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Challenges of Post-Penal Care in Serbia: Access to Education for Former Offenders

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Abstract: *This paper examines access to education for former offenders as a crucial prerequisite for securing employment and improving their prospects for successful reintegration into society. In addition to analyzing the existing legal and institutional frameworks, the study assesses their practical effectiveness. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a literature review, legal analysis of relevant legislation, statistical examination of data on educational programs, as well as interviews and focus groups with professionals working with former offenders. The main findings indicate that educational and vocational training opportunities for this group remain significantly underdeveloped, with few structured programs designed to equip them with the necessary skills for the labor market. Insufficient financial resources, a lack of interinstitutional coordination, a shortage of specialized personnel, and limited involvement from civil society organizations compound these limitations.*

Keywords: *Offender Education; Vocational Training; Post-Penal Care; Rehabilitation; Reintegration; Recidivism Reduction*

INTRODUCTION

Post-penal care in Serbia has undergone significant transformations since its introduction after World War II. Over time, legislative reforms have led to a more structured and comprehensive approach to assisting individuals after they have served their sentences. The Law on Enforcement of Penal Sanctions 2014 (LEPS) (Official Journal RS, No. 55/2014, 35/2019) and the Law on Enforcement of Non-custodial Sanctions and Measures (LENSM) (Official Journal RS, No. 55/2014, 87/2018) have introduced a modernized framework for post-penal assistance aiming to reduce recidivism and facilitate social reintegration. Defined in Article 48 of the LEPS, post-penal care encompasses all necessary assistance and support provided to individuals who have been released, ensuring their smooth transition into society.

The key institutions responsible for post-penal care in Serbia are correctional institutions and the Commissioner's Service, both of which play a vital role in coordinating support for released offenders (Kolaković-Bojović and Batrićević 2020). According to Article 185 of LEPS, treatment departments in correctional facilities are required to develop release programs in cooperation with the Commissioner's Service and Social Services. Additionally, Article 186 establishes a multi-agency cooperation model involving the Commissioner's Service, social welfare institutions, the police, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), all of which contribute to post-release assistance.

The Commissioner's Service, established within the Ministry of Justice's Administration for Execution of Criminal Sanctions, is tasked with implementing probation measures and

coordinating post-penal care. The service operates 25 offices across Serbia, staffed by 27 commissioners, 7 administrative staff members, and 2 department heads, with 36 treatment officers splitting their duties between prison work and enforcement of alternative sanctions (Kolaković-Bojović and Batričević 2022).

The post-penal assistance program is developed on an individual basis, tailored to the specific risks and needs of each released offender. It includes an assessment of the individual's circumstances, health status, education level, professional skills, and reintegration challenges. Developed one month prior to release, the support program is designed through collaboration between the treatment department, the Commissioner, and the convicted person. The counseling process, which begins at least three months prior to release, enables the Commissioner's Service to design targeted interventions aimed at facilitating successful reintegration.

This article specifically analyzes education as a key factor in employment, addressing the difficulties former convicts face in accessing the labor market and achieving successful reintegrating into society (Matić-Bošković 2019). It contributes to the broader discussion on criminal justice reform, emphasizing the importance of establishing a comprehensive and sustainable post-penal care system grounded in the principles of evidence-based policymaking (Kolaković-Bojović 2022). With its practical orientation, the article aims to inform policymakers and practitioners, offering concrete insights and recommendations. At the same time, it serves as a valuable resource for academic research and comparative analysis, providing a detailed insight into the current situation in Serbia.

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this paper are based on comprehensive research conducted by the authors between 2020 and 2024. The paper is based on desk research and incorporates insights from focus groups held during the 2020–2021 phase of the study, which aimed to support the enhancement of post-penal care in Serbia.

The main objective of the research was to explore the overall functionality of post-penal care in Serbia, including the normative framework governing it, organization, capacities and intersectoral cooperation of the stakeholders in charge of (or involved in) providing different services in the scope of post-penal care, as well as the accessibility of various services for ex-offenders. The research itself was divided into seven components based on the areas of post-penal care as defined in Article 57 of the LENSMS, which outlines the specific measures available under post-penal care, which include:

1. Assistance in securing housing and food.
2. Access to healthcare and social welfare services.
3. Support in re-establishing family relationships.
4. Employment assistance and access to education or vocational training.
5. Collaboration with social welfare centers to provide financial aid.
6. Support in addressing substance abuse issues.
7. Other forms of personalized assistance.

The specificities of the abovementioned seven pillars of post-penal care also determine the scope and applicability of certain methods in exploring it. The findings were gathered through the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods¹, which included legal and comparative analysis of the relevant legislative framework, statistical analysis of data and trends on its implementation, content analysis of websites and informative materials, as well as interviews and focus groups.

Focus groups were organized with professionals responsible for post-penal care, including commissioners who coordinate and oversee post-penal care and prison staff in charge of treatment. The discussions primarily focused on access to education, addressing key issues such as bridging the gap between education programs and vocational training opportunities, both within and outside the prison system. Participants also examined the availability and accessibility of information on these programs for ex-offenders, as well as the barriers they face in accessing them.

Special attention was given to discussing interinstitutional cooperation in the creation and implementation of education and training programs, ensuring they are effectively tailored to the needs of ex-offenders. The role of CSOs in complementing institutional solutions was also discussed. Commissioners shared numerous practical examples from their experience, highlighting both success and challenges.

The key issues identified during the focus group were further explored in-depth through interviews with heads of the units within the Prison administration responsible for post-penal care and offender treatment. Additionally, interviews were conducted with ex-offenders in the short period, up to three years after being released, providing first-hand insights into their experiences with post-penal support.²

Finally, several online meetings were held with CSO representatives working in the field of post-penal care, aiming to assess their role, challenges, and contributions to reintegration efforts.

¹ The full methodological approach, including the research tools, was developed in cooperation with and approved by the Serbian Prison Administration. The same applies to the Research Plan, the research tools (such as the list of topics and guiding questions for focus groups and interviews), the list of participants, and other related materials.

² Since these interviews were conducted during the 2021–2022 period, they took place via phone calls in order to comply with governmental safety measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information on the specific limitations and measures in force within the prison administration at the time, see: Kolaković-Bojović, Milica and Ana Batrićević. 2021. "Children in Correctional Institutions and the Right to Communicate with Their Families During the Covid-19 Pandemic". *Teme* 18 (4):1115-1130, DOI: 10.22190/TEME210824065K; Kolaković-Bojović, Milica. 2021. "Information and Communications Technology as a Tool to Substitute In-Person Visits in the Serbian Prison System During the Covid-19 Restrictive Measures". *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 7 (3):21-35, DOI: 10.47305/JLIA2137121kb; Matić Bošković, Marina and Milica Kolaković-Bojović. 2022. "New Approach to the EU Enlargement Process - Whether COVID-19 Affected Chapter 23 Requirements?". *EU and Comparative Law Issues and Challenges Series (ECLIC)*, 6: 330-350, DOI: 10.25234/eclic/22433.

FINDINGS

The Legal and Institutional Framework of Post-Penal Care

The legal and comparative analysis revealed that a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of the legal framework on post-penal care in Serbia is the lack of clear legal provisions defining the competencies, obligations, and responsibilities of various institutions.

The legal framework does not explicitly recognize former convicts as a vulnerable category, which affects the prioritization and scope of post-release assistance. According to professionals directly involved in providing post-penal care, this gap represents one of the most pressing challenges in practice, limiting access to essential support services for individuals reintegrating into society.

The Council of Europe experts recommended that a Commissioner's Service assume the role of coordinating post-penal care in Serbia (Nelissen and Frost 2018). However, despite its broad mandate, the limited resources of the Commissioner's Service hinder its ability to fulfill this function effectively. Without sufficient financial and human resources, the service struggles to establish itself as the central coordinating body responsible for post-release support, leaving gaps in inter-agency collaboration (Kostić and Matić-Bošković 2022).

According to the Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics (SPACE II 2023, 103), Serbia's Probation Service has one of the lowest reported budgets among Council of Europe member states, which limits its ability to provide adequate post-release assistance and effective reintegration programs (Kolaković-Bojović, Matić-Bošković and Batrićević 2022).

The conclusions from the focus groups, as well as discussions with CSO representatives, indicate that Serbia has made progress by encouraging civil society initiatives focused on providing information, training, and reintegration programs for former convicts. These initiatives align with Council of Europe standards, recognizing the key role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in post-penal care. However, CSOs' involvement remains largely informal, with limited institutional recognition. In 2017, CSOs working on prison reintegration launched an initiative that led to the establishment of the Post-Penal Support Network in March 2019 (Social Inclusion Team 2019). This network aims to enhance cooperation among CSOs, increase their role in post-penal care, and foster stronger partnerships with state institutions. Despite this initiative, the lack of formalized cooperation between state institutions and CSOs remains a significant challenge.

Education and Training in Post-Penal Care: Accessibility and Coordination

The main legal framework governing post-release education and vocational training in Serbia comprises the LENSМ and the Law on Adult Education (LAE) (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, Nos. 55/2013, 88/2017, 27/2018, and 6/2020). These laws establish the foundation for educational opportunities available for former convicts, both during incarceration and after release.

Adult primary education is implemented within correctional institutions (VPU) and penal institutions (penitentiaries), providing inmates with opportunities to acquire basic education and vocational skills. However, the continuation of education after release is also recognized as a key component of reintegration (Stevanović 2021). Article 57(4) of the LENSМ explicitly states that

post-release assistance programs may include support for completing education, vocational training, or specialized courses. This legal provision ensures that released individuals who demonstrate an interest in furthering their education can receive the necessary support to pursue their educational goals.

The Serbian education system offers various forms of adult education governed by the LAE, which integrates adult education into a unified national education system in three different forms:

1. Formal education
2. Non-formal education and
3. Informal learning.

Formal adult education encompasses primary and secondary education, which is implemented in verified elementary schools, adult elementary schools, secondary schools, and adult secondary schools.

Primary adult education follows the Functional Adult Basic Education (FABE) model, which enables accessibility and purposefulness of primary education to the adult population. The FABE is an organizational and programmatic unit in the formal education system in which adults receive primary education appropriate to their needs, learning opportunities and labor market needs (Rulebook on closer conditions in terms of programs, personnel, premises, equipment and teaching aids for gaining the status of a PROAEA (Rulebook on closer conditions, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 89/2015).

The adult education curriculum is delivered in specially trained and prepared elementary and adult education schools. It lasts for three years and consists of three one-year cycles. The first cycle focuses on acquiring the basics of functional literacy, while the second and third cycles concentrate on the basics of general education and professional competence. Professional competencies are acquired through training, which is one form of training that aligns with labor standards and labor market needs.

Secondary adult education encompasses special programs for adult education of two to three years duration, vocational training programs, specialist or master's education, training programs, and other adult education initiatives, all of which are conducted in secondary schools or high schools dedicated to adult education. During the year, the school enrolls candidates for the acquisition of specialist or master's education, professional qualifications, retraining, further qualifications, and training with the consent of the Ministry.

In addition to what is provided within the state education system, private high schools have expanded in Serbia in recent decades, offering distance learning, online courses, and flexible programs. However, those programs cost between €1,000 and €10,000 per year, making them inaccessible to many beneficiaries of post-release assistance.

Non-formal adult education offers structured learning programs that operate outside the formal education system, focusing on employment, personal development, and social engagement. Approved non-formal education programs are implemented in primary and secondary schools that have been granted the authority to make decisions on specific adult education activities, as well as other organizations that have been granted the status of Publicly Recognised Organiser of Adult Education Activities (PROAEA) based on a decision by the Ministry of Education.

The status of a PROAEA can be granted to various forms of public or private legal entities or organizations. The approval procedure for PROAEA status can be initiated by submitting a PROAEA application to the Agency for Qualifications, as outlined in the Law on the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette, No. 27/18).

Non-formal education programs cover a wide range of practical and vocational training programs, including literacy and mathematical skills, entrepreneurship and management, media and computer literacy, science and technology, foreign languages, ecology and environmental protection, safety at work, art, civil rights and career guidance for the advancement of job search skills. Depending on labor market needs, additional programs may be introduced to enhance employability.

Informal adult learning refers to self-directed knowledge acquisition in everyday life, work and social interactions. Although not formally structured, it plays a role in skills development and reintegration into the job market.

Access to Information

As equally confirmed by all participants in the process (professionals, ex-offenders, and CSO activists), a major obstacle in integrating secondary adult education, retraining, additional training, and specialization programs into post-release assistance is the lack of awareness among former convicts about the benefits of further education for their employment and career development. Many potential beneficiaries are unfamiliar with enrolment conditions, available programs, curricula, and financial support options, which significantly limits their participation in these opportunities.

Access to information on primary and secondary adult education remains inadequate, as it is mostly available only on the Ministry of Education's website and specialized institutions. These sources primarily focus on the normative and institutional framework, as well as official reports and statistics, but do not provide practical information for potential adult learners. This lack of user-friendly information creates barriers for individuals seeking education after release.

The situation is slightly better in vocational training programs organized by the National Employment Service (NES). NES provides detailed information on courses and training programs online, making them more accessible to those who can navigate digital platforms. However, computer illiteracy is a significant challenge, particularly for individuals released after serving long sentences. Without assistance from the Commissioner's offices, many beneficiaries cannot easily access this information.

For those without digital access, the only alternative is physically checking the noticeboards at NES offices. NES operates a network of over 200 noticeboards, including the Directorate, two Provincial Services, 34 branches, 21 offices, and more than 120 local units across Serbia. This means simultaneous publication on multiple noticeboards is required to disseminate information effectively. However, this method remains inefficient and unreliable, as it depends on regular visits to NES offices by released individuals who may not have the resources or motivation to check for updates frequently.

Stakeholder Cooperation Challenges

As the legal analysis showed, the LEA establishes a multi-level governance framework for ensuring, monitoring, and improving the quality of adult education. A key provision in the LEA is the organization of adult education programs in minority languages, provided that at least 50% of participants belong to a national minority group. In such cases, the respective National Minority Council is involved in providing, monitoring, and improving the quality of education.

Recognizing the importance of local-level coordination, Article 15 of the LEA allows local self-government units to establish Adult Education Councils (the Council), ensuring better monitoring and implementation of adult education policies. These councils may be formed independently or integrated into existing socio-economic or employment councils. Furthermore, multiple local government units can establish a Joint Adult Education Council (Regional Council), which enhances coordination across local government units. The Councils include representatives from local self-government units, employment services, employers, trade unions, and associations.

Stakeholder cooperation in adult education is structured at two levels, which are critical for post-release assistance:

- National level coordination – the Ministry of Justice (prison administration) must collaborate with national adult education stakeholders, as defined in Article 10 of LAE, to ensure that education programs for post-release individuals align with broader policy frameworks.
- Local/regional level cooperation - Commissioner offices should actively engage with local and regional adult education councils (where established) to ensure that post-release education programs address the specific needs of former convicts.

However, the qualitative analysis showed that even Commissioners lack reliable data on the number and functionality of regional councils. Nevertheless, they highlighted several examples of good practices in cooperation with these councils in various cities across the country.

Recent Trends in Adult Education Availability and Information Access

Statistical analysis revealed that, according to the data presented in the Report on the Implementation of the Annual Adult Education Plan in the Republic of Serbia for 2023, primary adult education was organized in 64 primary schools across the territory of 15 school administrations in Serbia. The program was designed for individuals over 15 years old who had either never started or not completed primary education.

In 2023, the program enrolled 5,835 adult trainees, falling short of the planned 6,477 participants. Completion rates varied across different education cycles: First cycle (I-IV grade) - 1,419 enrolled, but 690 completed; fifth grade - 1,609 enrolled, with 942 completed; sixth grade - 1,416 enrolled, and 984 completed; Seventh grade - 1,849 enrolled, with 1,225 completions; Eight grade - 1,624 enrolled and 1,289 completed (Ministry of Education 2024, 2).

However, qualitative analysis identified several barriers that hinder the efficient attendance and completion of adult education programs in Serbia:

- Travel costs – Many adult education schools are geographically dispersed, requiring students to travel up to 20 km to attend classes. For economically disadvantaged individuals, transportation costs pose a significant challenge, leading to low attendance and high dropout rates.
- Work Commitments – A significant proportion of adult learners are seasonal workers whose irregular work schedules make it challenging for them to attend classes consistently. Many are forced to prioritize employment over education, further limiting retention rates.
- Socio-economic barriers - 80.5% of adult learners belong to the Roma community, who already face systemic socio-economic challenges, including poverty, discrimination, and lack of stable housing (Ministry of Education 2023). These factors directly impact school attendance and participation.
- Lack of vocational training in the final stage – Although the adult education curriculum includes vocational training in the latter half of the third cycle, this component is rarely implemented due to a lack of financial resources and weak stakeholder cooperation at the local level. The absence of vocational training reduces the program's effectiveness in improving employability, making it less attractive for adult learners.

Secondary adult education in Serbia is state-funded and was implemented in 105 secondary schools across the territory of 16 school administrations in 2023. However, this marks a decrease of 12 schools compared to the previous year.

The program was planned for 384 students, but only 203 individuals over the age of 17 enrolled for the first grade. Despite the low enrollment numbers, completion rates indicate strong motivation among those who do participate. Specifically, first-year students completed 119 out of 203 enrolled, second-year students completed 86 out of 192 enrolled, third-year students completed 92 out of 170 enrolled, and fourth-year students completed 101 out of 151 enrolled.

These figures highlight a low dropout rate among enrolled students, suggesting that those who enter secondary adult education are committed to completing it. However, interest in joining formal adult secondary education remains very low, pointing to challenges in awareness, accessibility, and incentives for adult learners.

In 2023, retraining, additional training and specialization programs were implemented in 240 high schools across Serbia. These programs are mostly self-funded by participants supported by interested institutions, enterprises, or the National Employment Service through active labor market policies. A total of 3,262 adult students completed these programs, including 1,471 in retraining programs, 1,219 in qualification programs, and 572 in specialization programs.

The challenges faced in these programs mirror those experienced by post-release assistance beneficiaries, highlighting the need for a coordinated approach across the two levels of stakeholder cooperation.

Additionally, challenges in adult education within the penitentiary system must be considered. In 2023, 356 inmates enrolled in adult education programs within penitentiaries, but the average completion rate was 78.6%. Dropout rates varied by education level: first cycle – 67% completion, fifth grade – 82.4% completion, sixth grade – 80% completion, seventh grade –

78.12% completion, and eighth grade – 85.57% completion (Ministry of Education 2023, 8). Notably, 74.4% of all participants were Roma, reflecting the socio-economic vulnerabilities of this group and the need for targeted support measures.

Limited data availability restricts the ability to analyze recent trends in access to adult education in Serbia. Although the first publicly available Annual Adult Education Plan (AAEP) dates back to 2016, only six annual reports on its implementation have been made publicly accessible. The relatively short reporting period hinders a comprehensive assessment of progress and challenges in adult education.

To identify trends in the availability and accessibility of adult education programs, we relied on four years of data for comparison – 2018, 2019, 2022, and 2023- and analyzed trends arising from available statistical data. While this provides some insights, it is a short period to identify long-term patterns in adult education access and participation.

Table 1: Trends in Formal Adult Education (Source: Ministry of Education 2018 and 2023)

Data on the Adult Education Programmes	Year			
	2018	2019	2022	2023
No. of primary schools that organized programs	64 (15 school administrations)	65 (16 school administrations)	65 (15 school administrations)	64 (15 school administrations)
No. of adult students at primary school	6,090 (of 5,912 planned)	5,926 (of 6,315 planned)	6,015 (of 5,758 planned)	5,835 (of 6,477 planned)
No. of secondary schools that organized programs	121 (16 school administrations)	180 (17 school administrations)	139 (16 school administrations)	105 (16 school administrations)
No. of adult students in secondary schools	351 (of 444 planned)	447 (of 2,776 planned)	503 (of 574 planned)	716
Retraining programmes, Additional training and specialization	178 (17 school administration units)	310 (17 school administration units)	240 high schools	240 high schools
No. of adult students	4,018 (of 11,407 planned)	8,554 (of 23,772 planned)	7,336 (of 24,505 planned)	3,262

Analysis of the available data indicates several notable trends in adult education in Serbia:

- Stable number of schools offering adult education – the total number of schools providing formal adult education programs has remained unchanged, ensuring consistent availability across the country.
- Nationwide availability of formal adult education - Adult education remains accessible across Serbia, with institutions offering primary, secondary, and vocational training opportunities.
- Increase in secondary education enrollment – While the number of adult students attending primary education programs has remained relatively stable, the number of students enrolled in secondary education has more than doubled over the observed period. This suggests growing interest and participation in higher education levels among adult learners.
- Fluctuation in vocational training participation – The total number of students participating in retraining, additional training, and specialization programs initially

doubled but then experienced a significant decline in 2023. This drop may indicate barriers such as financial constraints, lack of awareness, or decreased funding for vocational education programs (Ministry of Education 2018, 2019, 2023).

Analysis of the data presented for non-formal adult education between 2019 and 2023 reveals the following key trends:

- Expansion of thematic scope – The range of topics covered by non-formal adult education programs expanded significantly during this period, reflecting a growing demand for diverse skills and competencies in various sectors.
- Increase in publicly recognized organizers – The number of publicly recognized organizers offering non-formal education more than tripled, rising from 32 in 2019 to 110 in 2023. This indicates greater institutional engagement and capacity-building efforts aimed at enhancing opportunities for adult learning.
- Growing training programs – The number of available training programs increased substantially, from 121 in 2019 to 412 in 2023. This surge suggests improved accessibility and a stronger focus on workforce development through targeted training activities.

Despite statistics indicating a significant expansion of non-formal adult education programs and an increase in publicly recognized organizers, a content analysis of relevant web pages revealed that access to information remains a major challenge. Even researchers in the field struggle to access a comprehensive list of publicly recognized organizers, making it practically impossible for beneficiaries of post-release assistance to obtain necessary details on available programs. To improve access to education and training opportunities, it is crucial to develop a structured list of available programs and organizers. These lists should be:

- Geographically categorized to help individuals find programs within their reach.
- Specialization-based to allow users to identify relevant training opportunities aligned with their skills and career interests.

To ensure up-to-date and accurate information, these lists should be distributed to Commissioner Offices and periodically updated through direct and structured communication between commissioners and adult education organizers. At a minimum, annual updates should be conducted, during which education providers share newly available programs, updated entry requirements, and current funding options. Implementing this systematic approach to information sharing will greatly enhance accessibility and support post-release beneficiaries in making informed decisions about their educational and employment pathways.

A positive example of how adult educational programs should be structured and presented to potential beneficiaries can be found on the National Employment Service website (NES 2025). The NES website offers a clear overview of adult education and training opportunities for job seekers, emphasizing the importance of acquiring new skills to enhance employment prospects. The platform targets individuals who are unemployed, lack work experience, or require additional qualifications. The comprehensive and user-friendly approach serves as a best-practice model for structuring post-release education and employment assistance.

Another good example of structuring adult education and vocational training opportunities is the Business Registry website, which provides clear and practical guidance for individuals interested in starting their businesses. This structured and user-friendly approach serves as a best-practice model for integrating entrepreneurship training into post-release assistance programs, offering former convicts a pathway to self-sufficiency and economic reintegration.

CONCLUSION

This article examines the current state of post-penal care in Serbia, with a particular focus on access to education as a key component of social reintegration and a crucial factor in reducing recidivism. The research confirms that despite a solid legislative foundation provided by the LENS and LEA, implementation remains inconsistent due to fragmented institutional coordination, limited resources, and insufficient awareness among released individuals about available educational opportunities.

One of the most significant findings concerns the structural barriers that prevent former convicts from effectively accessing and completing adult education programs. These include geographical inaccessibility, socio-economic hardship, lack of vocational training at critical stages, and inadequate inter-institutional cooperation. The analysis of data from 2018 to 2023 demonstrates some progress, particularly in secondary education participation and the expansion of non-formal education programs. However, it also reveals setbacks in vocational training enrollment and the overall functionality of stakeholder networks at the local level. A lack of access to information remains a significant obstacle for post-release beneficiaries. A structured approach to information sharing, including regularly updated lists of programs categorized by geography and specialization, would greatly enhance accessibility.

Examples of good practices in adult education and employment support can be found on the NES website and the Business Registry website, both of which offer clear, structured, and practical guidance on vocational training and entrepreneurship opportunities. Adapting a similar model for post-release assistance would enhance access to education, skills development, and employment pathways for former convicts, improving reintegration outcomes and contributing to a more effective and humane criminal justice system.

Education and vocational training are not only social rights but also strategic tools for reintegration and public safety. Therefore, investment in structured, coordinated, and inclusive post-penal education policies is essential. Enhancing the role of the Commissioner Service, institutionalizing cooperation with adult education councils, and improving information accessibility for ex-offenders are immediate steps that can yield tangible improvements.

Going forward, further research is needed to assess the long-term outcomes of current reintegration programs, especially in terms of employment sustainability and recidivism reduction. Additionally, comparative studies with other European jurisdictions could offer insights into best practices and help Serbia align more closely with international standards.

By highlighting these challenges and opportunities, this article contributes to the growing body of evidence that post-penal care must be understood as an integrated, multi-sectoral responsibility. Strengthening its implementation will not only support individuals in their re-entry but also advance broader goals of justice reform and social inclusion.

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Milica Kolaković-Bojović: conceptualization, writing-original draft preparation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, data curation. **Marina Matić-Bosković:** conceptualization, writing-original draft preparation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, data curation.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

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