

# Aftermath of Incarceration: Lived Experiences of the Ex-Convict

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of ex-convicts after incarceration. The study utilizes a qualitative approach, employing in-depth interviews with five participants who were released from prison for committing a crime. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and focused on the participants' experiences of re-entry into society, including their employment, housing, relationships, and mental health. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying common themes across the participants' experiences. The findings suggest that the re-entry process for ex-convicts is a challenging experience, characterized by a range of barriers and obstacles. Participants reported difficulty in finding stable employment and housing, often facing discrimination and stigma due to their criminal record. They also reported strained relationships with family and friends and struggles with mental health. The study highlights the need for support services to assist ex-convicts in their transition back into society, including employment and housing assistance, mental health services, and community-based support networks. The findings also call for broader social change to address the stigmatization and discrimination faced by ex-convicts, promoting a more inclusive and accepting society. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the experiences of ex-convicts after incarceration, contributing to a better understanding of the challenges they face and the support they need to successfully reintegrate into society.

**Keywords:** discrimination, employment, ex-convict, housing, incarceration, stigma

## INTRODUCTION

Crime is defined as an act or omission punishable by law (Mahmudovich, 2022). It is an act committed in violation of public law forbidding it, in general, crimes are actions that are deemed to be harmful to individuals, communities, or society as a whole, and are therefore subject to legal penalties (Maculan, & Gil Gil, 2020). According to studies, many factors can contribute to why individuals commit crimes. These factors can be broadly categorized into individual-level factors, such as psychological or biological factors, and societal-level factors, such as poverty and inequality (Dunlea, & Heiphetz, 2020; Updegrave, et al., 2021).

In connection to the crime, the Criminal Justice System in the Philippines. The criminal justice system refers to the set of institutions and processes designed to investigate, prosecute, and punish individuals who have been accused of committing a crime (Florea, et al., 2019). The criminal justice system is composed of 5 pillars such as law enforcement, prosecution, court, correction, and community (Guinigundo, 2021). These 5 pillars are what make up the criminal justice system. Without one of these, the criminal justice system of the Philippines cannot function.

The criminal justice system includes the correction pillar (Aguilar, 2022; Presbitero, & Ching, 2018). The Corrections Pillar performs its task as the safe keeper and undertakes the rehabilitation of offenders and

convicted felons (Mbatha, 2019; Belen et al., 2020). Corrections is a branch of the criminal justice system that is responsible for the detention, supervision, and rehabilitation of criminal offenders (Appleman, 2020). It administers penal treatment to criminal offenders in order to reduce crime (Ajah, 2018).

To provide reformation and the primary aim of establishing correctional centers across the world is to provide reformation and rehabilitation programs for those who violate the rules and regulations of their society (Ndidi & Daminabo, 2018)). These include incarceration as a form of punishment or the penalty for individuals who committed an act violating the law of such a state (Arrohim et al., 2020). Overall, the purpose of incarceration is not meant to punish them otherwise is to rehabilitate, give them hope, correct the wrong perspective of life, and eliminate their criminal behavior and mentality by utilizing those said programs (Warr, 2020). Through the programs implemented the PDL is more prepared upon reintegration into the community and gives them a great chance to get work outside (Ospina-Escobar, & Pcoroba, 2022).

In connection with incarceration, ex-convicts are individuals who have been released from prison or other correctional institutions after serving a sentence for a criminal offense (Elisha, 2023). This term is typically used to describe individuals who have been incarcerated for a significant period of time and have completed their sentence, as opposed to individuals who may have been briefly detained or incarcerated for a minor offense (Besin-Mengla 2020). Ex-convicts may face a range of challenges upon their release from prison, including stigma and discrimination, limited access to resources and services, and difficulties reintegrating into society (Robinson, 2022). Efforts to support ex-convicts may include providing access to job training and education programs, counseling and mental health services, and support from community organizations or reentry programs (Alisha, 2023).

The lived experiences of ex-convicts can vary widely depending on a range of factors, including the length of their sentence, the nature of their offense, and their support network upon release (Chouhy et al., 2020). However, there are some common themes that many ex-convicts may experience during and after their incarceration. During their time in prison, many ex-convicts may struggle with feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and loss of autonomy (Robinson, 2022). The prison environment can be highly structured and regimented, with limited opportunities for self-expression and personal growth (Robinson, 2022). Additionally, many ex-convicts may experience violence, exploitation, or abuse while in prison, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health and well-being (Western, & Harding, 2022). After release, many ex-convicts may find it challenging to reintegrate into society.

They may face barriers to employment, housing, education, and social relationships due to their criminal record (Jasni, 2020). This can lead to feelings of shame, stigma, and social isolation, which can have a significant impact on their mental health. Many ex-convicts may also struggle with issues related to substance abuse and mental health (Warren, 2023). Despite these challenges, many ex-convicts are resilient and determined to rebuild their lives after incarceration (Besin-Mengla, 2020). They may seek out support from community organizations, family members, or faith-based groups to help them overcome the barriers they face. With the right support and resources, many ex-convicts are able to successfully reintegrate into society and lead fulfilling, productive lives (Nyanihorba, & Armah, 2022; Whiteside, 2023).

Thus, the researchers perceived that this study is necessary to be conducted to realize what the ex-convicts encountered during their reintegration into the community. Whether they experienced equal opportunities for employment and livelihood, and how the community treated them after incarceration. On what challenges they face and how they have dealt with these kinds of experiences. Their management on getting back the life they previously possessed.

## **METHODS**

This study utilized the qualitative type of research, specifically the phenomenological approach. It is

the process of analyzing the responses from the participants of the study to determine the appropriate themes following the Moustakas transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenology that refers to experience, this approach seeks to understand human experiences. In relation to the study, this approach is a method to understand the undertaken situations of the ex-convicts after incarceration, their challenges, coping with the circumstances, and treatment of the community upon their re-entry. It is useful to use when the researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand and has individuals who can provide a description of what they have experienced.

The study was conducted in Ozamiz City, a third-class component province of Misamis Occidental. The city is well known for having a fascinating historical and cultural background. Both good and bad perceptions are highlighted for the city's expansive territory. The city comprises 51 barangays, 23 are in urban and 28 are in rural areas. In addition, the city is rich in agricultural resources and known for its historical establishment. This city is infamous for having high levels of organized crime. The city was chosen as the study's setting because it is compatible with the study's main goal, exploring the lived experiences of ex-convicts after their incarceration.

The study includes five (5) ex-convicted people who are included in the study regardless of the crime they committed. The participants had been specifically identified, and some of the participants were asked to conceal their identities for reasons of privacy and security. They are voluntarily engaged and aware of the goal of the study. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: 1) been convicted of an offense, 2) had served their sentence or penalty, 3) had been incarcerated, and 4) willingness to participate.

The researchers developed an interview guide that served as the main tool in gathering the needed data from the participants. The participants were asked about their personal information such as the age, gender, and length of serving the sentences. Further, they were asked the main question, about the challenges and experiences after its integration in the community. Recording devices were used to record the responses of the participants during the interview, with the approval of the participants in taking this action.

Acquiring data is a key tool for the completion of this study. The data needed for this study was gathered through an interview. But before conducting the interview the researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants and assured them confidentiality. Questions for the interview contained researcher-made questions that were answered by the respondents and the answers were recorded and tallied but the data and information collected herein shall be kept confidential and shall not be disclosed to any individual except the researchers themselves. Names are only required for verification purposes but shall not be included in data processing and presentation. Other personal information is essential for the study. So, these were processed and presented on the final report or paper.

This survey was entirely voluntary, and no individual was compelled to participate in the research. The researchers asked for full consent from the participants ensuring that all information was solely used for research purposes. Confidentiality was expected to be dealt with in handling all the information supplied by the participants. At the same time, the participants were briefed prior to anything else. They were given a letter stating the relevance and justification of this study and an assurance that the information they supply was used only for educational research purposes and that no harm is intended during the data-gathering procedure.

During the day of the data-gathering procedure, researchers ensured that the participants were not busy the moment they were approached. This ensured that the participants answer the interview questions with sufficient time. However, in the advent of refusal, the researchers shall no longer pursue nor force them to answer the interview questions. This is to ensure that the researchers did not cause any disturbance in the

process of gathering the data.

Concerning the rights of every participant who participated in the study, the study was conducted according to the “Republic Act No. 10173,” also known as the “Data Privacy Act of 2012”. Therefore, recordings of any shall not be taken without the prior consent of the respondents since the data gathering was recorded. This is also pursuant to the “Republic Act No. 4200,” or the “Anti–Wiretapping Law of 1965,” to ensure that there shall be no legal rights being tampered with nor violated.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Difficulties in Employment Opportunities

This theme shows that one of the challenges of ex-convicts after their incarceration is difficulties in employment opportunities. Given the current state of the world and the Philippines, having a job is crucial today. If you already have a criminal record, it can be tough to plan to apply for a job you decide to take. Many people did not apply for the same job they held prior to being incarcerated. Employers want to make sure they are creating a safe and secure working environment for their personnel because they are skeptical that anyone with a criminal record who is hired will not commit a crime again. This makes employment difficult and fewer opportunities for ex-convicts.

Results show that participants mentioned how difficult it is to apply for a police clearance needed to apply for a job as they would always bring their release order, so they won’t be apprehended again. Some even mentioned that employers are hesitant to take them in due to the record they have. Some even mentioned that many options are available, however when it comes to a formal job, there were lesser opportunities for them. These were mentioned in the answers of the following participants:

“It’s difficult when you apply for a police clearance your record will show up and you need to bring your release order, so they won’t arrest you.” (P2)

“Also experiences difficulties looking for good opportunities because staff are hesitant to accept the application because of the record.” (P3)

“There are many options that can be done to gain money, but when it comes to formal job application in the offices or other else, there are only less opportunities because of the records I had and of course they will not trust a person who already committed an offense.” (P4)

“I just chose to become a driver in my brothers’ small business. Getting clearances for the application is difficult and I already whatever job that I wanted to apply for will reject me.” (P5)

Having a record as a law violator breaks everyone’s trust, and the offender has to bear the consequences of their action (Lageson, 2020). Being worried, hesitant and mistrustful are the frequent reactions given to ex-convicts, especially discrimination (MPB et al., 2019). Job-seeking becomes the hardest part for the ex-convicts because it holds them back from rebuilding the trust of the community (Plotnikov, 2020). It pressures them out considering the fact that they have a family to support financially. One study published in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* found that ex-convicts were less likely to receive a job offer or even an interview compared to non-offenders, even when they possessed the same qualifications and work experience (Palmer & Christian, 2019). Another study conducted by the National Institute of Justice found that the stigma associated with having a criminal record made it harder for ex-offenders to get a job, and even when they did, they typically earned lower wages than their non-offender counterparts (Chen & Shields, 2020).

Findings show that being an ex-convict can affect the job opportunities coming to them. They find it difficult and hard to get the necessary clearances and requirements for application without being questioned about their status. The finding is consistent with the finding in the study of Plotnikov (2020), Palmer & Christian (2019), and Chen & Shields (2020) that ex-convicts find it difficult to look for job opportunities due to the criminal record they have. These were supported by Goffman's Theory of Social Stigma wherein people disqualified full social acceptance for the ex-convict making it difficult to find a job.

This implies that ex-convicts will less likely find a formal job opportunity without being discriminated against. It suggests that the difficulties in job opportunities for ex-convicts after sentencing are a pervasive and complex problem that needs to be addressed to improve their chances of successful reintegration into society. It is crucial for ex-offenders to gradually earn people's trust via their behavior, show them how sorry they are for their wrongdoing, and demonstrate their aptitude for the position.

### **Family Acceptance**

This theme shows that one of the challenges of ex-convicts after their incarceration is family acceptance. Not all the time a family can fully accept the ex-convict member. Sometimes, discrimination can hinder such acceptance. Family, who is the main source of support for the ex-convict can sometimes be the reason for their challenging lives. Acceptance and gaining trust once again can take a toll on the ex-convict and requires a lot of effort to fully be accepted. Family accepts members as time permits, however, they needed assurance that they would not go back to the vices and criminalities they once paid.

Results show that participants do not feel accepted and felt indifferent towards their families. Some even mentioned that their family's treatment is not the same way as before, making them feel that they were not fully accepted. Some even mentioned that although their family cannot accept them fully, so long as they worked hard enough, they will learn to open up their hearts again and accept them as who they are. These were mentioned in the answers of the following participants:

"My family even do not accept me, although not verbally, and they do not show it, but I felt that the treatment is different than before." (P1)

"Even my family I cannot feel that I was accepted." (P3)

"My family cannot accept me fully, but I know with great efforts, they will learn to accept me again." (P4)

Families of ex-convicts may take some time to embrace the changes and fully accept them (Palgan & Apolinario, 2022). But as they do, ex-offenders are encouraged to accept responsibility for their actions and seek to mend their relationship with their family (Ndaba, 2019). Gaining their family's trust again is a difficult process that requires a lot of compassion, patience, and work (Muthee et al., 2020). The acceptance by their family and a new facet of their existence comes as a result of each ex-convict's perseverance and refusal to give up on rebuilding their house (Sabzi Khoshnami et al., 2022).

Findings show that acceptance of the family for their ex-convict member can take a lot of effort to incorporate. Ex-convicts are not fully accepted after incarceration. Although not as severely discriminated against as society, families cannot help but think of the things they have done and the fear of losing them once more and repeating the same mistakes again. The finding is consistent with the finding in the study of Palgan & Apolinario (2022), Ndaba (2019), Muthee et al. (2020), and Sabzi Khoshnami et al. (2022) that ex-convicts still find it hard to be fully accepted by their family and still need to make an effort to show how much they have changed. These were supported by Social Disorganization Theory wherein the family needed assurance before they fully accepted the ex-convict and organized their train of thought that their

member has truly had a change of heart.

This implies that reconciliation and acceptance with the family of the ex-convict member is a long process with great effort and patience. Fair treatment cannot be given and was still hostile toward them. Families may accept them, but ex-convicts must show complete submitting and complete change before they can feel that they were accepted and supported. It is important that probationers find ways and means to get back the trust of the family once more. Starting a job in a legal way and being obedient and hardworking can slowly mend the broken hearts of the family. To let them see how much you have changed and regret your actions and to let them know that you deserved to be accepted again.

### **Social Discrimination**

This theme shows that one of the challenges of ex-convicts after their incarceration is social discrimination. Social discrimination against ex-convicts refers to the unfair treatment, negative attitudes, and stereotypes that ex-convicts face in their interactions with others (Effiom et al., 2020). This discrimination can take many forms, including difficulty finding employment, housing, and social acceptance. Often leads to the struggle to reintegrate into society and rebuild their lives after serving a sentence. In addition to these practical challenges, ex-convicts also face stigma and social isolation. They may be ostracized by their communities or face discrimination from others who are aware of their criminal history. This can lead to feelings of shame and low self-worth, which can further undermine their efforts to reintegrate into society.

Results show how socially discriminated the ex-convicts are in the community that no one wants to socialize or talk to them. Some even mentioned that the treatment of the people around him is different than before. Friends and relatives of the ex-convicts cannot even be trusted by them. There were even participants who disclosed that people were afraid of them and would stay away as far as possible from them especially when they were freshly out of prison. These were mentioned in the answers of the following participants:

“Most of the people would not entertain me because of what I did, and people would not socialize, furthermore, and even experience difficulties in terms of finding some good opportunities when he was in the community. According to him, it’s better to be here than there; though he experienced some discrimination outside the cell, for him it was better to live in discrimination than to live in a cell.” (P1)

“The treatment of people who knew him was not the same before, even among his close relatives and friends, and he felt that he couldn’t be trusted anymore. Due to the negative treatment, he decided to live outside of the city in order to be free from any form of discrimination.” (P3)

“Of course, I also experienced discrimination when I came back to the community. People became afraid of me because I committed a crime and was called an “ex-convict”, and they stayed away from me, especially when it was still recent.” (P4)

People who have served their time in prison or who have been found guilty of a crime belong to a group who have experienced neglect and discrimination after serving their time (Chen & Shield, 2020). The fact that these ex-offenders are frequently pushed back into society with no means of support and no chance to start over and support themselves separates them from the rest (Rose, 2021). Ex-offenders often felt like outsiders in their neighborhoods (Saba, 2019). People gave them the impression that they weren’t welcome in society. Some individuals do not treat them well, and those who were close to them also had unfavorable sentiments toward them (Quarton, 2020). Recognizing that former prisoners have paid their debt to society and merit a second chance is crucial.

There should be initiatives taken to lessen the social stigma and discrimination that they experience, such as fair hiring practices, housing assistance, and opportunities for education and training (Smith, 2021). We can

assist in reducing recidivism and creating a more just society by promoting the reintegration of ex-offenders into society (Moore, et al., 2016).

Findings show that after incarceration, ex-convicts would experience different kinds of challenges in life. One of them is being socially discriminated against and prejudiced. People will treat them differently and see them as badly influenced. The finding is consistent with the finding in the study of Chen & Shields (2020), Rose (2021), Saba (2019), and Quarton (2020) that ex-convicts will most likely be socially discriminated against and looked down upon. These were supported by Social Disorganization Theory and Labelling Theory wherein people discriminate against the ex-convicts for being criminals and label them as criminals even though they were out in prison and have paid for their sins.

This implies that ex-convicts recognize the discrimination they had experienced. It also entails how socially discriminated ex-convicts are even after paying for their sins. It is essential to recognize that ex-convicts have paid their debt to society and deserve a second chance. Efforts should be made to reduce the social stigma and discrimination that they face, such as implementing fair hiring policies, providing housing assistance, and offering education and training opportunities. By supporting the reintegration of ex-convicts into society, we can help reduce recidivism and build a more inclusive and just society.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was undertaken to explore coping strategies and self-actualization among rehabilitated drug users. The researchers interviewed five (5) ex-convicts in Ozamiz City. Through the five (5) ex-convicts, three (3) themes have emerged from the analysis of the researcher's in-depth interview such as difficulties in employment opportunities, family acceptance, and social discrimination. The study utilized the research-made interview guide in eliciting the needed data from the participants of the study. The data gathered were analyzed through Moustaka's data analysis techniques.

Findings show that being an ex-convict can affect the job opportunities coming to them. They find it difficult to get the necessary clearances and requirements for application without being questioned about their status. Acceptance of the family for their ex-convict member can take a lot of effort to incorporate. Ex-convicts are not fully accepted after incarceration. Although not as severely discriminated against as society, families cannot help but think of the things they have done and the fear of losing them once more and repeating the same mistakes. After incarceration, ex-convicts would experience different kinds of challenges in life. One of them is being socially discriminated against and prejudiced. People will treat them differently and see them as badly influenced.

Based on the results of the study, it is concluded that is study has observed that being an ex-convict can bring different challenges. Being an ex-convict can affect the job opportunities coming to them. This implies that ex-convicts will less likely find a formal job opportunity without being discriminated against. Acceptance and gaining trust once again can take a toll on the ex-convict and requires a lot of effort to fully be accepted. Reconciliation and acceptance with the family of the ex-convict member is a long process with great effort and patience. Fair treatment cannot be given and was still hostile toward them. Families may accept them, but ex-convicts must show complete submitting and complete change before they can feel that they were accepted and supported. Social discrimination can take many forms, including difficulty finding employment, housing, and social acceptance. Often leads to the struggle to reintegrate into society and rebuild their lives after serving a sentence.

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendation is hereby forwarded: Ex-convicts may explore ways in which they can use to sustain their financial needs through people who trust them. The family of ex-convicts should provide time, care, and support to them, constantly asking for their overall

welfare. Programs that allow and encourage physical and mental well-being both between and within ex-convict's families may promote their well-being. Thus, future researchers can use these findings to support their prospective investigation, particularly in the lived experience of ex-convicts after its incarceration.

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