Lived Experiences of Newly Reintegrated Citizens After their Release from Incarceration

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ABSTRACT

Reintegration, the process through which formerly incarcerated individuals transition back into society, poses substantial challenges—social, emotional, financial, and psychological. This study explored the lived experiences of newly reintegrated citizens to understand the complexities they encounter upon release. Employing a qualitative research design, specifically the phenomenological approach, the study gathered in-depth insights from seven newly reintegrated citizens selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology. The findings revealed four overarching themes: navigating reintegration amid stigma and struggle; restoring identity through relationships and acceptance; relational and spiritual anchors as foundations for healing and reintegration; and humanizing reintegration the need for support, dignity, and opportunity. These themes illustrated how stigma, limited employment opportunities, and emotional hardship significantly impact reintegration efforts, while affirming relationships, faith, and community support emerged as vital elements of healing and social reentry. The study concludes that reintegration is a deep human process shaped by acceptance, connection, and dignity. Successful reintegration requires more than second chances; it necessitates compassionate systems that acknowledge humanity and provide structured, long-term support. Therefore, the study recommends the establishment of comprehensive, community-based reintegration programs. These should holistically address emotional, social, spiritual, and economic needs, foster multi-sectoral collaboration, reduce stigma, promote second-chance employment, and ensure access to integrated services that enable a sustainable and dignified reintegration process.

Keywords: challenges, ex-convicts, incarceration, reintegration, restoration, stigma,

INTRODUCTION

Reintegration, also referred to as reentry, is the process through which former inmates' transition back into their communities and is essential for enabling them to lead law-abiding, productive lives. Reintegration begins during incarceration through reentry programs and extends well into post-release life, involving both personal efforts and external support systems to ensure successful community reintegration (Addis, 2024; Humerick, 2020). The term "newly reintegrated citizens" refers to individuals who have recently been released from incarceration and are actively undergoing the reentry process. This aligns with the definition of "returning citizens," a term used to describe individuals reentering society after incarceration (Powell, 2019). This process involves overcoming significant social, emotional, financial, and psychological barriers while adapting to societal expectations and rebuilding their lives after incarceration (Vivares, 2023).

Despite the intention of reintegration to promote rehabilitation and social inclusion, many newly reintegrated citizens encounter systemic obstacles that hinder their transition. Socially, newly reintegrated citizens often face stigma and discrimination, which hinder their ability to form supportive relationships and participate fully in community life (Kılıç & Tuysuz, 2024). Emotionally, they may struggle with the psychological impact of incarceration, including unresolved trauma, substance abuse, and feelings of isolation (Sanhueza, 2023). Financially, securing employment poses a significant barrier, as stigma, limited skills, and restrictive hiring

practices deter employers from hiring individuals with a criminal record (Muller & Roehrkasse, 2021). Psychologically, the transition from incarceration to freedom can be overwhelming, especially for those who lack adequate mental health support. Studies have consistently highlighted the importance of addressing these barriers to improve reintegration outcomes and reduce recidivism.

Although numerous studies have explored the challenges of reintegration, there is a notable empirical gap in research that specifically captures the lived experiences of newly reintegrated citizens within the Philippine context. Much of the existing literature is based on Western frameworks and data, which may not accurately reflect the socio-cultural realities, support systems, and reintegration processes present in Southeast Asia. As a result, the unique emotional, social, and structural challenges encountered by Filipino returning citizens remain underrepresented in scholarly discourse. By addressing this empirical gap, the current study seeks to provide localized insights that can inform culturally relevant reintegration policies and practices, ultimately contributing to more effective and compassionate reentry programs in the country.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of newly reintegrated citizens in the Philippines following their release from incarceration. By employing a phenomenological approach, the study aims to uncover the personal, social, emotional, and psychological dimensions of reintegration as perceived and experienced by the individuals themselves. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research seeks to capture how these individuals navigate the challenges of stigma, employment, emotional healing, and community acceptance. This qualitative exploration intends to give voice to those who are often marginalized and overlooked in criminal justice research, providing a deeper, more humanized perspective on reintegration.

This study is significant as it addresses an underexplored aspect of the criminal justice system in the Philippine context post-incarceration reintegration. Its findings will be valuable to policymakers, social workers, correctional administrators, and community-based organizations involved in offender rehabilitation and reentry programs. By shedding light on the firsthand struggles and coping strategies of newly reintegrated citizens, the study can guide the development of more responsive, culturally sensitive, and holistic reintegration initiatives. Furthermore, it contributes to the broader discourse on restorative justice by emphasizing the importance of dignity, support, and community inclusion in preventing recidivism and promoting genuine social reintegration.
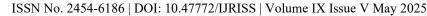
METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of newly reintegrated citizens, focusing on how they perceive and interpret their reintegration journey. Conducted in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, Philippines, the study involved seven (7) participants selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) formerly incarcerated and released for at least six months but not more than two years; (2) actively engaged in reintegration efforts such as rehabilitation programs or community support groups; (3) male heads of their families; and (4) willing to participate in the conduct of the study. Data were gathered using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide, designed to explore personal, emotional, and social dimensions of reintegration. To ensure effective communication, the interview questions were translated into Bisayan.

Data analysis followed Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenological Approach, which began with epoche (bracketing) to set aside the researcher's biases. Significant statements were extracted from the interview transcripts and coded line by line using manual coding. These codes were then grouped into meaning units and clustered into broader themes using thematic analysis. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of findings, several strategies were employed: member checking was conducted with five participants to confirm the accuracy of their transcripts and emergent themes; peer debriefing was done with two qualitative research experts; and triangulation was achieved by integrating field notes and participant observations during the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the different themes that were derived from the different responses of the participants of the

study during the conduct of the interview. The study explored the lived experiences of newly reintegrated citizens after their release from incarceration.

From the responses of the participants, there were four emergent themes namely: (1) navigating reintegration amid stigma and struggle; (2) restoring identity through relationships and acceptance; (3) relational and spiritual anchors as foundations for healing and reintegration; and (4) humanizing reintegration the need for support, dignity, and opportunity.

Navigating Reintegration Amid Stigma and Struggle

Reintegration journey of formerly incarcerated individuals is a complex process shaped by stigma, systemic barriers, and personal challenges. Brehmer (2024) emphasizes the impact of self-stigma, which often leads to social withdrawal and diminished mental health, thereby impeding social reintegration. While stigma is a prevailing challenge, recent interventions offer alternative outcomes. Cooper (2025) highlighted the work of Operation Gateway, a program providing job training and mental health services before release, which significantly improved participants' self-worth and reduced their experience of post-release rejection. These structured support systems show that with the right resources, the cycle of judgment and shame can be interrupted. Similarly, Carter and Thomas (2022) noted that community-based reintegration programs that involve family counseling and peer mentorship lead to improved perceptions of trust and a stronger sense of belonging among formerly incarcerated individuals. These initiatives provide hope that the emotional struggles shared by participants can be alleviated through empathetic, multi-level support.

These were supported by the responses of the following participants:

> *"I felt anxious about my future because of the judgment from family and   people around me." (P3)*

> *"It was very hard to find a job... Most employers didn't want someone with a criminal record." (P4)*

> *"I worked hard to find a job. I wanted to prove that I really had changed. I didn't want to waste the second chance I was given. I treated it as a second chance to start over and do right." (P5)*
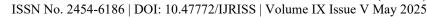
> *"I knew I had to live with the consequences." (P7)*

These findings imply that reintegration cannot succeed without addressing both the internal and external barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals. Stigma, particularly from family and employers, continues to shape the emotional and economic outcomes of returning citizens. Thus, reintegration programs must go beyond punitive narratives and instead adopt restorative, strengths-based approaches. The establishment of community-based support systems, employer education, and trauma-informed care is essential to help individuals reclaim dignity and move toward meaningful participation in society.

Restoring Identity Through Relationships and Acceptance

It refers to the process by which formerly incarcerated individuals rebuild a positive sense of self and personal worth through the emotional support, validation, and acceptance they receive from their family, friends, and community. According to Martinez and Carter (2021), strong relational networks—particularly with family and trusted peers—create a foundation for self-acceptance, emotional healing, and resilience. Similarly, Lee and Thompson (2022) found that social inclusion and validation reduce feelings of shame and increase motivation for prosocial behavior. In their study on post-incarceration experiences, Nguyen and Dela Cruz (2023) emphasized that the sense of being "welcomed back" by one's social circle helps to reframe personal narratives away from criminal pasts and toward hopeful futures. These findings affirm that reintegration is not just a legal or economic process but also a relational one, deeply rooted in the need for belonging and human connection.

These are evident in the results of the interview conducted:

"I just tried to get along with people and listened to their advice. I felt awkward because of my past in jail and people seemed afraid of me. But as time went on, their attitude changed, and they slowly warmed up to me." (P1)

"I accepted that what I did was wrong. My family encouraged me not to be affected by what others say. What's important is I change and not repeat my mistakes." (P3)

"I showed them that people can change. I stayed away from vices and tried to live clean. Eventually, others started seeing that I was serious about changing." (P6)

While labeling theory (Becker, 1963) highlights the internalization of deviant labels, many participants demonstrated agency in resisting these imposed identities through relational repair and spiritual transformation. From the lens of structural violence (Farmer, 2005), their struggles also stem from systemic neglect—lack of institutional support, economic marginalization, and legal discrimination post-incarceration. Likewise, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) could illuminate how class, gender roles (e.g., being expected providers), and family expectations intersect to shape reintegration experiences in ways not captured by individual-level theories alone.

The findings suggest that successful social reintegration after incarceration requires deliberate efforts to demonstrate personal transformation, rebuild trust, and reestablish positive ties within the community. Central to this process is family support, which plays a pivotal role in motivating change and fostering a strong sense of redemption. Emotional encouragement, the restoration of trust, and the desire to regain acceptance from loved ones empower formerly incarcerated individuals to confront social stigma and commit to lasting reform. These insights highlight that familial bonds not only alleviate the emotional challenges of reintegration but also serve as a vital foundation for rebuilding identity, self-worth, and a renewed sense of purpose.

Relational and Spiritual Anchors as Foundations for Healing and Reintegration

Recent studies emphasize that strong familial bonds contribute significantly to post-release adjustment by offering emotional security, consistent encouragement, and a nonjudgmental environment where individuals feel valued and accepted (Daciuk, 2024). Likewise, participation in spiritual communities has been associated with reduced recidivism, improved self-worth, and greater psychological well-being, as these communities often extend acceptance, guidance, and hope for change (Hodge et al., 2022; Morris & Walter, 2023). Faith practices, such as prayer and communal worship, have also been shown to help individuals cope with guilt, shame, and fear during reentry, while nurturing inner peace and positive self-identity (Sloas & Atkin-Plunk, 2020). Additionally, Haynes and Okoro (2023) highlight that consistent family engagements such as regular visits and meaningful conversations—can reduce the risk of recidivism by strengthening social bonds and reinforcing a sense of accountability. Similarly, Bennett and Rosario (2022) found that emotional reassurance from family, such as reminders of one's worth and encouragement through difficult times, can significantly buffer individuals against feelings of shame and isolation. Their belief in the individual's ability to change can help reinforce a positive self-image and decrease internalized stigma.
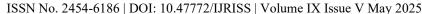
These were supported by the responses of the participants:

"I was given counseling before I was released — that really helped me a lot." (P2)

"I received support from my family and from the church — we had Bible studies and messages of hope..." (P5)

"In church, people prayed for me and some even gave advice..." (P6)

The integration of strong relational and spiritual anchors serves as a vital foundation for healing and successful reintegration. When individuals are grounded in supportive family relationships and faith-based communities, they are more likely to experience emotional resilience, reduced internalized stigma, and a renewed sense of identity and purpose. These anchoring systems not only foster psychological stability but also reinforce

accountability and hope, which are critical in navigating the challenges of post-release life. Strengthening these connections can thus play a transformative role in reducing recidivism and promoting sustained personal growth.

Humanizing Reintegration—The Need for Support, Dignity, and Opportunity

It is the process by which formerly incarcerated individuals experience reintegration into society through the lens of humane treatment, wherein their emotional, psychological, and economic needs are recognized and addressed with empathy, respect, and equity. Recent studies underscore how post-incarceration support systems, especially those providing emotional, psychological, and economic assistance—are crucial in reducing recidivism and promoting meaningful reintegration (Brinkley-Rubinstein et al., 2021; Davis & Vogel, 2022). Furthermore, individuals who are treated with respect and dignity, even while serving their sentences, show greater resilience and are more likely to pursue positive life changes upon release (Gurusami, 2020; Lebel, 2021). Lack of systemic support and persistent social stigma, however, often perpetuate cycles of marginalization. Programs that combine mental health care, employment pathways, and community education are therefore integral in restoring hope and enabling transformation (Tyler & Brockmann, 2023).

These were supported by the responses of the following participants:

> *"What I really wanted was emotional support — advice that would help me avoid going back to my old life..." (P1)*

> *"There were no seminars on how to deal with public judgment... I wish someone had taught us how to manage stigma better." (P3)*

> *"They didn't see us as people who simply made a mistake... I hoped they'd try to understand..." (P4)*

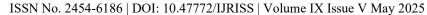> *"I hope to be given a chance to clear my name so that it's easier to find a job..." (P7)*

While the themes resonate with global findings, certain aspects are uniquely pronounced in the Philippine context. For instance, the role of spirituality and church communities is more central compared to Western models of reintegration (e.g., reentry courts or transitional housing). In contrast, in countries like Norway and Germany, structural support such as guaranteed housing and employment placements reduces reliance on religious or family-based reintegration. However, shared barriers such as stigma, lack of mental health access, and employer discrimination reflect global patterns (Travis et al., 2021). The Philippine context reveals a tension between moral rehabilitation and systemic neglect, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive interventions.

Reintegration efforts must be grounded in the principles of support, dignity, and opportunity to effectively break the cycle of incarceration and marginalization. When systems recognize and address the emotional, psychological, and economic needs of formerly incarcerated individuals with empathy and respect, the path to lasting transformation becomes more attainable. Humanizing the reintegration process not only fosters personal resilience but also counteracts the damaging effects of social stigma and systemic neglect. Comprehensive programs that combine mental health care, job readiness, and public education are essential in restoring individuals' sense of worth, facilitating community acceptance, and creating equitable opportunities for a meaningful, law-abiding life.

FINDINGS

1. Primary Challenges Faced by Newly Reintegrated Citizens After Their Release from Incarceration

Newly reintegrated citizens face complex challenges as they navigate life after incarceration, including persistent social stigma, rejection, limited employment opportunities, and the personal struggle to adjust and find motivation for change.

2. Coping with Social Stigma After Release

Despite the barriers, many begin to restore their sense of identity through supportive relationships, particularly by reconnecting with family, seeking acceptance from the broader community, and drawing strength from a deep desire for personal redemption.

3. Forms of Support Perceived as Most Effective in Facilitating Reintegration

Relational and spiritual anchors, such as consistent family support, faith-based communities, and compassionate engagement from both formal systems and individuals play a vital role in fostering healing, belonging, and resilience. These findings underscore the urgent need for a more humanized approach to reintegration, one that upholds dignity, addresses emotional and psychological needs, and provides the structural support necessary to overcome economic hardship and facilitates lasting transformation.

CONCLUSION

The reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals is a deeply personal and socially complex journey that requires more than just structural support demands compassion, inclusion, and dignity. The findings reveal that while newly reintegrated citizens encounter formidable obstacles such as stigma, economic hardship, and emotional readjustment, their capacity for transformation is greatly strengthened by meaningful relationships, spiritual grounding, and affirming support systems. Family ties, faith communities, and acts of empathy serve not only as sources of healing but also as catalysts for reclaiming identity and purpose. However, To ensure successful reintegration and reduce recidivism, it is imperative to adopt a holistic and human-centered approach—one that fosters emotional resilience, restores social belonging, and empowers individuals to rebuild their lives with hope and dignity.

RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations aimed to support the holistic reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals:

1. Local Government Units (LGUs), in collaboration with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), may develop anti-stigma campaigns and inclusive employment initiatives. This may include organizing job fairs tailored for second chance hiring, as well as public seminars that humanize the experiences of individuals with criminal records to raise awareness and reduce societal stigma.

2. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and faith-based communities are encouraged to organize peer support circles and family reintegration workshops. These initiatives should focus on emotional healing through counseling, conflict resolution training, and family bonding activities to strengthen relationships and support systems.

3. Correctional aftercare agencies, in partnership with religious institutions and licensed counselors, may implement structured reintegration plans that include spiritual mentorship and post-release family therapy. These plans should begin during pre-release stages and continue after release to ensure sustained support for successful reintegration.

4. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), together with local reintegration councils, may establish one-stop reintegration centers offering essential services such as housing assistance, mental health care, livelihood training, legal aid, and case management to ensure comprehensive support for individuals re-entering society.

5. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the long-term outcomes of reintegration programs by investigating the perspectives of employers, community leaders, and family members. This research will help deepen the understanding of reintegration dynamics and assess the effectiveness of current programs.

Overall, a coordinated, multisectoral, and human-centered approach is essential to ensure that reintegration becomes a transformative and sustainable process for individuals and communities alike.

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