travis et al., 2014). Effective interventions against social exclusion must deliver personalized support while confronting societal norms and attitudes that sustain stigma.

Institutional Barriers and Policy Implications

Institutional policies significantly contribute to the continuation of stigma associated with criminal records. Background checks, together with housing restrictions and licensing obstacles, frequently block formerly incarcerated individuals from obtaining essential resources and opportunities (Alexander, 2010). Existing institutional measures create more significant barriers for marginalized communities, with Black and Latino people experiencing this discrimination at higher rates due to their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (Travis et al., 2014). These obstacles result in a system that maintains inequality while restricting successful reintegration opportunities.

Although expungement laws and reentry programs seek to eliminate barriers for individuals, they face funding deficiencies and implementation obstacles (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Expungement laws enable people to seal or erase their criminal records but remain underutilized because complex application procedures and lack of public knowledge hinder their effectiveness (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005). Reentry programs offering job training and social support face significant funding shortages that prevent them from serving their target populations effectively (Visher & Travis, 2003).

Intersectionality and the Compounding Effects of Race, Gender, and Class

The reentry process becomes more challenging because criminal record stigma intersects with other social identities. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrated through her intersectionality framework that individuals experience distinct forms of marginalization due to their intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, and class. The challenges encountered by Black women who have criminal records include an increased risk of violence and reduced access to necessary support services (Richie, 2012). Criminal record stigma impacts low-income people more heavily because they typically do not have adequate resources to overcome reentry obstacles (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

Multiple layers of marginalization highlight the importance of creating focused interventions catering to different groups' unique requirements. Programs offering women gender-specific support, including childcare and trauma-informed care, demonstrate improved reentry outcomes (Richie, 2012). Programs that tackle the distinct obstacles racial minorities face, including racial hiring discrimination, play a crucial role in advancing workplace fairness and diversity (Pager et al., 2009).

The Effectiveness of Reentry Programs and Interventions

Reentry programs demonstrate effectiveness in diminishing stigma while supporting successful reintegration efforts. According to Visser & Travis (2003), programs offering job training, mentorship, and social support successfully enable individuals to break through reentry barriers. Studies show that the Ready4Work program substantially lowers recidivism rates for its job training and placement services targeted at former inmates (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005). Research shows that mentorship initiatives connecting people with community mentors deliver social support and lessen isolation symptoms (Bushway & Apel, 2012).

These programs struggle to achieve full effectiveness because they lack sufficient funding and cannot scale properly, revealing the necessity for systemic changes (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005). The implementation of "Ban the Box" policies and expungement laws marks important progress, yet their inconsistent results highlight the necessity for more all-encompassing approaches (Agan & Starr, 2018). Future research needs to target the identification of best practices and develop methods to expand successful interventions to larger populations.

DISCUSSION

Research findings demonstrate the extensive and complex nature of criminal record stigma that significantly affects reentry outcomes. The analysis of existing literature in this review revealed significant themes such as stigma's psychological and social aspects, employment discrimination, and social exclusion while examining the intersectionality of institutional barriers and assessing the success of reentry programs. This section examines the research findings to identify literature gaps and controversies and proposes future research directions.

Critical Analysis of Findings

The reviewed literature demonstrates how criminal record stigma persists over time and produces extensive negative effects. Goffman's (1963) idea of stigma as a "spoiled identity" continues to be pertinent because criminal records still undermine people's credibility and restrict their chances for successful reintegration. LeBel (2012) demonstrates that when individuals internalize stigma, it creates additional challenges during reentry because they face shame and reduced self-esteem. Psychological effects worsen when people encounter structural obstacles like employment discrimination and housing restrictions, which sustain patterns of exclusion and marginalization (Pager, 2003; Alexander, 2010).

Researchers discovered that criminal record stigma shows complex intersectional dimensions. Crenshaw (1989) and Richie (2012) demonstrate how combined racial, gendered, and class-based factors create specific obstacles for groups at society's margins. Black women who have criminal records experience an increased risk of violence and restricted access to support systems, while individuals with low income encounter systemic obstacles that hinder their reentry into society (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). The multiple layers of marginalization indicate that interventions must be designed to meet the distinct requirements of each affected group.

Existing research shows substantial gaps in our knowledge about the enduring consequences of stigma. Research has identified the direct barriers faced by formerly incarcerated people but lacks depth regarding the long-term impact of stigma on their personal identity and self-esteem. Research into reentry program effectiveness has not sufficiently examined scalability issues and long-term results (Visser & Travis, 2003; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005).

Trends and Controversies

The literature shows an increasing awareness regarding the necessity of systemic changes to tackle stigmatization associated with criminal records. "Ban the Box" and expungement laws mark essential advancements, yet their effects vary widely and occasionally produce negative results (Agan & Starr, 2018). Although "Ban the Box" policies improve callback rates for applicants with criminal records, they also cause employers to discriminate racially by using race as an indirect measure of criminal history. The unforeseen impact demonstrates how complicated it is to combat employment discrimination and shows the necessity of creating more extensive solutions.

The field faces a debate about how best to address stigma through individual versus structural approaches. Reentry programs delivering job training and social support demonstrate potential benefits yet face constraints due to limited financial resources and challenges in scaling up (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Structural changes, including policy reform and community engagement, demand strong political will because they are challenging to implement. Successful reintegration depends on linking individual and structural strategies together.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This review's results hold significant meaning for policymakers while serving as vital information for practitioners and researchers. Policymakers must create solutions that tackle the fundamental causes of the stigma associated with criminal records, including public opinion and institutional practices. Societal stigma toward formerly incarcerated individuals can be reduced through public awareness initiatives that confront stereotypes while increasing empathy. Implementing policies restricting criminal background checks for employment and housing decisions would help lower systemic obstacles that hinder reentry into society.

Reentry programs need expansion and customization to address the unique requirements of different population groups. Gender-specific reentry programs that offer childcare alongside trauma-informed care result in better outcomes for women (Richie, 2012). Targeted interventions addressing racial minorities' specific barriers, like employment discrimination, are essential for advancing fairness and diversity (Pager et al., 2009).

Extensive research remains necessary to understand stigma's lasting effects and measure reentry programs' effectiveness. Research that follows people through different stages of their lives could show important information about how stigma affects their identity and self-esteem and what helps them reintegrate successfully. Research must identify scalable, evidence-based strategies suitable for community implementation.

Future Research Directions

Subsequent studies need to target the identified gaps and controversies from this analysis. Key areas for future research include:

- **Long-Term Effects of Stigma:** Research examining the long-term effects of stigma on personal identity and self-worth should include investigating factors that enable resilience and recovery.
- **Intersectionality:** Future studies should investigate specific obstacles different groups encounter, including Black women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and low-income members.
- **Effectiveness of Reentry Programs:** Research evaluations that measure the scalability of reentry programs along with their long-term results and practical approaches to minimize stigma.
- **Policy Impact:** Research examines the effects of “Ban the Box” policies and expungement laws while studying unintended results and improvement strategies.
- **Community-Based Interventions:** The literature explores localized community interventions that tackle stigma through programs like restorative justice and mentorship for community members.

CONCLUSION

Existing studies about criminal record stigma and reentry outcomes indicate a complicated phenomenon that deeply affects people and their communities socially and economically. Research results reveal how criminal record stigma remains widespread across multiple domains, such as job discrimination and social marginalization, alongside institutional obstacles. The difficulties individuals face become even more complex when additional factors like race, gender, and class combine to create distinct forms of marginalization among various groups.

The review reveals that stigma continues to produce lasting psychological and social effects. Research by Goffman (1963) and LeBel (2012) demonstrates that individuals who internalize stigma experience shame and diminished self-worth alongside social isolation, which results in major reintegration obstacles. Structural obstacles, including employment discrimination and housing restrictions, continue to sustain cycles of marginalization while reducing chances for successful reentry (Pager, 2003; Alexander, 2010). The research underscores the importance of interventions targeting both personal and societal aspects of stigma.

The literature review reveals substantial research gaps regarding the enduring effects of stigma and the success rates of reentry programs. Job training and mentorship programs demonstrate the potential to reduce stigma and help former offenders reintegrate but face challenges related to inadequate funding and limited scalability (Visser & Travis, 2003; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005). The “Ban the Box” initiatives and expungement laws mark meaningful progress yet produce inconsistent outcomes that occasionally undermine their intended benefits (Agan & Starr, 2018). The existing insufficiencies stress the importance of further research to develop scalable, evidence-based solutions suitable for community-level implementation.

This review produces important consequences for policymakers while also affecting practitioners and researchers. Policy reform, community involvement, and personal assistance effectively reduce the stigma associated with criminal records. Campaigns that challenge stereotypes about formerly incarcerated individuals while building empathy could help eliminate societal stigma. Reentry programs must expand their offerings while tailoring services to address the unique requirements of populations like women, racial minorities, and low-income people (Richie, 2012; Pager et al., 2009).

This review demonstrates how criminal record stigma deeply affects reentry outcomes and advocates for a comprehensive approach to solve this problem. Through joint efforts of personal and systemic approaches, we can diminish stigma and enable successful reintegration while building a fairer, inclusive society. Subsequent studies must bridge the review's identified research gaps by focusing on long-term effects while considering intersectional factors and developing scalable strategies. Removing criminal record stigma serves social justice objectives and builds more stable communities.

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