
The Reintegration of Ex-Convicts in Society: A Case Study



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ABSTRACT: Reintegration into society is one of the things that Persons Deprived of Liberty or those who committed crimes and are serving their sentences inside a correctional institution look forward to. The restoration of freedom and the thought of spending time with their families brought them so much joy and comfort amidst all their experiences and struggles. This study explored the life of seven ex-convicts in their reintegration into society, particularly Ozamiz City. It utilized the case study design using Yin's method of data analysis. This study yielded the following themes: having difficulty applying for a job, struggling to earn a living, feeling indifference among family members and relatives, enduring the negative treatment of other people, trying to start a new life, having a positive outlook in life despite hardship, and aiming to reconcile with their families. In addition, this study showed that most ex-convicts had experienced challenges that tested their patience and views in life, yet they encouraged themselves to look for the brighter side of life. Thus, the researcher recommends revisiting for enhancement the briefing and debriefing conducted before the reintegration of the ex-convicts with their families, and a government program may be created for ex-convicts to have employment opportunities.

KEYWORDS: challenges, community, ex-convicts, incarceration, reintegration, stigma

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of the Criminal Justice System is to protect the community from high-risk offenders (Mckay, 2020). Incapacity of offenders through incarceration is one method of achieving such protection. When a verdict convicts an accused person, their freedom is taken away through the death penalty, a monetary fine, or imprisonment (Ismaila, 2020). In every country worldwide, imprisonment is used as a form of punishment. In most countries, it is the most severe form of punishment that courts can impose (Weidner & Schultz, 2019). Incarceration is the confinement of convicted and sentenced offenders for an extended period. Inmates in a penal institution are denied many rights, including the right to life and personal liberty, one of the most important human rights (Niranjana & Sundaram, 2022; Guercke, 2021). The anthropological significance is that incarcerated people can form new principles and have different experiences than when free.

Individuals who end up in prison/jail can be some of society's most vulnerable or traumatized members, and the experience of prison/jail is traumatic in and of itself. In some ways, the entire family is imprisoned or, at the very least, profoundly affected. Recently released offenders suffer from negative mental health effects due to a lack of a support system and the resources required for reintegration into the community (Bebbington et al., 2021). It is not as simple as walking out the door and returning to one's previous life to leave a penal institution. Many people have lost their jobs, relationships have suffered, and living situations have changed. One may lack a social network, financial support, insurance, or the resources needed to find work, a place to live, see a therapist, or reconnect with the community. According to this viewpoint, former inmates face many psychological challenges after being released from prison or jail, including stigma, discrimination, isolation, and instability (Baffour et al., 2021). Such a condition can have disastrous consequences, such as failed relationships, homelessness, substance abuse, recidivism, overdose, and suicide.

Released offenders, regardless of their offense, require jobs to survive in their new domain of liberty. Studies have reported that employment reduces recidivism tendencies and facilitates ex-convicts' adjustment to civilian life in several ways (Chikadzi et al., 2022; Obatusin & Ritter-Williams, 2019; English, 2018). According to Obatusin and Ritter-Williams (2019), the likelihood of criminal behavior decreases significantly when ex-convicts are employed. First, employment allows ex-convicts to earn money to help pay for transportation, food, and other daily expenses and rebuild lost relationships with children and family. Second, employment promotes socialization among coworkers and provides the structured activity. Third, employment improves social status and allows ex-convicts to demonstrate to the public that they have learned their lessons (Chen & Rine-Reesha, 2022; Riley, 2022).

In the Philippines, about a thousand Person Deprived of Liberty (PDL) were released yearly in jails. However, the data varied depending on the agency or bureau handling the task. For BJMP, as of September 2022, there are about 9102 Persons Deprived of Liberty, while for Parole and Probation Administration during the calendar year 2021, there are about 7859 terminal

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cases (fulfilled the terms and conditions of his probation). In region ten only, the BJMP released 346, both male and female and the Parole and Probation about 683 as of 2021. The government aims to decongest the jails and release at least 5,000 PDL by the next year (Neil, 2022). According to the Bureau of Jail and Management Penology Region X, approximately 200 Persons Deprived of Liberty have been released annually in Misamis Occidental. This estimated number is based on the Persons Deprived of Liberty who finished serving their sentence inside the jail. In addition, there were a small number of studies on the quality of life of ex-convicts focusing on their coping strategies during their reintegration. Therefore, the study aims to reveal what, how, and why ex-convicts face challenges in reintegration into the community.

The data suggested that there is more number of released Persons Deprived of Liberty who reenter the community and face several challenges. The preceding facts motivated the researcher to explore how these released Persons Deprived of Liberty could meet their reintegration into the community. This study is necessary to provide more understanding of the lives of ex-convicts after their incarceration. It helped the community understand their roles in the ex-convicts' successful reentry without returning to recidivating. This study is also necessary to address government agencies like the Department of Labor and Employment to create government programs for ex-convicts continuously. It lightens the burden and gives them hope to start a new life again in society.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study utilized the qualitative approach using the case study design. A case study is an empirical investigation into a case or cases seeking to answer "how" or "why" questions about the phenomenon of interest (Yazan, 2015). It was conducted in Ozamiz city, in the province of Misamis Occidental Philippines. The participants of this study were ex-convicts or individuals who finished serving their sentences inside a prison or jail. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify the participants of this study. The selection criteria were based on the following: 1) has served a sentence in any penal institution in the Philippines; 2) has at least one child 3) had been released for more than six months; 5) had consented to participate in the study.

In this qualitative research, specific measures were addressed, particularly the selection and the conduct of the interviews with the participants. The researcher conformed to the ethical protocol set by the university. The researcher applied for ethical review and filled out the following forms: Application for Ethics Review, Informed Consent for Interview, Technical Review of Research Proposal, Ethical Review of Assessment Form, and Informed Consent Assessment Form. After reviewing all the submitted forms, the Ethics Board gave a feedback on the study. The researcher gathered the data from the participants using an Interview Guide. Questions were translated into the Bisayan language to facilitate communication with the participants. The six stages of Yin's (2009) case study were used in this study which was also used to evaluate the transcripts of all the interviews.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study looked into the situation and experiences of ex-convicts after their incarceration. It used the case study design to explore the life of ex-convicts in their reintegration in society. A total of seven participants voluntarily participated in the face-to-face interviews. Four participants ranged from 30-40 years old, while three were 40-50 years old. All of them have dependents with two or more children with their partners. All of the participants were convicted and released for more than six months from correctional institutions in the Philippines.

From the responses of the participants, there were seven emergent themes, namely: (1) Having difficulty applying for a job; (2) struggling to earn a living; (3) feeling indifference among family members and relatives; (4) enduring the negative treatment of other people; (5) trying to start a new life; (6) having a positive outlook in life despite the hardship; and (7) aiming to reconcile with the family.

1.1 Having difficulty applying for a job

Finding a job nowadays is very difficult; even new graduates need help finding a company that would hire applicants without experience. Like new graduates needed help to land their first job, ex-convicts also needed the same to avoid the path of recidivating. Still, these criminal records prevented them from being hired for any available vacancy. Thus, the economic difficulties the ex-convicts face make their reintegration into society difficult.

These are the shared statements of the ex-convicts:

"I do not have a job and cannot find one because of my record. There was also a time that I applied for a job and did not make it because I failed during the background investigation/checking."

"I do not have a job to enable me to sustain my daily needs."

"I searched for a job to sustain my daily needs but I was rejected."

The result of the study was not only because of derogatory records supported by Besin-Mengla (2020), who stated that ex-convicts were unskilled and spent a longer period of unemployment since they were incarcerated. The vocational training inside the penal institution is limited and does not impart high skills that can make them competitive in the job market. With the high number of job seekers in the Philippines, it becomes difficult for people with questionable characters and limited skills to be employed. Many employers conduct background investigations to discover job seekers with a criminal history and most often do not employ

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them. It implies that ex-convicts struggle to find a job not only because of their derogatory records being the factor but because of the skill needed in a job that they lack due to incarceration.

1.2 Struggling in earning for a living

Ex-convicts find it hard to find a job after they are released from prison or jail, the same struggle they faced in earning a living. Ex-convicts would most likely start from scratch since no company would hire them, they resorted to selling something to sustain their daily needs and to lessen the burden they put on their families for not finding a job (Yin et al., 2022; Scanlon, 2001).

With teary eyes, the participants gave the following statements:

"Regarding economic situations, I still depend on my family because I struggled to find a job."

"It totally affected my family and me. I even heard that no one would want to buy and drink in our store because they are all afraid of me."

"It was hard. I was starving; I had no shelter."

Being financially incompetent can drastically alter one's life. Money is necessary for everyone. Though these ex-convicts would want to be as productive as they can during their reintegration, being unable to find a job made them struggle to earn a living. Furthermore, the knowledge they have gained and the skills they have developed are of no use because no one would want to hire them. This kind of condition may push them into recidivating.

1.3 Feeling the Indifference among Family Members and Relatives

Every family is unique. In every situation, each responds differently. Although some family members would refuse to accept ex-convicts because of what they did, others would gladly accept them despite everything.

These are the unraveling challenges shared by participant during the interview:

"Finally, I could see my family, although I was also worried if they will accept me."

"My relationship with my family is 50/50. My wife? She forgives but never forgets."

"It is still not good because my children are still distant from me."

"Some would avoid or go away when they saw me approaching."

"Everything is different now that I am an ex-convict."

Close family ties have a strong bond. Whatever trouble comes in a family, as long as the family has close ties, blood is thicker than water (Gozum, 2019). It is very common in Filipino families, but in the case of the participants in this study, the saying does not apply. The gap between them and their families starts from imprisonment to reintegration into the community. Ex-convicts' relationship with their family and relatives is vital as it influences their reintegration into society. However, imprisonment leaves a scar that is not easy to forget (Haimson, 2022; Toubiana, 2020; Ndaba, 2019). It would create a gap that starts the poor relationship between families and relatives (Haimson, 2022; Blancaflor et al., 2021; Ndaba, 2019). These individuals aspire to become law-abiding citizens again. However, it would not be possible without society making them feel that there is still a place for forgiveness, renewal, and acceptance.

1.4 Enduring the negative treatment of other people

Adverse treatment from other people will always be part of the everyday struggle of an ex-convict (Peters, 2020). Both family and society's treatment of ex-convicts affects them significantly. If the treatment toward them is pleasant, it can favor them. However, if it is not, it can be otherwise.

The statements below were shared by the participants:

"When I reintegrated, it seemed like all eyes were on me."

"These challenges affected me greatly because of the way people avoided me."

"Distant, afraid, and careful. That is how I describe my relationship with my family and neighbours."

"I cannot stop them from saying unfavourable words to a poor person like me."

"My neighbours blamed my parents for raising me badly."

Their existence in the community allows others to say spiteful words against them. This kind of scenario would go on for quite a while, which would test their patience to the point that they would compare the treatment they received inside the prison against the treatment they received in the community. Inside a correctional institution there was no feeling of indifference toward each other, they all shared the same agony which made it more bearable. In most cases, emotional acceptance is the coping mechanism of these people (Bakken & Visher, 2018). Acceptance is one of the factors in coping with their current situation. The world needs to be more understanding of people who have made mistakes and are now doing their best to be productive members of society; therefore, let us be kind and show them kindness by accepting them in society and becoming law-abiding citizens again.

1.5 Trying to start a new life

Life after prison can be a difficult transition. Going home after prison is a very challenging transition for most ex-convicts and their families (Yin et al., 2022; Muthee et al., 2020). Everyone expects them to start a new life, from being a person who violated

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the law to a newly abiding citizen in the country. But creating a new life is not easy for ex-convicts. Some of them re-offend after being released due to the stigma, discrimination, and instability they received from the people in the community (Baffour et al., 2021; Muthee et al., 2019).

Thus, these are the statements of the participants:

“Even if I have to start from scratch I will do it for my family. In the hopes of accepting me as renewed individual already.”

“I will not give up on proving them that I am a good citizen now. I will work my way to proving them that I am better now.”

Studies disclosed that if an ex-convict reintegrates into the community without proper intervention, they are most likely return to correctional institutions. Some ex-convicts feel like they are facing a whole second sentence when they re-enter society. But some ex-convicts strive to be renewed because they do not want to return to prison or jail due to bad experiences. Trying to start a new life may be difficult for most of them for many reasons, but it would be the best decision they can make for themselves and those who believe in them (Baffour et al., 2021; Muthee et al., 2019).

1.6 Having positive outlook in life despite the hardships

A positive outlook means being optimistic, expecting success and favorable outcomes of one's plans, being happy, and looking at the bright side of life. When one has a positive attitude, he or she is more alert, and less stressed. One may also have a lower risk of depression and other mental health problems. Anything that reduces the risk of psychological and physical illnesses is a must in life. As an ex-convict, maintaining a positive attitude in the face of adversity is essential; it will assist them in successfully becoming a newly abiding citizen in the community while also regaining the trust and confidence of the people (Farrington, 2020; Agan & Starr, 2018).

Here are their shared statements as they unravelled their positive outlooks in life:

“It's hard but I will survive because it motivates me to work harder and become a better version of myself.”

“My realization as a renewed individual is that I am able to appreciate the learnings I get from my journey as a convicted person to an ex-convict. It draws me nearer to God.”

“It became tougher and tougher each day but the more I have the reason to be stronger and prove them wrong.”

“My realizations as a renewed individual is that, I learned to forgive myself before I asked the forgiveness from others.”

“I am persistent to win my wife because she's the only person who believed in me after the downfall that I've experienced.” (P7)

Ex-convicts want to be accepted and be treated generally without malice and hesitations as a law-abiding citizens. Forgiveness and acceptance are what they are trying to get from their families, neighbors, and society in general. Others may give up and accept how society has labeled them, even if some things are not true anymore. Despite the difficulties they've faced, there are still ex-convicts who maintain a positive outlook on life. Negativity will not grant them forgiveness, but positivity will (Yin et al., 2022; Bakken, & Visser, 2018).

1.7 Aiming to reconcile with their families

The ex-convicts need a way to family reconciliation which is possible, and when handled effectively, can bring joy, healing, and a renewed bond with one another. Building relationship needs a lot of emotional work and willingness on the part of the people involved and surprisingly the road to healing leads to new beginnings. It is why strengthening the relationship of ex-convicts and their families should be given more importance to help them successfully become a law-abiding citizen again in society. Forgiveness may not come easily to most people, but it will eventually come to those who are patient enough to receive it.

These are the shared sorrows of the participants:

“I was able to handle this unpleasant situations because after the years that I have been away from my family I want to make it up to them.”

“I will strive hard to earn the complete trust of my family, our neighbours and the people in our community.”

“I was happy to be reintegrated in the hopes that finally I can see them every day.”

Filipinos are known for their character as being family-oriented people (Marie, 2018). Family relationships are often the primary source of emotional, practical, and financial support for people in the criminal justice system, from the arrest to after release. Evidence shows that strong family relationships are crucial in reducing the possibility of reoffending. Family members play an essential role in the re-entry of those ex-convicts. They are the ones who provide support such as shelter, food, clothing, and guidance to avoid criminal behaviors. Families affect position outcomes that can help them transition from prison to the community (Michigan Department of Corrections, 2018). Thus, ex-convicts aim to reconcile with their family from incarceration to reintegration phase in the hopes for a strength to keep going with their lives. Forgiveness and trust are not easily acquired or earned. It takes time and a lot of effort to prove that one is regretful of what he has done. The same as it takes a lot of time to forgive the person who caused pain and suffering (Moak et al., 2020; Ndaba, 2019; Moyo, 2017). But at the end of the day, family is generally receptive toward their loved ones who have just gone out of incarceration. Time is the ultimate healer, no matter how long it takes, a family will always forgive its family member.

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IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following are the conclusions. First, ex-convicts faced economic and social challenges as they reintegrated into the community due to their criminal records. Not all ex-convicts share the same level of acceptance. Ex-convicts experienced challenges from their families, employment, and society, making a living and sustaining their daily needs gets more difficult as they continued. Secondly, Ex-convicts were able to create a coping mechanism for themselves to handle their current situation, looking on the brighter side of life to survive all the challenges they encountered as they reintegrated into society. The coping mechanisms the ex-convict has to provide them with reasons to continue their life's journey. And lastly, beneath the high rate of recidivism among ex-convicts, the participants of this study never gave up on their lives. Instead, they plan for their future without returning to the life they had experienced inside the penal institution. Further, the social treatment, motivation to live, and the presence of the Divine intervention upon liberation made the ex-convicts fully accept their life transformation for the better.

From the results of the study, it is recommended that the Department of Labour and Employment may develop more employment opportunities and job assistance programs where the target beneficiaries are ex-convicts to help them sustain their daily needs. A continuous Community Assistance Program may be created or developed to assist and monitor ex-convicts' successful reentry into the community. The community may support the ex-convicts in their plans through acceptance. Instead of the stigmas, the community may give encouragement and support for their renewal of life to be productive citizens. Programs between ex-convicts and the community may be emphasized and given more attention to explain further the role of the community in the reintegration of ex-convicts.

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