

Criminal Records and the Economics of Recidivism: Labor-Market Exclusion, Signalling, and Reintegration in Thailand

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Abstract

Recidivism remains a major correctional and economic challenge in Thailand, especially among people with drug-related convictions and those returning to disadvantaged communities. This conceptual article examines how post-release structural exclusion may shape reoffending. Drawing on Becker's economic model of crime, Spence's signaling theory, Arrow (1973) and Phelps's (1972) statistical discrimination theory, and social capital theory, it explains how criminal records, employer risk perceptions, labor-market discrimination, stigma, and weak support can restrict stable lawful employment. It distinguishes rehabilitation from reintegration, arguing that skills and behavioral change alone are insufficient without employment, housing, treatment continuity, family support, and community acceptance. The article proposes employer incentives, time-limited criminal-record disclosure, transitional employment, job matching, community support, and health follow-up. It contributes to economic criminology by linking post-release exclusion with reduced lawful opportunities and recidivism risk. The theoretical contribution is further specified as a rehabilitation–reintegration conversion gap: rehabilitative gains in skills, treatment, and behavioral readiness may fail to become stable lawful opportunity when institutional and labor-market barriers remain. A Post-Release Opportunity Conversion Framework is proposed to make these relationships explicit and testable in the Thai context.

Keywords: Recidivism, Reintegration, Labor-Market Exclusion, Criminal Records, Economic Criminology

Introduction

Recidivism is commonly understood as reoffending after release from prison or correctional supervision. It creates repeated social, fiscal, and economic costs through renewed criminal justice expenditure, lost labor participation, family instability, and continued poverty. For this reason, recidivism should be examined not only as a correctional problem but also as an economic and social policy problem.

In Thailand, the issue is especially important for people convicted of drug-related offences and for those returning to disadvantaged communities. Recent reporting indicates that, as of December 2025, 211,740 inmates, or about 70% of Thailand's total prison population, were incarcerated for drug-

related offences (International Federation for Human Rights & Union for Civil Liberty, 2026). Drug-related imprisonment, unstable employment, family debt, stigma, and limited services may interact in ways that make reintegration difficult.

Existing explanations often focus on individual factors such as substance dependency, low education, weak self-control, unemployment, and incomplete rehabilitation. These factors matter, but they are incomplete. They do not fully explain why some people continue to face exclusion even after completing punishment or rehabilitation. This article argues that recidivism can also be shaped by post-release structural exclusion: labor-market, institutional, and social barriers that restrict lawful economic participation.

This article contributes to academic discussion in three ways. First, it explains criminal records as post-release economic sanctions that can reduce access to lawful employment. Second, it connects signaling theory and statistical discrimination theory to explain how employer risk perception may exclude rehabilitated individuals from formal labor markets. Third, it links labor-market exclusion with social capital theory to show how stigma and weak community support can reduce the expected value of lawful reintegration.

Building on these three contributions, this article proposes a more specific theoretical mechanism: the rehabilitation–reintegration conversion gap. The concept distinguishes between rehabilitation as the development of individual capacity—such as skills, treatment gains, education, and behavioral change and reintegration as the successful conversion of that capacity into stable lawful employment, supportive relationships, and legitimate social roles. The novelty of the article therefore lies not in claiming that employment, stigma, or social capital are new determinants, but in specifying how these established mechanisms interact to determine whether rehabilitation produces real post-release opportunity in Thailand.

Objectives and analytical approach

The objectives of this article are to explain how criminal records and employer risk perception can restrict employment after release, analyze how social stigma and weak social capital affect reintegration, and propose policy directions that connect correctional rehabilitation with real post-release opportunity.

This article is conceptual and policy-oriented. It does not present new survey data, interviews, or statistical estimates. Instead, it draws on academic literature, Thai correctional policy discussion, and economic and sociological theory to explain how post-release barriers may shape reoffending risk.

To avoid overgeneralizing evidence from other jurisdictions, the analysis distinguishes three categories of claims. “Thai evidence” refers to findings or institutional arrangements documented specifically in Thailand; “international evidence” refers to mechanisms demonstrated elsewhere that may require contextual validation; and “conceptual propositions” refer to relationships generated by the framework that remain to be tested empirically in Thailand. This distinction is especially important because labor-market institutions, criminal-record rules, employer practices, and social-support systems vary across countries.

Literature review

Recidivism, rehabilitation, and desistance

Research on rehabilitation and desistance shows that reducing reoffending requires more than punishment. Rehabilitation may include education, vocational training, cognitive-behavioral programs, treatment, counselling, and preparation for work. These interventions can improve skills and personal readiness. Andrews and Bonta (2017) emphasize the importance of addressing criminogenic needs, while Cullen et al. (2011) argue that imprisonment alone is unlikely to reduce recidivism without evidence-based intervention.

However, rehabilitation does not automatically lead to desistance. Desistance refers to the long-term process of moving away from crime. Farrall (2002); Laub and Sampson (2003); Maruna (2001); Sampson and Laub (1993) show that desistance is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by employment, social bonds, identity change, family support, and life opportunities.

This literature is important for Thailand because it suggests that prison-based programs may have limited long-term impact if people return to the same social and economic conditions that contributed to their earlier criminal involvement. Skills training may improve employability, but it cannot guarantee employment if employers refuse to hire people with criminal records.

A more critical reading of the literature suggests that program completion should not be treated as equivalent to successful reintegration. A recent systematic review of 34 rehabilitation and re-entry studies found that psychosocial and health interventions showed some positive effects, whereas vocational interventions produced positive behavioral outcomes but mixed results for recidivism and broader social reintegration (Negi et al., 2026). This evidence strengthens the distinction between improving individual readiness and achieving durable post-release outcomes: the unresolved question is whether rehabilitative gains can be sustained and converted into real social and economic opportunity after release.

Employment, reentry, and labor-market exclusion

Employment is widely recognized as a protective factor against reoffending. Stable work can provide income, routine, identity, social ties, and a lawful pathway for future planning. Uggen (2000) describes work as a potential turning point in the life course, while Berg and Huebner (2011) show that employment and social ties are closely connected in the reentry process.

However, people with criminal records often face substantial labor-market barriers. Pager (2003) shows that a criminal record can sharply reduce employment opportunities. Bushway et al. (2007) similarly argue that reentry is strongly shaped by labor-market exclusion. Western (2018) shows that the year after prison is often marked by unstable work, poverty, and fragile social relationships.

These findings are relevant to Thailand because employment exclusion may not always mean complete joblessness. In many cases, people may find informal, insecure, or low-paid work. Such work

may provide short-term income but often lacks stability, legal protection, social security, and career progression. Phuchongpravech and Chaiwat (2021) provide an important Thai-related foundation for examining barriers to formal and informal labor-market reentry.

Recent evidence also cautions against treating employment as a simple binary outcome. Connell et al. (2023), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized employment interventions, found that interventions increased the likelihood of working at least one day and the number of days worked, but did not demonstrate clear effects on employment status at follow-up; all included trials were conducted in the United States. The critical implication is that job quality, stability, and retention matter alongside initial job entry, and that evidence from other labor markets should not be assumed to generalize automatically to Thailand.

Criminal records, stigma, and informal sanctions

Criminal records can create long-term consequences beyond the formal prison sentence. They may affect employment, housing, education, family relationships, access to services, and social identity. Although criminal-record checks are often justified as tools for public safety, they may also create long-term barriers for people who have completed punishment.

Stigma is central to this process. Goffman (1963) explains stigma as a process through which a person is socially marked by a discrediting attribute. In the case of people with criminal records, criminal history may become the dominant identity through which employers, neighbors, and institutions interpret them.

This stigma can be particularly strong for drug-related offences. Drug involvement is often associated with assumptions about unreliability, relapse, moral failure, or future risk. These assumptions may continue even after treatment, rehabilitation, or evidence of behavioral change.

Recent research supports the general importance of criminal-record stigma, but evidence demonstrating that stigma is systematically stronger for drug-related convictions in Thailand remains limited. The offence-specific claim should therefore be treated as a hypothesis for future research rather than as an established finding.

From an economic-criminological perspective, stigma functions as an informal sanction. It continues to impose costs after the formal sentence has ended. These costs may include lower hiring probability, lower wages, fewer housing options, weaker family support, and reduced access to community resources.

More recent empirical work strengthens the labor-market component of this argument while also showing its limits. Rovira (2024), using a field experiment in the British labor market, found lower employer callback rates when otherwise equivalent applicants disclosed a criminal record. Cerda-Jara et al. (2024) similarly found that criminal-record stigma can persist even among college graduates, indicating that higher human capital does not necessarily neutralize the negative signal of a record. These studies provide evidence for the signaling mechanism, but they do not establish the magnitude

or form of employer discrimination in Thailand; that relationship remains an empirical question for Thai research.

Research on self-stigma also suggests that exclusion is not confined to hiring decisions. Brehmer et al. (2024) found an association between self-stigma following incarceration, mental health, and community integration. This supports the article's use of social capital and stigma as linked mechanisms, while also indicating that the pathways between stigma, health, social support, and reintegration require more precise empirical testing.

Thailand as a policy context

Thailand provides an important context for analysing the relationship between drug-related imprisonment, labor-market exclusion, and reintegration. Correctional policy has long included rehabilitation and vocational training, but the scale of drug-related incarceration continues to place pressure on prisons, reintegration services, and post-release support systems (Department of Corrections, 2019; Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020, 2021).

Recent prison reporting indicates that people incarcerated for drug-related offences accounted for about 70% of Thailand's total prison population in December 2025 (International Federation for Human Rights & Union for Civil Liberty, 2026). This suggests that drug-related imprisonment remains a major structural feature of Thailand's correctional system.

Thailand's labor-market structure also matters. Many people returning from prison may enter informal or unstable work rather than formal employment. Informal work may reduce immediate unemployment but may not provide stable wages, legal protection, social-security coverage, or long-term mobility. In this context, labor-market exclusion does not simply remove income. It can also push people into low-quality employment that may be insufficient to support desistance.

Thai evidence does support the broader proposition that former prisoners face barriers across formal and informal labor markets (Phuchongpravech & Chaiwat, 2021), but the prevalence, quality, and duration of informal employment among released prisoners require further direct measurement.

The Thai context therefore raises an important economic-criminological question: if rehabilitation increases skills but criminal-record stigma prevents access to stable work, how much public-safety benefit can rehabilitation produce? This article argues that the answer depends on whether post-release policy increases the expected value of lawful participation.

Recent Thai evidence: established findings and remaining gaps

Recent Thai research provides stronger support for several parts of the argument. Atsawalapsakun (2025), based on interviews with first-time drug offenders and family members, identified economic stability, family and social support, and behavioral rehabilitation as factors relevant to non-recidivism. Tanannut and Cholsaktrakul (2025) found through comparative legal analysis that disclosure of criminal records may affect job applications and argued that record-management rules

should differentiate according to offence seriousness. Wanichwattanakul (2024) likewise proposed a crime-free period as a mechanism for limiting the disproportionate long-term consequences of criminal records, while Wingwon and Ekabut (2025) identified stigma, criminal-record management, and fragmented post-release support as structural reintegration issues in Thailand.

At the same time, the Thai evidence base remains incomplete. Existing studies do not yet establish, with employer audit data or longitudinal administrative data, the causal magnitude of criminal-record discrimination, the quality and duration of post-release employment, or the extent to which these factors independently predict recidivism. The framework developed below therefore treats these relationships as mechanisms to be tested rather than as causal effects already demonstrated in Thailand.

Theoretical framework

Economic model of post-release choice

Becker's (1968) economic model of crime provides a useful starting point for understanding how incentives and constraints shape offending. The model suggests that individuals compare the expected costs and benefits of legal and illegal activity. Crime becomes more likely when the expected utility of illegal activity exceeds the expected utility of lawful alternatives.

This does not mean that people automatically choose crime whenever they are poor. Nor does it mean that addiction, trauma, mental health, or peer influence are irrelevant. Rather, the model helps explain how limited lawful income, weak employment prospects, and low expected wages can increase pressure toward illegal income opportunities.

For people returning from prison, the expected benefit of lawful work may be reduced by criminal-record disclosure, employer rejection, low wages, lack of references, and loss of social networks. At the same time, illegal activity may offer faster income, especially in communities where drug markets or informal criminal networks remain accessible. These conditions can make desistance difficult even when individuals have completed rehabilitation.

The economic model is not intended to assume a specific illegal-income pathway. Rather, it represents the narrower proposition that changes in the expected return to lawful work alter the relative incentive structure faced after release. The availability, accessibility, and value of illegal opportunities are empirical conditions that vary across communities and should be measured rather than presumed.

Signalling and criminal records

Spence's (1973) signalling theory explains how decision-makers act under imperfect information. Employers cannot perfectly observe an applicant's trustworthiness, reliability, or future productivity. As a result, they rely on observable signals such as education, employment history, references, and criminal records.

A criminal record can become a strong negative signal. Employers may interpret it as evidence of future risk even when the offence is unrelated to the job, occurred years earlier, or has been followed by rehabilitation. This creates a labor-market problem: exclusion may arise not because a person lacks ability, but because employers use criminal history as a simplified indicator of risk.

In this way, criminal records can reduce the return on rehabilitation. A person may gain skills through correctional training, but those skills may not produce employment if the criminal record dominates the employer's decision.

Statistical discrimination

Arrow (1973) and Phelps (1972) explain statistical discrimination as a process in which decision-makers use group-level assumptions to make individual-level decisions under uncertainty. In hiring, employers may assume that people with criminal records are more likely to be unreliable, risky, or costly to supervise.

These assumptions may appear rational from the employer's perspective, but they can produce inefficient and unfair outcomes. They may exclude individuals who are qualified, motivated, and low risk. They may also create self-reinforcing disadvantage. When people with criminal records are repeatedly denied employment, they have fewer opportunities to build work experience, gain references, and demonstrate reliability. This exclusion may then reinforce the belief that they are unsuitable for formal work.

Fryer (2007) shows that discriminatory beliefs can evolve dynamically over time. In the reintegration context, this means employer assumptions and worker exclusion can reinforce each other. Discrimination is therefore not only a moral problem. It is also a labor-market inefficiency.

Social capital and stigma

Economic models explain part of the reintegration problem, but they do not fully explain the role of relationships, trust, and community support. Social capital theory fills this gap. Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) show that social networks, trust, reciprocity, and shared norms can help individuals access information, resources, and cooperation.

Incarceration can weaken social capital. Family relationships may deteriorate, community trust may decline, and work networks may disappear. After release, weak social capital can make it harder to find employment, secure housing, manage stress, avoid drug networks, and access informal support.

Social capital can also act as a protective factor. Family support, positive peer relationships, mentoring, community acceptance, and supportive local institutions can increase the expected value of lawful behaviour. Tyler's (2006) work on legitimacy is relevant here because people are more likely to comply with rules when they perceive institutions and communities as fair and supportive.

Taken together, these theories explain a linked process. Criminal records operate as negative signals in the labor market. Employers may use those signals as risk indicators when they lack full

information about applicants. This can produce statistical discrimination and reduce hiring probability. Lower hiring probability and lower wages reduce the expected utility of lawful work. At the same time, stigma weakens social capital by reducing family support, community trust, and access to informal job networks. These combined barriers may increase reintegration difficulty and recidivism pressure.

Proposed conceptual framework and theoretical contribution

The central theoretical contribution is the rehabilitation–reintegration conversion gap. Rehabilitation can generate “rehabilitation capital” through skills, treatment, education, counselling, behavioral change, and preparation for work. Reintegration, however, is an achieved social and economic condition. A conversion gap exists when rehabilitation capital increases but criminal-record signals, employer uncertainty, low-quality employment, stigma, or weak social support prevent those gains from becoming stable lawful opportunity.

The framework also introduces a signal-competition mechanism. A criminal record may operate as a negative historical signal, while independently verified skills, recognized occupational competence, sustained lawful employment, references, and evidence of rehabilitation can operate as positive current signals. The relevant employer decision is therefore not simply whether a criminal record exists, but how employers weigh negative historical information against credible evidence of present capability under uncertainty. This mechanism extends the existing literature by linking rehabilitation directly to labor-market signaling rather than treating training and criminal records as separate determinants.

Figure 1 presents the proposed Post-Release Opportunity Conversion Framework. It integrates rehabilitation capital, the signal environment, employer decision-making, employment access and quality, social capital, and the expected value of lawful participation. The Thai institutional context is treated as a boundary condition rather than assumed to be identical to settings studied internationally.

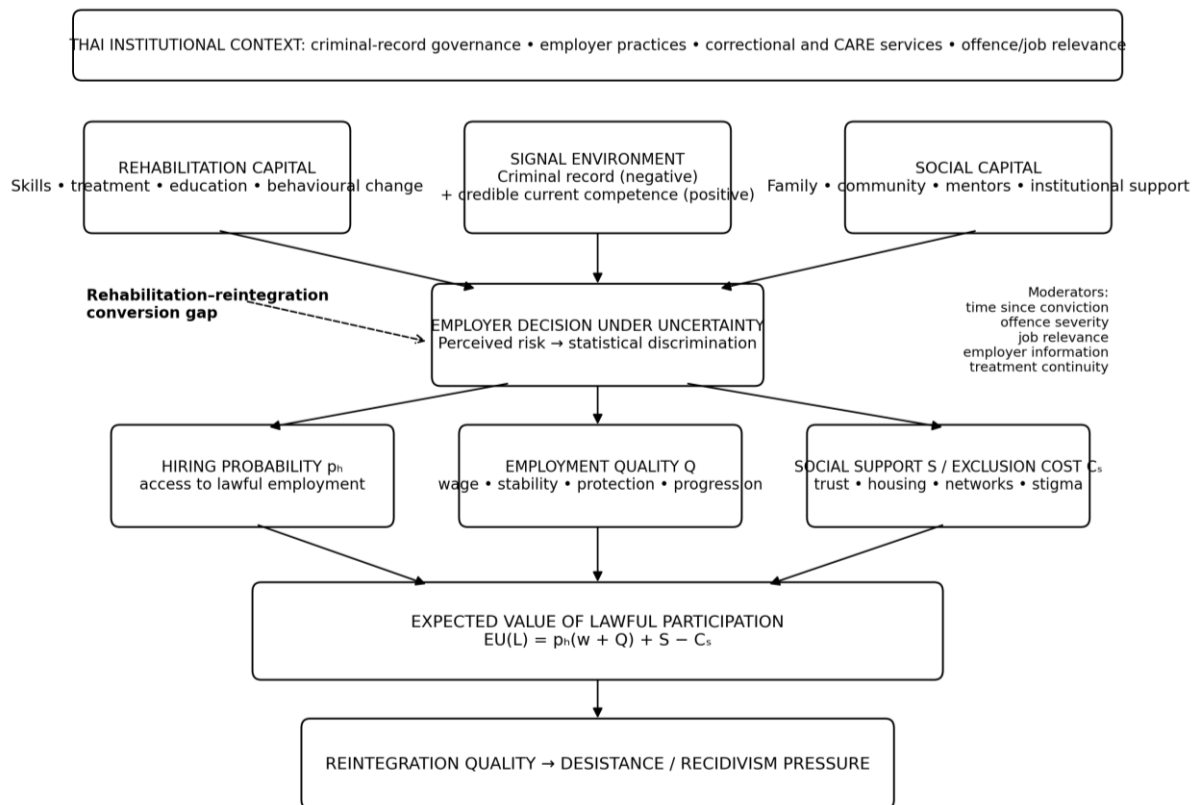


Figure 1: Post-Release Opportunity Conversion Framework (proposed by the authors).

Conceptual propositions derived from the framework

P1. Criminal-record signalling proposition: greater salience of a criminal record is expected to reduce access to formal employment through increased employer-perceived risk.

P2. Statistical-discrimination proposition: the exclusionary effect of a criminal record is expected to be stronger when employers possess limited credible information about an applicant's current competence and rehabilitation.

P3. Counter-signalling proposition: credible evidence of current competence, rehabilitation, references, and sustained lawful behaviour may attenuate, but not necessarily eliminate, the negative signal associated with a criminal record.

P4. Conversion-gap proposition: the effect of rehabilitation on reintegration is expected to depend on the extent to which acquired capacities can be converted into stable lawful employment and supportive social roles.

P5. Social-capital proposition: family, community, and institutional support are expected to increase the value of lawful participation both directly and through improved access to employment, housing, information, and treatment.

P6. Employment-quality proposition: the relationship between employment and successful reintegration is expected to depend not only on having a job but also on job stability, earnings, protection, and opportunities for progression.

Economic-criminological analysis

Expected-Utility Mechanism

The mechanism can be expressed simply. Let the expected utility of lawful work be:

$$EU(L) = p_h w + S - C_s$$

where p_h is the probability of being hired, w is lawful wage income, S is social support, and C_s is the cost created by stigma, job search barriers, and exclusion.

$$EU(I) = (1 - p)d - pF - C_m$$

where d is illegal income, p is the perceived probability of detection, F is expected punishment, and C_m is the moral, psychological, or social cost of offending.

Recidivism pressure increases when $EU(I) > EU(L)$. The purpose of this simple model is not to measure recidivism statistically, but to show how post-release exclusion can change the relative attractiveness of lawful and unlawful options. Criminal-record discrimination may reduce p_h and w . Social stigma may increase C_s and reduce S . If illegal income opportunities remain accessible, d may remain high. The policy problem is therefore not only how to increase punishment, but how to raise the expected value of lawful participation.

For conceptual development, employment quality can be separated from wage income rather than treated as implicit in w . An extended representation is $EU(L) = p_h(w + Q) + S - C_s$, where Q represents employment quality, including stability, protection, and progression. This extension is heuristic rather than an estimated model and is intended to make explicit why obtaining any job may not be equivalent to achieving sustainable reintegration.

Labor-Market and Social Barriers

Criminal records can function as continuing sanctions after a sentence has ended. They may restrict applications, interviews, workplace trust, and promotion opportunities. This is particularly important for non-violent drug-related offences, where perceived risk may be higher than actual workplace risk.

Current evidence supports the principle that criminal-record information should be assessed in relation to job relevance, offence seriousness, and time since conviction. However, the specific proposition that perceived workplace risk exceeds actual workplace risk for people with non-violent drug convictions in Thailand has not yet been established empirically and should not be stated as a factual comparison without direct evidence.

Employment quality also matters. Work is protective only when it is reasonably stable, lawful, and economically meaningful. If post-release employment is insecure, poorly paid, or socially degrading, it may not provide a strong foundation for desistance. Skills training can improve employability, but it cannot guarantee employment if employers refuse to hire.

Stigma extends punishment into everyday life. A person may complete legal punishment but continue to be treated as permanently risky or unreliable. Stigma can reduce family support,

community acceptance, and access to positive networks. Women with drug-related convictions may face stronger moral condemnation, particularly when they are mothers or caregivers.

Recent international evidence supports the broader relationship between incarceration stigma and community integration (Brehmer et al., 2024), but gender- and caregiving-specific effects in Thailand require direct evidence. The article therefore does not rely on such subgroup differences as an established part of the proposed mechanism.

Rehabilitation, Reintegration, and Support Continuity

Rehabilitation and reintegration should not be treated as the same process. Rehabilitation usually focuses on behavioral change, treatment, education, and skills development. Reintegration refers to the broader process of rebuilding a lawful and stable life after release.

A person may complete rehabilitation but still fail to reintegrate if employers refuse to hire, housing is unstable, treatment stops, or community stigma remains strong. Correctional systems should therefore evaluate long-term outcomes, including employment placement, job retention, housing stability, treatment continuity, family reconnection, and non-reoffending.

The period immediately after release is often unstable. People may need income, housing, documents, treatment, transportation, family mediation, and emotional support at the same time. Continuous support, including job placement, mentoring, counselling, substance-use treatment, mental-health care, and case management, is therefore essential (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005; Visser & Travis, 2011).

Policy recommendations

Thailand should consider employer incentive schemes for hiring rehabilitated individuals, including wage subsidies, tax benefits, public recognition, and risk-sharing tools. These measures should encourage fair assessment based on job relevance, skills, and evidence of rehabilitation.

Criminal-record reform should also be considered for people who remain offence-free for a defined period, especially for low-risk non-violent offences. Possible reforms include record sealing, spent conviction rules, or restricted disclosure when the offence is not relevant to the job. Safeguards should remain for work involving children, vulnerable persons, weapons, financial responsibility, or high public-safety risk.

Transitional employment and job matching can bridge the gap between prison and stable work. These programs can provide supported employment, coaching, workplace mediation, and employer follow-up. Thailand should also strengthen continuity of mental-health and substance-use care through referral systems, community clinics, counselling, peer recovery groups, and case management.

Community-based reintegration can rebuild social capital. Local governments, civil society organizations, religious institutions, employers, families, and community leaders can support mentoring,

family mediation, public education, and restorative practices where appropriate. Reintegration can be presented as a public-safety strategy rather than leniency.

To make criminal-record reform operational, disclosure rules could be differentiated using four criteria: offence seriousness, time elapsed since conviction, subsequent offence-free behaviour, and relevance of the offence to the specific occupation. This would move policy away from indefinite blanket disclosure while preserving stronger safeguards for clearly defined safety-sensitive work. Recent Thai legal studies support the need for more proportionate record-management arrangements (Tanannut & Cholsaktrakul, 2025; Wanichwattanakul, 2024).

Employer incentives should also be designed as risk-sharing rather than as stand-alone subsidies. A pilot program could combine time-limited wage support with verified evidence of current occupational competence, job matching, a designated intermediary, workplace mediation, and retention coaching. The intended mechanism is to reduce employer uncertainty while allowing current capability to function as a credible positive signal alongside the historical criminal record.

Policy evaluation should move beyond counts of people trained or referred to work. Core outcome indicators should include employment at three, six, and twelve months; job retention; earnings and employment stability; social-security coverage where applicable; housing stability; continuity of mental-health or substance-use treatment; and a clearly defined measure of reoffending. These outcomes would allow Thailand to test whether rehabilitation inputs are actually converted into durable reintegration.

Table 1: Policy mechanism summary

Structural barrier	Economic mechanism	Policy response	Indicator
Criminal-record disclosure	Reduces hiring probability and lawful income	Time-limited record restrictions	Employment after release
Employer risk perception	Creates statistical discrimination	Wage subsidies and employer certification	Job retention
Low wages and unstable work	Weakens lawful-work incentives	Transitional employment	Wage stability
Weak social capital	Reduces support for desistance	Mentoring and family mediation	Housing and family stability
Treatment discontinuity	Increases relapse risk	Health and substance-use follow-up	Treatment attendance
Informal-sector dependence	Limits protection and mobility	Job matching into protected work	Employment after release
Weak positive signals /	Allows criminal-record	Verified competence,	Callback,

Structural barrier	Economic mechanism	Policy response	Indicator
employer uncertainty	information to dominate hiring decisions	employer intermediary, risk- sharing and retention support	placement and 6–12 month job retention

Limitations and directions for future research

This article is a conceptual paper and therefore does not test the proposed causal relationships using new survey, interview, experimental, or administrative data. The expected-utility formulation and the conceptual propositions should be read as heuristic mechanisms rather than empirical estimates. The article also draws substantially on international evidence for employer behavior and criminal-record stigma; these mechanisms cannot be assumed to have the same magnitude or institutional form in Thailand.

The Thai literature is growing but remains fragmented across legal analysis, correctional studies, and small qualitative or cross-sectional studies. In addition, recidivism itself can be measured in different ways: rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, or return to correctional supervision and cross-jurisdiction comparisons are sensitive to definitions and follow-up periods (Yukhnenko et al., 2023). These limitations constrain strong causal claims and reinforce the need to distinguish Thai evidence from international findings.

Future research should test the framework through employer audit or discrete-choice experiments, longitudinal follow-up of people after release, and linkage of correctional, employment, social-protection, treatment, and reoffending data where legally and ethically permissible. Evaluations should also examine heterogeneity by offence type, time since conviction, gender, age, geography, employment sector, and job relevance. Such studies would allow the six propositions to be tested and would identify which policy mechanisms most effectively narrow the rehabilitation–reintegration conversion gap in Thailand.

Conclusions

Recidivism is often explained as individual failure, weak self-control, addiction, or unsuccessful rehabilitation. These factors matter, but they are incomplete. They do not fully explain why people may continue to face exclusion after completing formal punishment.

This article has argued that recidivism in Thailand should also be understood as a problem shaped by structural exclusion. Criminal records can operate as negative labor-market signals. Employer risk perception can create statistical discrimination. Stigma can weaken social capital. Low wages and unstable work can reduce the expected value of lawful employment. When these factors combine, reintegration becomes difficult even for people who have completed rehabilitation.

The main policy lesson is that rehabilitation must be connected to real post-release opportunity. Skills training, counselling, and behavioral change are important, but they cannot produce sustainable

reintegration unless people can access lawful work, housing, treatment, family support, and community acceptance.

For economic criminology, the central implication is that post-release exclusion can function as an informal economic sanction. Even after formal punishment ends, criminal records, stigma, and employer discrimination may continue to alter incentives by reducing access to lawful income and weakening social support. Reducing recidivism therefore requires more than rehabilitation inside correctional institutions. It requires policies that raise the expected value of lawful participation and reduce unnecessary barriers to labor-market reintegration.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This article contributes a conceptual economic-criminological framework for understanding recidivism in Thailand. The main body of knowledge is the explanation of criminal records as post-release economic sanctions that reduce access to lawful employment. The article also shows how criminal records operate as negative labor-market signals, how employer risk perception may create statistical discrimination, and how social stigma weakens social capital. By linking these mechanisms together, the article explains why rehabilitation may not lead to successful reintegration when lawful work, social support, and treatment continuity remain limited. This framework can support future research on employment, criminal records, and recidivism in Thailand, and can guide policy design on employer incentives, criminal-record reform, transitional employment, and community-based reintegration.

The new contribution is therefore not any one of the component theories in isolation. It is the specification of a conversion mechanism between rehabilitation capital and realised post-release opportunity. The framework adds to existing knowledge by identifying employer information and signal competition, employment quality, and social capital as linked conditions that can mediate whether rehabilitation produces reintegration. In the Thai context, its additional value is to separate relationships already supported by Thai evidence from mechanisms demonstrated mainly overseas and from propositions that remain to be tested locally.

This formulation also produces a concrete research agenda. If the framework is supported empirically, successful correctional policy should be evaluated not only by programme completion or skill acquisition but by the conversion of those gains into sustained employment, continuing treatment, stable housing, supportive relationships, and non-reoffending after release.

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