

Aftermath of Incarceration: A Phenomenological Investigation of Ex-Inmates' Reintegration to Society

Angel Lu F. Cabel¹

Isabela State University-Cauayan Campus

Paula D. Peralta

Isabela State University-Cauayan Campus

Alyzza Nicole B. Aggari

Isabela State University-Cauayan Campus

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the reintegration experiences of ex-inmates in a rural province in Northern Philippines, focusing on the challenges they encountered and the support they received. The research aimed to understand the life of ex-inmates before, during, and after incarceration and to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of government-provided transitional services. Utilizing a qualitative design guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, the study utilized purposive sampling in recruiting five ex-inmates and conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Results revealed significant barriers to reintegration, including societal stigma and financial difficulties, alongside inadequate transitional support. Yet, insights from the interview also showed a renewed sense of purpose for the ex-inmates and support from their family and friends. The findings revealed the complex challenges and the critical need for comprehensive reintegration programs and support. The study concludes that improved support systems and policies are necessary to ensure the successful societal reintegration of ex-inmates, reducing recidivism rates and ultimately promoting social harmony.

Keywords: ex-inmate, incarceration, reintegration into society, transitional services

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of incarceration and its implications for society is a topic of considerable importance and ongoing concern. Unfortunately, recent statistics reveal a troubling reality: the global prison population is steadily increasing, with many countries facing severe overcrowding in their correctional facilities. For instance, as of 2023, the Philippines has seen a drastic increase in its prison population, with correctional facilities such as Quezon City Jail and the Manila City Jail housing more than four times their intended capacity (Thelwell, 2020). Similarly, the annual increase in the number of incarcerated individuals who would be apprehended and subsequently released is expected to continue in the country. The Philippines has recently surpassed Haiti regarding detention conditions, operating at a capacity exceeding 80-100 prisoners per cell (Jones & Narag, 2019). This results to the overcrowding of jail cells subject imprisoned individuals to devastating conditions, high death rates, and violence (Villafuerte et al., 2023).

doi: 10.5281/zenodo.15269239

¹Corresponding Author: angellu.cabel_cyn@isu.edu.ph

Incarceration is intended to function as punishment and rehabilitation. Yet, the challenges that follow imprisonment present significant issues for ex-inmates attempting to reintegrate into society. The importance of reintegration cannot be overstated, as successful reintegration reduces recidivism, enhances public safety, and promotes the well-being of former inmates and their communities (Bidola et al., 2024). However, reintegration is fraught with numerous obstacles, including social stigma, lack of employment opportunities, and inadequate support systems (Bidola et al., 2024).

The literature on ex-inmates' reintegration into society post-release is extensive, exploring various themes such as stigma, psychological challenges, family dynamics, financial and housing barriers, and societal impacts. Cerda et al. (2015) found that former inmates are often unfairly stigmatized as dangerous and unreliable, with perceived deficiencies in basic capabilities and ethical behavior, creating significant barriers to reintegration. Rade et al. (2016) and Moore et al. (2016) similarly highlighted the negative outlooks from the public, leading to expectations of unfair treatment and further hindering the reintegration process. In terms of psychological challenges, Baffour et al. (2021) noted how stigma, discrimination, isolation, and instability contribute to adverse mental health outcomes for ex-inmates.

Bebbington et al. (2021) emphasized the lack of support systems and resources for successful reintegration. as their study revealed that ex-prisoners exhibit persistently high rates of psychiatric disorders—including common mental disorders, psychosis, PTSD, substance dependence, and suicidal behavior—even after release. Despite adjusting for factors such as past trauma and current socioeconomic adversity, ex-inmates remained nearly twice as likely to experience psychiatric conditions compared to the general population. Bebbington et al. (2021) highlighted that without coordinated and sustained mental health support during and after incarceration, these vulnerabilities contribute to a cycle of relapse and reoffending, underscoring the urgent need for integrated post-release support systems. Yin et al. (2021) added that most families provide little to no support for ex-inmates, further endangering their reintegration process. Reamico (2022) also found that acceptance by the community, support from loved ones, and maintaining hope were crucial for rebuilding self-assurance and leading a stable life post-release, particularly in the Philippine context where incarceration rates are among the highest globally. Given the growing number of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) and the overwhelming challenges they face upon release, such as societal stigma, lack of resources, and psychological strain, these sources of support serve as foundational anchors that help ex-inmates cope with reintegration stress. In the absence of formal government reentry programs, the community and familial support systems fill a critical gap, enabling former inmates to recover a sense of dignity, reduce feelings of isolation, and sustain hope in the face of social rejection and structural barriers.

Family dynamics also play a significant role, as Bertulfo et al. (2016) and Subramanian et al. (2015) discussed the financial, structural, and mental impacts on families of incarcerated individuals. By family dynamics, we refer to the interactions, roles, and relationships among family members that influence how a family functions before, during, and after a member's incarceration. The incarceration of a family member can lead to significant financial strain—defined as the sudden loss of income, additional legal or transport costs, and economic instability—and housing insecurity,

especially when the incarcerated individual had been the primary provider. Yin et al. (2022) revealed that the anticipated positive reactions from relatives were often met with apathy, underscoring how incarceration can alter emotional ties and expectations within families. Additionally, Martin (2018) highlighted the stress and anxiety caused by the disparity between prison life and life beyond, which further disrupts family cohesion. These changes in familial roles and emotional support systems may diminish the reintegrative potential of returning individuals. Turney and Goodsell (2018) and Ceballo and Absin (2022) noted the negative repercussions on children, including emotional distress and educational disruptions, demonstrating how incarceration reverberates across generations.

Financial and housing barriers further complicate reintegration. Pogrebin et al. (2014) examined the financial obligations (e.g., parole costs and debts) that hinder ex-convicts from establishing economic stability. Flores-Barolo and Vicente (2019) reported that the lack of financial stability and limited prospects lead to a high risk of re-incarceration. Baptiste (2016) highlighted housing as a significant barrier to re-entry, with stable housing being crucial for securing employment and accessing support services. Lutze et al. (2013) found that providing housing and comprehensive support services enhances the likelihood of successful reintegration. Ultimately, the family's ability—or inability—to provide emotional and structural support becomes a determining factor in the reintegration journey, making family dynamics not just relevant but central to the long-term outcomes of formerly incarcerated individuals.

Moreover, societal impacts and coping strategies are crucial in the reintegration process because they directly influence how ex-inmates navigate life after incarceration. By societal impacts, we refer to the broader external factors—such as public stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion—that shape how individuals are treated by their communities, post-release. These impacts often manifest in strained interpersonal relationships, limited employment opportunities, and the persistent labeling of ex-inmates as dangerous or untrustworthy. Coping strategies, on the other hand, are the internal and behavioral mechanisms ex-inmates use to manage the stress, rejection, and identity disruption brought about by these societal challenges. These include emotional regulation, withdrawal, spiritual practices, and seeking social support.

Western (2018) challenged the stereotype of ex-convicts as inherently criminal, arguing that many have survived cycles of violence, trauma, and marginalization long before incarceration. Reamico (2022) further emphasized that former Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) often face heightened anxiety, a longing for equal treatment, and difficulties in securing employment—challenges that are deeply tied to how society views and engages with them. Agtong et al. (2023) underscored the weight of societal disapproval and lack of systemic support, which make adaptation more difficult. Guinto et al. (2019) found that while stigma severely affects personal relationships, it can be mitigated through community support and a resilient, hopeful mindset. Palgan and Apolinario (2022) noted the danger of “normalization,” where ex-inmates may lose family ties or revert to old behaviors, further affecting their self-esteem and employment prospects.

These societal pressures are not just background conditions—they are active forces that shape whether an individual can successfully reintegrate or fall into recidivism. Coping strategies become essential tools for survival and transformation,

enabling ex-inmates to rebuild their identity, restore relationships, and find purpose amid rejection. Without understanding and addressing these social impacts and equipping ex-inmates with healthy coping mechanisms, reintegration efforts will remain incomplete and ineffective.

The existing literature indicates that ex-inmates face various challenges in reintegrating into society. Despite extensive research on this topic, there is a significant gap in studies investigating accessible and effective re-entry programs for ex-inmates, and a comprehensive understanding of the barriers they experience and strategies to overcome them. This research gap is particularly evident in the province of Isabela, highlighting the need for region-specific studies to inform local policy and program development. Hence, this study addresses these gaps by providing a holistic, region-specific, and practical examination of ex-inmate reintegration in Isabela.

This research aimed to achieve several objectives to comprehensively understand the reintegration process of ex-inmates. First, it sought to explore the experiences of ex-inmates a year before and during incarceration, providing insight into their life circumstances and the factors that led to their imprisonment. Second, the study examined ex-inmates' experiences during their re-entry into the community, shedding light on their immediate challenges and adjustments upon release. Third, it aimed to identify the various challenges encountered by ex-inmates upon reintegration into society, including societal stigmatization, familial rejection, and financial difficulties. Finally, the study evaluated how ex-inmates perceived the transitional services provided by the government, assessing the effectiveness and accessibility of these programs in supporting their reintegration. Through these objectives, the research intended to offer a holistic view of the reintegration journey and provide recommendations for improving support systems for ex-inmates.

II. METHODS

The study utilized a qualitative research design using Moustaka's (1994) transcendental phenomenology. This approach aims to acquire data by espousing the assumption that the essence of things is ultimately dependent on how the individual living it experiences a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To uncover meaning and significance of these experiences, the researchers endeavored to interpret the internal perceptions and feelings of the participants (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022).

The participants of this study are ex-inmates (N=5) recruited through purposive sampling. A preliminary screening was administered to secure the participants' credible eligibility to feed the researchers the data needed. The criteria of the sample include the following: 1) they are residents of the Province of Isabela; 2) they were incarcerated for one (1) year or more in any correctional facility in the country; 3) they were already released for six (6) months or more; and 4) they are not recidivists.

Three of the study's six participants are married: P1, P2, and P4. Meanwhile, P3 is widowed, whereas P5 is single. Sixty-three-year-old P1 was incarcerated for 14 years for the crime of Homicide and was released in 2010. Sixty-six-year-old P2 was imprisoned for three years for the crime of Child Abuse and was freed in 2021. Seventy-three-year-old P3 was put behind bars for one year for the crime of Rebellion and left the cells in 1979. Forty-nine-year-old P4 was jailed for four years for the crime of Rebellion and was released in 2022. Lastly, thirty-two-year-old P5 was confined in cells for one year for the crime of Rape and was released in 2010.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The researchers created an interview guide with the guidance of a licensed psychometrician and guidance counselor, who also validated its content. Before data collection, a letter of invitation was provided to prospective participants. After screening the participants, appointments were scheduled for in-person interviews. Before the interviews began, participants were briefed on the study's objectives, potential risks, and benefits. They were informed that participation was voluntary, with the option to decline or skip any questions they found uncomfortable. After obtaining their consent to participate, participants completed an informed consent form and proceeded with the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The collected data were stored securely in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

The researchers were immersed in the data through repeatedly reviewing the transcripts in order to identify significant statements that highlighted key aspects of reintegration. These statements were coded to filter the data into manageable clusters without losing the richness of the participants' experiences. From these codes, broader themes such as "Family Dynamics," "Societal Impacts," "Economic Challenges," and "Coping Strategies" were formulated. Furthermore, the researchers created coherent narratives that reflected both shared and individual experiences. Utilizing Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), the researchers continuously reflected on the interpretations and refined the themes in order to ensure that the themes authentically represented the participants' perspectives.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed several key themes and subthemes that encapsulate the experiences of ex-inmates. The primary themes include the experiences of ex-inmates before and during incarceration, and their experiences and challenges upon reintegration into society. Specifically, the themes before incarceration include strong family ties and life dissatisfaction. During imprisonment, the themes highlighted are the excellent rapport with co-inmates and compliance with jail officers. Upon reintegration, the themes are further divided into family dynamics, societal impacts and coping strategies, and the ex-inmates' views on transitional services provided by the government. All themes are further broken down into various subthemes, providing a detailed analysis of the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by ex-inmates.

A. Experiences of the ex-inmates a year before and during incarceration

1. Before incarceration.

Four participants shared that they had strong relationships with their families before incarceration. P2 mentioned, "I have four children. I had a good relationship with my family before I got imprisoned," and P4 highlighted, "I have three children... When it comes to my relationship with the kids... they are not at all stubborn. They obey what we, their parents, tell them. But my only concern for the kids is that they finish their studies as it is the only thing we can let them inherit, which no man can steal away from them." These reflections show that the participants had built strong familial foundations and valued their roles as breadwinners and caretakers. This

insight is consistent with Williams et al. (2012), who found that most prisoners were close to their families and received emotional support.

Despite strong family ties, participants expressed dissatisfaction with their quality of life due to financial instability. P1 said, "Through God's mercy, we have a good life condition. We have enough in life. Even in food, we are doing fine. It is just money matters that I fall short of." Similarly, P3 and P4 emphasized the difficulty of being the sole breadwinners and the hardships of providing for their families. P4 stated, "Even if I only reached 4th grade, I have good thinking and have reached many places. To say, I have learned a lot. Maybe, I am not a waste to the community, after all." This economic struggle was not merely a source of discomfort—it became a trigger for desperation. The constant pressure to fulfill their responsibilities as providers, particularly in the absence of viable employment opportunities, led some participants to resort to unlawful means as a survival strategy. The need to cover daily expenses, support their children's education, or settle debts created an environment in which committing a crime appeared to be a rational, albeit risky, option. Bulandos and Austria-Cruz (2019) supported this, indicating that poverty is a significant factor driving crime commission, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities where legitimate economic opportunities are scarce.

The participants' dissatisfaction and relentless pursuit of a better life fueled their vulnerability to unlawful activities. Their actions were not driven by malice or criminal intent, but by the overwhelming need to improve their circumstances in a society that offered them few alternatives. This demonstrates how structural issues such as poverty, lack of education, and underemployment are not just background variables but also active contributors to the choices individuals make, including engaging in crimes out of necessity.

2. During incarceration.

Insights from the interviews show that the participants had varied experiences with their co-inmates. P1 and P3 formed friendships with their cellmates almost immediately. P1 stated, "My co-inmates were okay. I have not encountered any problem. I made friends with some of them," while P3 noted, "We are okay. We are like friends to each other there." Conversely, P4 and P5 highlighted challenges in getting along with others, emphasizing the need to cooperate to avoid conflict. P4 mentioned, "Not being on good terms with some co-inmates is inevitable... Misunderstandings arise when beliefs contradict." P5 added, "You really need to get along with them. Otherwise, you will be subjected to disciplinary actions." This finding aligns with Schaefer et al. (2017), who found that inmates often formed familial ties despite the lack of a clear hierarchy among different groups inside the cells. The experience of building rapport in prison involves an enforced harmony among inmates, which contrasts with the freedom to choose acquaintances outside.

On the other hand, the participants described their relationships with jail officers as harsh, resulting in compliance out of fear. P1 recounted, "Dealing with jail officers is difficult... One small mistake, and you get punished. There is a paddle awaiting you." P3 echoed this sentiment, describing severe mistreatment, "They beat you outside and instruct you not to tell anyone... I was tortured and punched while eating." While sharing this, the researchers observed that P3 was stroking his legs. This insight aligns with findings of Alimohammad et al. (2018), which suggest that anxiety

may manifest in behaviors such as hand or leg stroking. The participants' experiences underscore a power imbalance between inmates and officers, with harsh treatment leading to submission as a coping mechanism. This abuse is exacerbated by the lack of a comprehensive manual for jail officers, resulting in arbitrary enforcement of rules.

Meanwhile, all participants acknowledged the availability of livelihood programs in prison. P1 worked in an auto repair shop and saved money for his family. P2 mentioned opportunities in small business and gambling, P4 ran a peanut butter and bread business, and P5 noted basket and mat production work. These programs are seen as beneficial for economic support and family relations, supporting findings by Estillore and Aoas (2020) that such activities aid inmates' rehabilitation and financial contributions to their families.

Despite these programs, the participants reported issues with basic needs provision inside the prison. They experienced overcrowded cells, with up to 30 inmates in one cell, leading to discomfort. Medical services varied: while P1 and P4 received free medication and regular check-ups, P2 found outside medicine more available, and P3 shared a lack of access to medical care. Food quality was also problematic, with complaints about insufficient portions and poor cooking. This finding reflects concerns Narag & Jones (2016) highlighted about overcrowding and the need for better resources and training in the prison system. The overall satisfaction with jail services was mixed, indicating that while some services were available, their flaws remained a significant issue for the ex-inmates.

B. Experiences of ex-inmates during their re-entry to the community

1. Family and friends' acceptance.

Insights from the interview show that the participants demonstrated a warm reception from family and friends upon their release from prison. P1 noted that his family embraced him upon re-entry: "My family treated me well when I was released." P3 and P4 confirmed similar experiences, with P3 stating, "I expected that my family would still treat me well. Nothing changed with the way my family dealt with me. They missed me and showed compassion." P4 added, "I raised my family well before my imprisonment. When I was freed, they accepted me fully and happily." Likewise, P2 highlighted his family's ongoing support: "I am so grateful for my family because they really understood me. I just tell them what I need, and they give it to me."

Regarding friends, the participants felt no significant changes in their relationships. P1 said, "My circle of friends was good, just like my family." P2 noted, "Nothing changed with my friends. They understand the situation since they know what really happened." P3 shared, "I treat my friends well. I do not involve them in these matters." P4 confirmed, "My friends certainly accepted me. It took them almost a month visiting me in our house just to see me."

These findings differ with Tenorio et al. (2019), who suggested that ex-inmates often face difficulties with family and friends due to lingering ill feelings and embarrassment. In this study, family and true friends were constant sources of support for the ex-inmates. They expected their relationships to remain strong despite their past, which was met. The ex-inmates' family and friends played a crucial role in their reintegration, which reflect the deep-rooted family values of Filipinos that are particularly evident during difficult times. The ex-inmates anticipated that their familial and social relationships would endure despite the stigma attached to their

past – and this expectation was affirmed. Their families did not abandon them or treat them with suspicion or judgment; instead, they embraced their return, offered encouragement, and even assisted them in rebuilding their lives. This consistent support played a pivotal role in helping the ex-inmates regain a sense of belonging, self-worth, and motivation to pursue positive life changes.

Such strong familial backing reflects the deep-rooted cultural values in Filipino society that emphasize family solidarity, unconditional love, and mutual support, especially during times of hardship. In many Filipino households, the family is regarded as the primary social unit and safety net, one that upholds loyalty and compassion regardless of a member's past mistakes. As Ballaret (2025) emphasizes, Filipino families often respond to the return of formerly incarcerated relatives with warmth and acceptance, anchored in values of forgiveness and collective resilience. Similarly, Cutamora et al. (2025) demonstrate that the strength of intergenerational familial ties enhances resilience and coping during reintegration into community life. Uy (2022) further highlights how Filipino migrants in Europe draw on familial and spiritual traditions to withstand discrimination, guided by a commitment to forgiveness and neighborly love. These findings are echoed by Valdez (2016), who notes that even when family members are fragmented by trauma, unity and support often resurface, reflecting a deeply embedded cultural ethos of togetherness. Thus, this cultural emphasis on forgiveness, togetherness, and resilience may explain why the participants experienced acceptance and encouragement from their loved ones, ultimately easing their transition back into the community.

2. Renewed life aspirations.

The participants expressed renewed aspirations centered on self-improvement and family commitments. P1 and P4 focused on personal change, with P1 stating, "With my release, I would change everything I did wrong," and P4 adding, "I have many plans. When I was released, I vowed to change my personal behavior. But getting along with other people is one thing I would try to manage."

P2 and P3 aimed to compensate for lost time with their families by committing to jobs that could provide for their daily needs. P2 said, "My actual plan is to make up for my shortcomings to the family. I aspire that the land I will farm/till will be prepared so I can pay up my debts and other obligations. Unfortunately, I have not started yet with farming because it took me long to plan for an efficient way to plant anything possible." P3 shared, "My plan is to fill up all the lost time with my family, so I focused on working for them."

The need for change among ex-inmates was driven by existential crises and society's negative perception of them. Long periods of isolation and introspection during incarceration forced the participants to confront not only the consequences of their actions but also the meaning and direction of their lives. These existential crises – marked by a deep sense of loss, guilt, and longing for redemption – prompted them to reassess their identities and life goals. Compounding this was the awareness of how society viewed them: as criminals undeserving of trust, opportunity, or dignity. This external stigma intensified their internal resolve to reform and motivated them to rebuild their reputations and reintegrate with dignity.

According to Honeywell (2018), the belief in life renewal pushes individuals toward a hopeful future. This was evident among the participants, whose

commonality lay in their commitment to changing old habits and routines – not just for personal gain, but for the well-being of their families. They expressed sincere repentance for their past actions and demonstrated a strong determination to avoid repeating the same mistakes. In this way, their aspirations were not simply reactive or circumstantial, but part of a deeper psychological and moral transformation rooted in the hope of becoming better individuals, responsible family members, and productive citizens.

3. Fear of judgment.

After experiencing life inside prison cells, ex-inmates primarily feared judgment upon attempting to reintegrate into the community. P2 stated, “In my case, I fear exposing myself outside.” Similarly, P3 said, “I feared at that time. I just stayed at home, and I could not bring myself to go to the field.” Fear of judgment was recognized as an internal perception among the ex-inmates, who viewed the outside world as cruel and preferred the safety of their family homes.

Pansag et al. (2016) found overcoming difficulties inside cells is driven by sufficient motivation that will urge them to continuously hope that their renewed plans in life upon release will soon come to fruition. Insights from the participants imply that there may be an internal perception of negative judgements among inmates. During these times, family homes became their safe places, as they viewed the outside world as cruel and unwelcoming towards ex-inmates.

C. Challenges experienced by the ex-inmates upon reintegration into society

1. Economic challenge.

Insights from the interviews have shown that ex-inmates often encounter significant financial hardships upon their release from prison. P1 mentioned his plans to alleviate the family burden after incarceration: “My hardship upon release is employment, hoping to give a good life to my family.” P4 echoed this sentiment: “What I did is I put my attention to farming to make up to my family.”

Furthermore, in the context of this study, it was found that farming became the primary – and often the only – source of income for the participants. P1, P2, and P4 expressed their immediate return to farming: “I did not apply for work. I am only a farmer. I did not try applying, I just did farming,” “I did not try applying, I immediately went to farming,” and “I focused my attention on farming.” These statements reflect not only the limited opportunities available to them but also a sense of resignation and reluctance to explore alternative livelihoods. Their decision to return to familiar labor-intensive work may be interpreted as a practical response to immediate financial needs, but it also reveals a deeper hesitancy to re-enter formal employment spaces where they risk being judged or rejected due to their criminal records.

Meanwhile, P3 and P5 attempted to engage in various available jobs, with P3 stating, “Whatever it is that could make money, I go for it. There is no discrimination.” P5 added, “Yes, they ask about your criminal record during job interviews. They inquire about what happened. There is no discrimination; it depends on who interviews you.” These accounts suggest that although some participants made attempts to explore new ventures, they still encountered barriers such as social scrutiny and the emotional toll of having to repeatedly explain or defend their past.

This emotional burden likely discourages sustained engagement in formal employment.

P3's account of relocating his family in search of better opportunities – only to face deeper hardship – underscores the lack of financial and social capital that limits mobility and adaptability. "My solution at that time was to leave. My family and I left and went to one town, but it seemed like a wrong move because we were more burdened for not having our own land to till. So, we decided to return to our hometown; I do not mind dying there." This illustrates not only the scarcity of resources but also the eventual retreat into familiar territory, possibly driven by feelings of shame, fear of rejection, or social alienation in unfamiliar communities.

These challenges align with Yin et al. (2022), who noted that ex-inmates often lack resources – such as stable housing, financial capital, or professional networks – and face an unwillingness to engage in new ventures due to perceived shame. In this study, that shame manifested in self-exclusion from job markets, avoidance of social interaction in new environments, and a strong preference for work that did not require public exposure or formal application processes. Even years after their release, many participants continued to struggle with achieving financial stability, reflecting the long-term consequences of incarceration on self-perception and social reintegration.

2. Perceived societal stigma.

Insights from the study showed that ex-inmates often face significant societal stigma upon reintegration, which has led to feelings of vulnerability. P1 described how neighbors viewed him with hostility: "My neighbors had hostile looks toward me. Of course, it is because I wronged them. I nevertheless ignored them because I was at fault. If they have something to tell against me, I do not know. I just treat them well." P2 mentioned his strategy to cope with uncertainty: "If I am unsure of a person, what I do is I keep my mouth shut. I wait for them to talk to me, and I start interacting with them. My acquaintances grew, but I remained humble. If there is any misunderstanding between us, I give way."

P4 highlighted the difficulty of adjusting to community perceptions: "The hardest thing was adjusting because we have no idea what people think of us. Other people in our community would say, 'This is his case, but he managed to get out.' This is all in my head, but I have not heard anything. Of course, maybe they have no trust and confidence in me. That is what I feel." P5 added that he was subjected to teasing: "They tease me. It appears to be a joke for them, but for me, it is not, as other remarks are below the belt. I just laugh it off."

These experiences align with the findings of Moore et al. (2016), which indicate that stigma can significantly impact ex-inmates' functioning and self-esteem. Ex-inmates often feel labeled as a different breed of individuals post-release, leading them to build walls for self-protection. Their feelings are frequently disregarded and subjected to mockery, forcing them to lower their morale and adjust to those around them.

3. Psychological instability.

Ex-inmates also struggle with psychological instability, fearing future uncertainties. P2 stated, "I contemplate what I should do because this seems like a new life. I think of the things that could be and the things I can do to improve my life." P3

discussed the hardship of being unable to provide for his family: “It has been a big struggle. Just a year of not engaging in farming already means not being able to provide for your family's needs. Just a day of not working is a big loss already. If possible, I can provide in excess.” These reflections capture the emotional weight carried by individuals attempting to rebuild their lives while grappling with anxiety, self-doubt, and a disrupted sense of identity.

Participants experienced psychological instability not only as a result of their incarceration but also due to unresolved traumas and the daunting uncertainty of life after release. The prison experience, particularly the exposure to physical violence, punishment, and solitary confinement, left enduring emotional scars. These experiences contributed to feelings of helplessness, diminished self-worth, and a fractured sense of purpose. With limited preparation for life beyond bars, many faced the world again with fear and trepidation. They are uncertain whether they would be accepted, able to find work, or capable of staying away from past behaviors.

This psychological burden was further intensified by the pressure to reintegrate successfully and make amends for their past. Many ex-inmates worried about their ability to fulfill societal expectations, restore family relationships, and prove they had changed. The emotional toll of wanting to do better, while being unsure of how to navigate a vastly different world, created internal conflict and distress.

The support of their families proved to be a critical factor in mitigating these mental and emotional struggles. Participants leaned on the acceptance, encouragement, and understanding of loved ones as stabilizing forces during their transition. In the absence of mental health care and structured reintegration programs, family support served as an informal yet powerful coping mechanism. Without such support, these inner struggles could easily lead to relapse or recidivism.

Without proper psychological intervention before release, e.g., trauma-informed counseling, reentry planning, or emotional resilience training, the risk of falling back into old patterns remains high. The process of reintegration can feel overwhelming when ex-inmates are left to face it alone, with minimal resources and ongoing stigma. However, Baffour et al. (2021) and Muthee et al. (2020) noted that the fear of returning to prison and the hope for a better future can become motivating forces. For many, the memory of incarceration and the desire to reclaim their dignity act as psychological anchors pushing them to persevere and rebuild their lives despite the odds.

D. Ex-inmates' Perception of the Government's Transitional Services

The participants also reported significant gaps in the transitional services² provided by the government upon their release, revealing both a lack and absence of support. Four participants indicated that they did not receive any transitional services. P4 noted, “I do not remember receiving any help from the government because we even looked for our own lawyers. Our barangay officials also did not give us any financial assistance. They assume I am in good financial standing, even if that is false. If I do not work, we won't have enough money. If we do not farm, we have nothing.”

²In the Philippines, transitional services for inmates include psychosocial counseling, vocational skills training, educational programs, spiritual and behavioral rehabilitation, and aftercare support aimed at facilitating successful reintegration into the community and reducing the risk of recidivism (Bureau of Jail Management and Penology [BJMP], n.d.; Bureau of Corrections [BuCor], 2021).

Similarly, P5 mentioned receiving only psychological treatment: “Yes, there is psychological treatment,” but added, “There are no transitional programs. Not even livelihood.”

This feedback aligns with Chikadzi’s (2017) findings, which indicate that while there is increased support from various organizations before release, many ex-inmates feel they are not provided with adequate aftercare services. Participants experienced a lack of helpful programs and felt that their basic needs were neglected. The available support was often superficial and did not address their long-term needs.

The fact that psychological treatment was the only service granted to just one participant highlights a significant issue: penal institutions often cease to monitor and support former inmates once they are released. This insight indicates a reliance on the ex-inmates’ self-recovery under the false assumption that they can manage on their post-release. The lack of sustained support, follow-up, monitoring, and continuity of care in and out of prison underscores the inadequacies of the transitional services provided.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the reintegration experiences of ex-inmates in the Province of Isabela, specifically focusing on their life before, during, and after incarceration; the challenges they encountered upon re-entry; and their perceptions of government-provided transitional services. The findings revealed that reintegration is a deeply complex and personal journey shaped by interwoven structural, emotional, and societal factors.

First, the study found that strong family ties prior to incarceration often became a lifeline upon release, contradicting previous research that predicted alienation. In the Philippine context, cultural values of forgiveness and family solidarity played a crucial role in helping ex-inmates rebuild their lives, with participants frequently citing the emotional and practical support of loved ones as central to their renewed sense of purpose.

Second, the research uncovered significant psychological distress stemming from traumatic incarceration experiences, social stigma, and fear of judgment. Many participants struggled with anxiety, self-doubt, and uncertainty, which were only partially offset by familial support. These findings underscore the need for trauma-informed care and pre-release psychological intervention, as emotional readiness is essential to a successful reintegration process.

Third, economic hardship was a major barrier, with participants largely resorting to farming or informal labor. Despite the presence of livelihood programs in prison, most lacked access to post-release employment assistance, and feelings of shame and social exclusion discouraged them from pursuing new ventures. The absence of comprehensive reentry planning contributed to persistent financial insecurity and reinforced the cycle of marginalization.

Finally, the participants expressed limited awareness of or access to transitional services, with most reporting no post-release support from local or national agencies. This reflects a critical gap in government accountability and coordination, reinforcing the idea that reintegration is still primarily viewed as the individual's burden rather than a shared societal responsibility.

Thus, the study concludes that effective reintegration must begin within correctional facilities—not merely through disciplinary control but through well-funded, person-centered programs that provide psychological, educational, and livelihood support. Reintegration should be viewed as a continuum of care that extends beyond release, with coordination between penal institutions, local governments, and civil society.

Policymakers and practitioners are urged to strengthen transitional services by ensuring accessibility, continuity, and cultural responsiveness, especially in rural areas like Isabela. With the growing prison population in the Philippines and the high risk of recidivism due to systemic neglect, this study serves as a call to action. Reintegration is not merely a personal recovery; it is a public responsibility.

V. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has some limitations. First, the criteria used to select participants limited the research's scope. The strict qualifications narrowed the range of experiences included, so it is suggested that future research expand the criteria to include any Filipino citizen who has been incarcerated. This would allow for a broader nationwide comparison of services and transitional programs, offering a more complete analysis of their experiences.

Additionally, the study faced challenges in obtaining complete and accurate information. Participants were asked to discuss very sensitive times in their lives, which might have felt intrusive and impacted the results. Future researchers should build strong, trusting relationships with participants before starting the study to help them feel more comfortable sharing their experiences.

Finally, further investigation is needed to determine whether the study's findings accurately reflect the realities of judicial processes and systems. Future researchers can use these findings as a foundation for their work and justify specific approaches to this topic in future studies.

VI. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research.

VII. REFERENCES

- Agtong, G. A., Bazer, A., Descuatan, K. A., & Ceballo, E. C. (2023). Life after imprisonment: Exploring the repercussions of jail time on ex-convicts. *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 21(3), 61–77.
<https://doi.org/10.9734/arjass/2023/v21i3472>
- Alimohammad, H. S., Ghasemi, Z., Shahriar, S., Morteza, S., & Arsalan, K. (2018). Effect of hand and foot surface stroke massage on anxiety and vital signs in patients with acute coronary syndrome: A randomized clinical trial. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 31, 126–131.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2018.01.012>
- Baffour, F. D., Francis, A. P., Chong, M. D., Harris, N., & Baffour, P. D. (2021). Perpetrators at first, victims at last: Exploring the consequences of stigmatization on ex-convicts' mental well-being. *Criminal Justice Review*, 46(3), 304–325.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016820960785>

- Ballaret, J. R. (2025). Behind the bars and beyond: A qualitative exploration of Filipino families embracing returning prisoners. *The Family Journal*.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/10664807251325557>
- Baptiste, N. (2016, January 26). After incarceration, what next?. *The American Prospect*.
<http://prospect.org/article/after-incarceration-what-next>
- Bebbington, P. E., McManus, S., Coid, J. W., Garside, R., & Brugha, T. (2021). The mental health of ex-prisoners: Analysis of the 2014 English National Survey of Psychiatric Morbidity. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 56(11), 2083–2093. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-021-02066-0>.
- Bertulfo, D. J., Canoy, N., & Celeste, M. A. (2016). Positioning analysis of Filipino family narratives in the context of prisoner reintegration. *Sage Open*, 6(4), 2158244016674248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016674248>
- Bidola, V. R., Leon, R. D., Ignacio, E., Mori, M. J., Valdez, S. N., & Bernabe, J. (2024). Life after bars: A narrative-case study of ex-convicts. *American Journal of Human Psychology*, 2(1), 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.54536/ajhp.v2i1.2554>
- Bulandos, J. Z., & Austria-Cruz, M. A. (2019). Extent of factors that influence the commission of crimes in Cabanatuan City, Philippines. *Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 11(1), 0.
- Bureau of Jail Management and Penology. (n.d.). *Programs*.
<https://bjmp.gov.ph/programs/>
- Bureau of Corrections. (2021). *Operating manual - Part I*. <https://bucor.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/BUCOR-OPERATING-MANUAL-Part-1.pdf>
- Cerda, J. A., Stenstrom, D. M., & Curtis, M. (2015). The role of type of offense and work qualifications on perceived employability of former offenders. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40, 317–335. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12103-014-9244-8>
- Ceballo, E. C., & Absin, F. A. J. C. (2022). Phenomenology of incarcerated mothers: What about their children?. *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 7(4).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.46827/ejsss.v7i4.1269>
- Chikadzi, V. (2017). Challenges facing ex-offenders when reintegrating into mainstream society in Gauteng, South Africa. *Social Work*, 53(2), 288–300.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15270/52-2-569>
- Cutamora, J., Constantino, R., Lapa, M. M. I., & Tipon, L. (2025). The impact of community listening sessions on navigating life challenges and enhancing resilience in older adults. *Discover Public Health*, 1(1), 1–14.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12982-025-00397-w>
- Darwynn, B. E., & Aoas, D. M. P. (2020). Effects of BJMP livelihood program to the lives of released inmates. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 5(11), 761–773. www.ijisrt.com. ISSN - 2456-2165
- Flores-Barolo, M. G., & Vicente, J. B. (2019). Challenges and coping mechanisms of persons deprived of liberty of Sablayan Prison and Penal Farm in the Philippines. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences*, 8(11), 49–97.
- Guinto, K. L. B., Kim, C. M. G., Bab-ating, G. J. L., & Caranto, L. C. (2019). Living outside the bars: Lived experiences of family members of offenders in Baguio and Benguet, Philippines. *Mountain Journal of Science and Interdisciplinary Research*, 79(1), 62–71.

- Ho, L., & Limpaecher, A. (2022, March 17). What is phenomenological research design? Essential guide to coding qualitative data. *Delve*.
<https://delvetool.com/blog/phenomenology>
- Jones, C., & Narag, R. (2019). How inmates help run Philippine prisons. *Current History*, 118(811), 298–303. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614475>
- Lutze, F. E., Rosky, J. W., & Hamilton, Z. K. (2013). Homelessness and re-entry: A multisite outcome evaluation of Washington State's re-entry housing program for high risk offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 41(4), 471–491.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854813510164>
- Martin, L. (2018). "Free but still walking the yard": Prisonization and the problems of re-entry. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 47(5), 671–694.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241617737814>
- Moore, K. E., Stuewig, J. B., & Tangney, J. P. (2016). The effect of stigma on criminal offenders' functioning: A longitudinal mediational model. *Deviant Behavior*, 37(2), 196–218. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4788463/>
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Muthee, J. M., Adeli, S. M., & Barasa, F. O. (2020). Effects of the challenges facing re-entry of women ex-offenders in Nyeri County, Kenya. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 9(4), 29–40.
<https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v9i4.699>
- Palgan, M. D., & Apolinario, R. C. (2022). Walking a new beginning: A case study on the chronicles of ex-offenders in surpassing the challenges of living outside the bars. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 6(1), 178–187.
- Pansag, F. J., Rufina, C. R., Paradiang, L. A., Labasano, F., & Lasala, G. (2016). Journey of an ex-convict: From conviction to liberation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(2), 21–28.
- Pogrebin, M., West-Smith, M., Walker, A., & Unnithan, N. P. (2014). Employment isn't enough: Financial obstacles experienced by ex-prisoners during the re-entry process. *Criminal Justice Review*, 39(4), 394–410. http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57929-4_7
- Rade, C. B., Desmarais, S. L., & Mitchell, R. E. (2016). A meta-analysis of public attitudes toward ex-offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 43(9), 1260–1280.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0093854816655837>
- Reamico, C. (2022). Lived experiences of reintegration: A case study of how former persons deprived of liberty (PDL) experienced reintegration in a local context. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 7(5).
<https://ijisrt.com/assets/upload/files/IJISRT22MAY1251.pdf>
- Schaefer, D. R., Bouchard, M., Young, J. T. N., & Kreager, D. A. (2017). Friends in locked places: An investigation of prison inmate network structure. *Social Networks*, 51, 88–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2016.12.006>
- Subramanian, R., Delaney, R., Roberts, S., Fishman, N., & McGarry, P. (2015). Incarceration's front door: The misuse of jails in America. *Vera Institute of Justice*.
<https://www.vera.org/publications/incarcerations-front-door-the-misuse-of-jails-in-america>
- Uy, J. L. S. (2022). "He loved me first so I need to love my neighbors": Filipino migrants' experiences of resilience against racism and discrimination in Finland. *Doria*.
<https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/186373>

Valdez, D. M. G. (2016). *Filipina survivors of sexual violence negotiating family values* (Master's thesis, California State University). CSU ScholarWorks.
<https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/fj2363676>