Supporting Occupational Engagement in Forensic Settings: An Evidence-Based Review

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Abstract

Background: Forensic occupational therapy is a small yet expanding practice area focused on helping individuals in the criminal justice system build skills, regain independence, and successfully re-engage in meaningful daily life. Occupations treated most consistently include education, employment, and housing. Financial management, family/parenting, and social skills were addressed however, less often. Basic needs (food and clothing), transportation, physical health (including sexual health/HIV risk), obtaining identification (driver's license/social security card), and religion or spirituality are rarely explored (Moore et al., 2020).

The purpose of this review is to determine if occupation-based interventions will reduce recidivism and the potential impact of having occupational therapy services available for individuals who are currently incarcerated. Determine the outcome when services are provided and if that impacts the ability to remain in the community after release.

Using the scoping review methodology framework from Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, we completed the six stages to answer the research question. The stages include identifying the research question; identifying relevant studies; study selection; charting the data; collating, summarizing, and reporting results. Reporting will be guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR)(Tricco et al., 2018).

Background

Involvement in the criminal justice system disrupts participation in meaningful occupations, contributing to occupational deprivation, role loss, and limited community reintegration (Muñoz & Jaegers, 2025). Individuals often face barriers related to mental health, substance use, and restrictive environments that limit skill development and autonomy (Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2023; Mynard et al., 2024). Although occupational therapy is well-positioned to address these challenges through interventions targeting daily routines, life skills, and social participation, services in forensic settings remain inconsistent and underutilized (Muñoz et al., 2016). This gap highlights the need to better understand the role and impact of occupation-based interventions in supporting successful reentry and reducing recidivism (Moore et al., 2020).

Data

Identification
- Records identified through database search:
  - n = 100
- Records after duplicates removed:
  - n = 82

Screening (Title)
- Records screened by title:
  - n = 82
- Records excluded based on title:
  - n = 39
- Records moved to abstract review:
  - n = 43

Eligibility (Abstract)
- Abstracts screened:
  - n = 43
- Records excluded after abstract review:
  - n = 20
- Full-Text articles assessed for eligibility:
  - n = 23

Included (Full-Text)
- Full text articles excluded:
  - n = 16
- Studies included in final review:
  - n = 7

(Reasons for exclusion: not occupation based, not intervention-focused, wrong population, insufficient data)

Methods

Search Strategy: Databases searched included Academic Search Ultimate, CINAHL Ultimate, Cochrane CENTRAL, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and Criminal Justice Abstracts. Search terms combined incarceration-related terms (e.g., prison, jail, correctional facilities) with occupational therapy intervention terms. Filters included peer-reviewed articles published within the past 10 years.

Screening Process: Two student researchers independently screened titles and abstracts for inclusion. Discrepancies were resolved by a faculty advisor. Full-text articles were reviewed collaborative by the research team to determine final inclusion.

Synthesis of Results

Data from the included studies were synthesized using the Johns Hopkins Evidence-Based Practice Model, incorporating the Individual Evidence Summary and Summary Synthesis tools to systematically evaluate the strength and consistency of findings across studies (Bissett, 2025) . Evidence was grouped by intervention type and outcomes related to occupational participation, mental health, and community reentry. Of the seven included studies, the majority provided moderate levels of evidence (Levels II–IV, primarily Grade B), with one higher-level study (Level I) and some lower-level evidence contributing contextual insight. Across studies, consistent themes emerged demonstrating that occupation-based and activity-based interventions, including sensory modulation, mindfulness, and participation-focused programming, improved emotional regulation, coping, social participation, and skill development. However, synthesis also revealed significant gaps, including limited use of standardized measures, small sample sizes, and a lack of long-term outcomes related to recidivism. Overall, the body of evidence provides moderate support for the use of occupation-based interventions in forensic settings, while highlighting the need for more rigorous and longitudinal research.

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