

# Behind Invisible Bars: Lived Experiences of Probationers

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of probationers participating in community-based rehabilitation programs in the Province of Iloilo, Philippines. As an alternative to incarceration, community-based rehabilitation seeks to promote offender reintegration by addressing the psychological, social, and behavioral dimensions of rehabilitation while maintaining public safety. Guided by a transcendental phenomenological approach, the study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten (10) probationers who were purposively selected based on their direct experience with the probation system. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which involved verbatim transcription, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, and synthesis of the participants' lived experiences. The findings revealed that probation was experienced as a transformative yet challenging journey. Participants described positive personal changes characterized by improved self-discipline, strengthened family relationships, and renewed hope for the future. However, their rehabilitation was continuously challenged by social stigma, discrimination, restrictions associated with probation supervision, and economic difficulties. To navigate these challenges, probationers actively engaged in rehabilitation activities while drawing emotional strength from their families, communities, and personal resilience. Their aspirations centered on achieving sustainable livelihoods, maintaining personal growth, and successfully reintegrating into society as productive and responsible citizens. Overall, the study highlights that effective community-based rehabilitation extends beyond legal supervision and requires holistic interventions that strengthen family support, reduce stigma, expand livelihood opportunities, and encourage community participation. The implementation of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is recommended as a community-based strategy to enhance reintegration by fostering social support, accountability, and long-term desistance from crime.

**Keywords:** Probation, Non-Institutional Corrections, Community-Based Treatment, Phenomenology, Iloilo, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the lived experiences of probationers enrolled in community-based rehabilitation programs in Iloilo, examining how they navigate the rehabilitation process, the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they adopt, and their aspirations for personal growth and reintegration into society.

Community-based rehabilitation has a long and evolving history; while the concept may appear modern, its origins trace back centuries (Glaser, 1964). Over the years, new strategies and best practices have been introduced to address the emerging difficulties in correctional systems (Yangco, 2019).

On the global stage, probation and parole are acknowledged as vital non-custodial measures consistent with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures, also known as the Tokyo Rules (Melanders & Alfredsson, 1997).

In the Philippine context, community-based rehabilitation has become increasingly important due to severe prison overcrowding. As of June 2023, correctional facilities are operating at 421% overcapacity, with the New Bilibid Prison housing over four times its intended population (De Leon, 2023). Studies such as Paudac (2024) highlight that community-based programs can foster personal growth and community integration; however, existing research tends to be limited in scope, either geographically confined or thematically narrow.

Many works focus on social stigma but often neglect broader economic, familial, and psychological dimensions of probationers' experiences. Furthermore, the coping strategies of families and the shared aspirations of both probationers and their households remain underexplored.

To address these gaps, this study aims to provide a comprehensive account of probationers' lived experiences in Iloilo, highlighting their challenges, the ways they cope with difficulties during rehabilitation, and their hopes for a better future. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to advancing knowledge in criminology, psychology, and social work. By shedding light on the human dimension of correctional reform, the study not only informs policymakers and correctional institutions about strengthening alternatives to incarceration but also offers valuable insights for practitioners, families, and communities in supporting rehabilitation and reintegration. Ultimately, this research moves the frontier of knowledge by emphasizing holistic personal transformation and social inclusion, beyond the traditional focus on reducing recidivism.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design, specifically the transcendental phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of probationers in the Province of Iloilo. Phenomenology is well-suited for research that seeks to understand the subjective realities and meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell, 2021).

Through this approach, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, engaging participants in open-ended conversations that allowed them to describe their realities in rich detail. Probing questions and active listening techniques were employed to elicit deeper insights, while systematic analysis and synthesis of participants' accounts enabled the identification of recurring themes and underlying structures (Casey, 2000).

The study was conducted in the Province of Iloilo, located in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines. Iloilo consists of forty-two municipalities and one city, with the Parole and Probation Administration Regional Office in Iloilo City serving as the central hub for parole and probation services in the area. This office, situated at Room 404, CJ Ramon Q. Avanceña, Hall of Justice, Bonifacio Drive, Iloilo City, plays a crucial role in developing and managing community-based correctional programs.

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, a method that ensures the selection of individuals with characteristics directly relevant to the research problem (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The study included ten probationers, all of whom had been granted probation by the court and had served three years or more within the probation system. A list of potential Participants was obtained from the Parole and Probation Office, from which the participants were carefully selected. Each Participant participated in face-to-face interviews, allowing for a thorough and nuanced exploration of their experiences.

Data were collected using an interview guide, which provided structure while maintaining flexibility to explore emergent themes (Naz et al., 2022). The guide was divided into three main sections: (1) the lived experiences of probationers, (2) the challenges encountered and coping mechanisms employed, and (3) their aspirations for the future. Informed consent was secured prior to participation, and participants were fully briefed on their rights and the scope of the study. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, and all files were securely stored on a password-protected device.

The data collection process began with a formal communication letter submitted to the Parole and Probation Office in Iloilo City, requesting approval to conduct the study and access the list of eligible probationers. Once approval was granted, interviews were scheduled in coordination with the Probation Officer to ensure convenience for the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher, ensuring that participants could respond freely and provide detailed narratives.

Data analysis followed a systematic process involving transcription, coding, and theme generation. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, transforming spoken accounts into written data that could be examined in depth (Davidson, 2009). Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and the transcripts were carefully reviewed to identify meaningful patterns and themes. Emphasis was placed on the significance of themes in relation to the research objectives, rather than their frequency (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were guaranteed, with participants assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The researcher adhered to the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy. The study aimed to maximize potential benefits to participants, avoid harm, ensure fairness in participant selection, and safeguard voluntary participation through full disclosure of the research process (Munhall, 1988).

Finally, bracketing and reflexivity were employed to minimize bias and maintain ethical integrity. The researcher consciously set aside personal assumptions and professional preconceptions as a criminologist, reflecting critically on how these might influence interactions with participants and the interpretation of data. This reflexive practice enhanced transparency and credibility, ensuring that the findings authentically represented the perspectives of the probationers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The researcher analyzed the data in this study using Colaizzi's approach. To ensure that the contents of each transcript are understood, they are meticulously reviewed and reread. Subsequently, relevant statements regarding the phenomena under investigation were extracted from each transcript and individually documented, including the corresponding page and line references. Subsequently, the relevance of the statements was utilized to generate meanings, which were then grouped to provide a comprehensive explanation.

These emergent themes are formulated as answers to the sub-problems and are summarized as follows:

| Experiences of the Participants on the Rehabilitation Program                                                 |                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Positive Experiences                                                                                          | Negative Experiences                                                           |
| Transformation in Attitudes and Behavior<br>Emotional Reintegration with Family Support                       | Battling Social Prejudice and Stereotypes<br>Restrictions on Personal Autonomy |
| Coping with the Challenges Encountered by the Participants During the Availment of the Rehabilitation Program |                                                                                |
| Active Participation in Probationary Activities                                                               | Strengthening Bonds with Family and Community                                  |
| Aspirations of the Participants to Improve their Lives                                                        |                                                                                |
| Achieving Sustainable Livelihood                                                                              | Sustaining Personal Growth                                                     |

### Experiences of the Participants on the Rehabilitation Program

#### Positive Experiences

##### Transformation in Attitudes and Behavior

The Participants shared their experiences of how probation has helped them reshape their mindsets and behaviors. The rules and regulations of probation instilled discipline, responsibility, and a renewed sense of self-worth. This led to changes in their behavior, such as becoming more patient and avoiding criminal activity.

Participant 10 learned principles to cope with his vices and maintain a peaceful life by avoiding specific negative influences. He shared:

May nakita ko nga nagbag-o, ang pag hagan-hagan ko inom, way naman ko gapanigarilyo tapos kun gatilaw ko sa mga problema pero galing sa mga nabatian ko bala maam nga mga principles nga daw kis a may pangpahingabot bisan pa naglikaw man gihapon ako para nga ang pangabuhì ko mangin tawhay (IDI10:SS2). (I noticed some changes—I've lessened my drinking, I no longer smoke, and when I face problems, I try to handle them better.

From what I've learned, ma'am, there are principles that sometimes bring peace of mind, even though I still try to avoid trouble to keep my life peaceful).

Participant 7 acknowledged that the support of the probation officer played a significant role in changing his attitude:

Ang pagbulig sang probation officer nga mabago ya akon attitude paagi sang pag upod nila saamon para mabago amon nga bad habits. (IDI7:SS2). (The assistance of probation officers in changing my attitude by being with us to change our bad habits).

Participant 9 discussed his struggle and growth in self-management to prevent relapsing into past negative behaviors:

Naka eksperyensya ko Ma'am sang kuwan pagtawag sang ano ni gni ah pagmanage sang kaugalingon ko mismo Ma'am nga malikaw na nga tun-an ko na kaugalingon ko nga malikaw gid ko sa mga pareho sa sitwasyon nga makasala liwat. (IDI9:SS5). (I experienced, Ma'am, learning how to manage myself, Ma'am, to avoid situations where I might make mistakes again. I've learned to avoid those situations so I won't repeat the same mistakes).

The emergent theme illustrates how probationers' attitudes and behaviors were changed during their probationary period. Participants contemplated the program's impact on their perspective on life, facilitating a more optimistic outlook. They emphasized that they acquired a sense of discipline and responsibility through consistent guidance and structured activities. This transformation imparted a newfound sense of self-worth, enabling them to make more informed decisions and avoid their previous behavior patterns.

The transformation experienced by the probationers in the rehabilitation program can be explained by Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991). This theory posits that individuals undergo profound changes in their perspectives when critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs, leading to shifts in attitudes, behaviors, and life decisions. In the case of the probationers, the structured activities and guidance provided by the program fostered such critical reflection, helping them develop a sense of discipline, responsibility, and self-worth. This process allowed them to reshape their outlook on life and make better choices.

Lipsey et al. (2007) showed that structured interventions significantly reduced criminal behavior. Offenders who completed the program exhibited better impulse control, enhanced self-reflection, and improved decision-making abilities. These changes were linked to reduced recidivism rates and more positive social behaviors. The study highlighted that individuals engaged fully in the program developed new coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies, contributing to long-term behavioral change.

### Emotional Reintegration with Family Support

The Participants highlighted that probation allowed them to remain free after the imposition of their sentence, helping them reintegrate into their families, which played a vital role in their reformation process. This immediate reintegration enabled them to repair the broken ties caused by their crimes and support their families without being incarcerated.

Participant 9 mentioned having time to support their wife by assisting with her work while on probation:

Pareho sang kuwan sa pagsugat dul-ong sa kabataan nalipay ko nga bisan ara ko sa probation Ma'am may time pa ko sa pagdul-ong sa kabataan sa school, pagsugat man sa ila kag may pa ko Ma'am sa pagtingban sa akon asawa nga maglibod sang mga ulobrahon ya Ma'am parehas sa paglibod namon sang mga frozen, lamayu, isda or gulay Ma'am (IDI9:SS7). (I'm happy that even though I'm on probation, I still have time to help the kids at school, to meet with them, and I also have time to assist my wife with selling things like frozen goods, meat, fish, or vegetables).

Participant 4 noted that his wife's financial resources were crucial during his time in Pototan. He expressed:

Ang financial Ma'am indi lang kalain man na magbinutig pa bala haw ang financial gid ang gamit sang asawa samtang to ya kami sa Pototan nga teh gapangayu-ngayu kami sa pamilya namon eh para may plete kadto to

(IDI4:SS4). (The financial aspect, Ma'am, not to lie or deceive, but the financial support is what my spouse uses while we were in Pototan in jail, we would ask for money from our families just to have fare for that).

Participant 7 expressed that his happiness while on probation comes from spending time with his children and being able to provide food for them:

Ang kalipay ko di sa probation amo ang makaupod ko akon mga kabataan nga makapangita ko para saila pagkao, kalipay gid nga gin salo ako ka probation (IDI7:SS7). (My happiness with probation is being able to be with my children and provide for their needs. I'm really glad that I was given the chance to be on probation).

The emergent theme emphasizes the essential role of probation in enabling offenders to remain free after sentencing. Probation facilitated the immediate reintegration of offenders into their families and played a critical role in their rehabilitation. By circumventing the emotional distress and isolation of incarceration, probationers were afforded a more conducive environment for behavioral reform. Assisting probationers in confronting the repercussions of their actions while remaining accompanied by support and family involvement provided emotional stability, accountability, and moral guidance.

This emergent theme can be explained through Bowlby's (1988) Attachment Theory, which stresses the importance of secure emotional bonds, particularly with family, in fostering psychological well-being. The theory posits that individuals with strong attachments are better equipped to handle stress and challenges, as the emotional support provided by loved ones nurtures a sense of security and resilience. By reconnecting with their families, probationers likely provided a crucial source of emotional stability, allowing them to process their feelings, rebuild trust, and gain the emotional resources needed to navigate their rehabilitation successfully.

Shapiro and Schwartz (2001) explored family involvement in rehabilitation programs. They found that offenders with strong family support during and after rehabilitation were more likely to reintegrate into society successfully. Family support correlated with lower recidivism rates and provided emotional and psychological stability during the transition period. Offenders who maintained or reestablished family connections exhibited better emotional health and a stronger sense of belonging, reducing their likelihood of reoffending.

## Negative Experiences

### Battling Social Prejudice and Stereotypes

Despite being on probation, the Participants faced significant challenges, particularly the distrust of employers and other members of the community towards probationers. They struggled with societal stereotypes linked to their past crimes, which limited their opportunities during the probationary period.

Participant 9 pointed out that some people may distrust probationers, making it challenging to apply for even basic positions:

Iba Ma'am ang tawag nga probationer ka na Ma'am ang pagtan-aw sang iban nga tao sa imo sa pag-apply mo pa lang sa mga ulobrahon Ma'am ang iban nga tao Ma'am way na sang pagsalig sa imo Ma'am kay tungod nga isa ka probationer medyo mabudlay man sa pag-apply mo sa mga masimple nga ulobrahon Ma'am (IDI9:SS1). (It's different, Ma'am, being labeled as a probationer. The way other people look at you changes. When you apply for jobs, Ma'am, some people no longer trust you because you're a probationer. It becomes a bit difficult to even apply for simple jobs, Ma'am).

Participant 10 was troubled by negative remarks from others who oppose them despite their efforts to remain cautious:

Ang ginabudlayan ko maam dire sa probation ang wala man gid pero ang paghirabot kanakon pagisip sang mga pamilya nakon amo gid na hadlokan ko kay ginapabatan man ko ka mga mura bala mga kontra partido nga sulay bisan na gahalang pa ko (IDI10:SS5). (What I find challenging, ma'am, is not really the probation itself, but dealing with the judgment of my family members is what truly worries me because I feel like I am being criticized and tempted by opposing parties even though I am trying to change).

Participant 2 conveyed that he felt judged by others as if there was something undesirable about him because he was a probationer:

Oo, matyagan bala daw pagka ano siling bala nga daw lain kamo bala, kung ano to ang kungbaga daw may higko kaw sa ila panulok (IDI2:SS3). (Yes, you feel like... what they say is like, you're different, like you have a stigma in their eyes).

The emergent theme described probationers' ongoing struggle against social prejudice and stereotypes, which persisted despite their progress toward rehabilitation. Despite the progress they had made through the program, they still encountered external difficulties, particularly the societal condemnation associated with their past behaviors. These negative perceptions impeded their reintegration into the community, making it challenging for them to feel entirely embraced by society and find acceptance. Despite their efforts to effect positive change in their lives, the stereotypes they confronted frequently resulted in feelings of isolation, marginalization, and judgment.

This struggle can be understood through Labeling Theory, which explains how individuals labeled by society based on their past actions can experience long-term consequences, even after attempting to reform. According to this theory, societal labels such as "criminal" or "offender" can create self-fulfilling prophecies, where individuals internalize these labels and are treated according to these negative perceptions (Becker, 1963). This stigmatization can make it difficult for probationers to break free from their past identity and achieve full social reintegration, regardless of their efforts to change.

Uggen and Manza (2002) found that social prejudice and stereotypes often reinforced feelings of exclusion and isolation. Participants reported difficulties in securing employment and housing, often feeling judged and marginalized despite having undergone rehabilitation. This marginalization hindered their ability to reintegrate into the community and limited their opportunities for economic and social advancement.

### **Restrictions on Personal Autonomy**

Some Participants expressed frustration over the limitations imposed during their probationary period. Although these restrictions were necessary to ensure progress and compliance, the strict monitoring and limited freedom often led to feelings of confinement and a lack of control over their lives.

Participant 9 noted that having probation status imposes restrictions on his movements:

Yes Ma'am, mabudlay tungod kay indi ta makatravel sa tabok sa katambi nga syudad kung indi ka maka ngayu sang gate pass or permiso halin sa imo probation officer budlay man nga matravel ka man nga way ka sang pahintolot halin sa imo probation officer indi lng sa ano Ma'am bali may certification ka gid nga mabudlay bali kungbaga iba ang imo nga hulag compare nga way ka sa probation Ma'am (IDI9:SS6). (Yes, Ma'am, it's difficult because you can't travel to the neighboring town unless you request a gate pass or permission from your probation officer. It's challenging to travel without their approval. There's also a certification involved, which makes it harder. In a way, your actions are restricted compared to when you weren't on probation, Ma'am).

Participant 1 explained that he was not allowed to travel to certain areas unless he obtained permission:

Oo limited, indi kami pwede ka ano halimbawa pag gabi na indi ka ano, manirado man lang gihapon bisan probation makadto kasa iba nga halimbawa sa Panay kadto ka sa kung Iloilo City lang kami indi pwede kami ka pa Antique, Guimaras, Bacolod dapat malisinsya gid. (IDI1:SS8). (Yes, it's limited. For example, if it's already nighttime, you can't just go out, you still need permission even if you're on probation, you can't just go to other places like Antique, Guimaras, Bacolod, you really need permission).

Participant 6 pointed out the tedious process when it comes to processing the papers for his probation approval:

Ang kabudlay maam ang una ang pabalik balik mag pa janiuay kung diin ang papel para ma approve ako probation (IDI6:SS5). (The difficulty, ma'am, was the back-and-forth process of submitting the papers for my probation approval).

The emergent theme expressed the probationers' dissatisfaction with the probationers' limitations on their autonomy. They described how the rigorous monitoring and supervision, intended to guarantee their progress and prevent recidivism, sometimes felt burdensome and restrictive. The imposition of rigorous schedules and the loss of personal freedom resulted in feelings of confinement for specific individuals. Although these restrictions were intended to offer structure, they occasionally experienced a sense of frustration due to feeling as though they lacked authority over their own lives.

This experience is cited by Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which focuses on the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. According to SDT, autonomy is a critical human need. When individuals perceive a lack of control over their decisions, it can undermine their motivation and sense of self-efficacy. The strict limitations imposed by the program, though intended to guide their rehabilitation, may have interfered with their sense of personal agency. This, in turn, could lead to negative emotions such as frustration, as the probationers struggled with the perceived imbalance between external control and their desire for autonomy.

Schinkel (2014) cited the lack of personal autonomy as a significant source of frustration. Despite these restrictions being necessary for compliance and monitoring, participants expressed feelings of disempowerment, which sometimes impacted their long-term rehabilitation outcomes. The loss of freedom and intense supervision, while necessary for rehabilitation, often created feelings of confinement, leading some individuals to struggle with maintaining motivation and self-efficacy.

## **Coping with the Challenges Encountered by the Participants During the Availment of the Rehabilitation Program**

### **Active Participation in Probationary Activities**

The Participants highlighted the significance of actively participating in probationary activities, contributing to their personal growth. These activities kept them focused and offered valuable insights into their path toward reformation during probation.

Participant 5 reflected positively on his experience during probation, stating that reporting sessions contribute to their understanding of his situation:

Daw mayu pangabuhin namon sa probation namon kag sa akon man nga probation sa nabatyagan ko okay man ang pagreporting daw naka dugang sa kaisipan mo bala ma'am bahin sa natabo kanakon daw hanggod ya nga na taho na kasanagan indi magka akig ko sala mob ala ukon indi man ang importante ang tawag nga pag bag o kag kuwan ekspersyansya sang sa parehas mo nga tao bisan mat masakit ka pa nga istorya nga nabatian kuwan makabaton ka sang katong bukas nga mag pasensya maka intndi. (IDI8:SS3). (It feels like life is better for us on probation, and for my probation, I feel that the reporting is okay; it adds to your understanding about what happened to you. It's like you gain enlightenment, and you shouldn't get angry at mistakes, whether they're yours or not. The important thing is the change and the experiences of people like you. Even if you hear painful stories, you can accept them and learn to be patient and understanding).

Participant 9 felt a sense of freedom that allowed him to defend himself and avoid mistakes:

Daku Ma'am ang una daw free ang akon gid ang kaugalingon Ma'am nga madepensahan kaugalingon ko kag malikawan ko nga maka-angkon ako sang sala una bes pagsalig sa Ginoo nga indi na ko makahimo sang sala ika duwa padayon gid nga pagsupport kag pagtingban sa akon pamilya labi na gid sa akon kabataan kag sakon asawa Ma'am. Kag kaayohan sa pagpangabuhin Ma'am. (IDI9:SS16). (It's a big change, Ma'am. First, I feel free to defend myself and avoid making mistakes. I trust in God that I won't make mistakes again. Second, I continue to support and help my family, especially my children and my wife, Ma'am. This has greatly improved my life).

Participant 8 described his probation experience as educational, noting that there are various events scheduled throughout the year:

Oo daw ga eskwela kami di the may mga month nga mga ja nga may event mga bulan na conduct ni maam bala kag nutrition month mga Independence Day next meeting naman madiscuss about sa environment. (IDI9:SS6).

(Yes, it's like we're in school because there are monthly events organized by the probation officer, like Nutrition Month or Independence Day. Then, in the next meeting, we discuss topics like the environment).

The emergent theme showed the critical role of probationers' active participation in probationary activities. Probationers could focus on personal development and positive pursuits by participating in prescribed tasks such as vocational training, counseling, and community service. These activities reinforced their dedication to change by providing a sense of accomplishment and a clear path toward progress.

This emphasis on active participation can be linked to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, particularly the higher-order needs of self-esteem and self-actualization. According to Maslow, individuals are motivated to achieve their full potential once their basic needs for safety, love, and belonging are met. For probationers, participating in constructive activities provided opportunities to meet these higher-order needs by fostering self-confidence, skill development, and a sense of purpose. By staying engaged in probationary tasks, they could see tangible progress in their lives, helping them build the self-esteem and competence necessary for long-term success and reintegration into society.

McGuire (2001) found that active participation in these activities helped offenders develop a sense of purpose and responsibility. Participants who engaged in job skills training and educational programs reported higher self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment, which were key to their successful reintegration. Engagement in positive, structured tasks kept them focused and helped them reintegrate into society more effectively.

### **Strengthening Bonds with Family and Community**

The Participants navigated the challenges of the probation period with the support of their families and communities. This support created a conducive environment for their reformation and facilitated their eventual reintegration into society.

Participant 10 noted that his friends continue to offer their support during his probationary period:

Mga abyan ko nagabulig man kanakon kung may mga problema ko nga kung ang ano kulang ginasaligan asta guro subong naka gwa na ko priso nako pero ara mga abyan ko nga waay gani sa posisyon amo pato ya nakabulig kanakon (IDI10:SS5). (My friends also help me with my problems, especially when I'm lacking something. Even now that I've been released from prison, I still have friends who don't hold any positions of power but have still been able to help me).

Participant 8 coped by embodying his strong commitment to achieving success for the sake of his children and family:

Magtinguha gid nga malumpawasan ko para sa mga kabataan ko kag pamilya ko nga bisan paano matapos ko kaso ko kag indi sila mahuy an. (IDI8:SS7). (I strive to overcome them for the sake of my children and family so that even after my case is resolved, they won't be ashamed).

Participant 4 expressed gratitude for his release and acknowledged the support he was receiving from government officials:

Ah way man ta na gapasalamat ta na Ma'am nga nakaguwa man kami kay subong nga nagbulig man kanamon mga tao man ka gobyerno (IDI5:SS5). (Oh, we're grateful that we got out because now, the government and the people have helped us).

The emergent theme observed that the essential comfort and support the Participants received during their rehabilitation were derived from strengthening their relationships with family and becoming more involved in their communities. They forged a robust emotional foundation that facilitated their recovery by reestablishing connections with family members and cultivating more intimate relationships. In the same way, their increased participation in community activities enabled them to establish a network of individuals who facilitated and encouraged their ascent to personal development and reintegration.

This process can be elucidated through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the importance of various environmental systems in an individual's development. According to this theory, relationships within the microsystem (family) and mesosystem (community) play a crucial role in shaping behavior and providing emotional support. For the probationers, the family provided immediate emotional security, while community involvement offered a broader support network, which was key in fostering resilience and aiding their recovery.

Mowen and Visser (2016) showed that reintegration into communities with strong family and social networks significantly lowers the chances of reoffending. Offenders who maintained or developed close ties with family and participated in community programs showed more excellent emotional stability and lower levels of recidivism. The emotional and social support these networks provide helps former offenders navigate the challenges of post-release life and build resilience.

## Aspirations of the Participants to Improve their Lives

### Achieving Sustainable Livelihood

Due to the persistent stigma, most Participants aspired to secure stable and sustainable employment during and after probation. Achieving financial independence through livelihood opportunities was crucial in maintaining their new path and supporting their families despite their past involvement in crime.

Participant 1 mentioned that there is a need for extra assistance focused on livelihood:

Ang madugang halimbawa ang ga support bala ang kuha-an namon pangabuy-an. May ari man kami bala pangabuhin kumbaga para sa pangabuy-an (IDI1:SS9). (For example, additional support in terms of livelihood. We have a livelihood project for our community).

Participant 10 aspired that more livelihood project can lead to a stable income source for them:

Te amo nani ang livelihood nga ni nga kung may programa nga matuod nga matupa kanamon nga livelihood amo na maging mayad nga pangabuhian namon, maka parayo ta sa kwan kay kung sa panimalay mulang dampi nasagod mo kundi makalumas kasa paglagaw kag pag ililimon sa mga tao (IDI7:SS10). (This livelihood, if there is a program that can truly provide us with this livelihood, it will be a good source of income for us. We can move away from poverty because if you just stay at home, you might feel stuck and burdened by people's opinions).

Participant 9 suggested that it would be beneficial if probation programs offered support for probationers through initiatives that could create job opportunities or additional income:

Siguro kung may ara Ma'am nga program ang probation nga eh support ang mga probationer nga halimbawa may ara sila patigayon nga mga pwede maging kabuhin-an or dugang invome sa mga probationer Ma'am mas okay gid. (IDI9:SS10). (Maybe if there were programs that support probationers, such as opportunities for additional income or livelihood options, it would be even better).

The emergent theme articulated a strong aspiration to establish a sustainable livelihood, recognizing that stable employment is crucial for their long-term success. For numerous Participants, achieving financial independence was not solely about satisfying their requirements; it also involved maintaining their progress during their probation and providing for their families. By obtaining sustainable employment, they could further distance themselves from past behaviors and establish a foundation for a successful future. Additionally, employment allowed them to contribute to society, bolstering their self-esteem and social reintegration.

This focus on achieving a sustainable livelihood can be framed through Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, which emphasizes the importance of individuals having the freedom to pursue opportunities that lead to their well-being and personal development. According to this approach, securing stable employment is not merely about earning a livelihood but about having the capability to make choices that enhance one's quality of life and provide financial security. For the probationers, sustainable employment would offer them the means to exercise control over their lives, achieve financial independence, and support their families, thus enabling them to maintain their rehabilitation and personal growth in the long term.

Laub and Sampson (2001), on the importance of employment for former offenders, showed that securing stable work led to increased self-worth and social integration. Post-release employment found that securing sustainable jobs was critical in reducing recidivism. Employment provided financial independence and helped offenders reintegrate into society, giving them a stable environment to continue their personal growth.

### **Sustaining Personal Growth**

The Participants expressed a commitment to sustaining the personal growth they achieved during probation, even after the program's completion. They aimed to continue developing emotionally and mentally, ensuring their progress is maintained and further advanced, with a firm resolve to avoid returning to past negative behaviors.

Participant 8 expressed his commitment to return to work after completing probation to fulfill his dreams:

Pagtapos probation mabalik gid ako ubra ko nga sensiro gid para mala bot ko gid mga handum ko. (IDI8:SS14). (After probation, I plan to go back to my job and work diligently to achieve my dreams).

Participant 3 determined to lead a good life once their probation is over:

Ang pagtapos ko sa probation mangabuhi ko sang mayo (IDI3:SS9). (After completing my probation, I will live a good life).

Moreover, Participant 5 reflected on the importance of guidance and advice, acknowledging that without it, he might have continued engaging in harmful behaviors:

Daw waay naman gid maam kay basihan ang ralagway kung waay ko nakita ang advice sigro mapadayon ko sang mga nd manami nga bulohaton pero sbung nag bago na (IDI5:SS10). (There's nothing, ma'am, because based on my experience, if I didn't heed the advice, I would probably continue doing bad things, but now I've changed).

The emergent theme emphasized the probationers' unwavering dedication to maintaining the personal development they underwent during their rehabilitation. They acknowledged the significance of extending their emotional and mental development beyond the program's structured environment. This continuous commitment to self-improvement was deemed indispensable for preserving the beneficial changes they had implemented and guaranteeing long-term success and satisfaction. In many cases, personal development evolved into an objective to enhance their emotional resilience, decision-making, and sense of purpose.

This commitment to sustaining personal growth aligns with Rogers' (1961) Person-Centered Theory, which emphasizes the idea of self-actualization, or the continuous development of an individual's potential. According to Rogers (1961), people have an inherent tendency toward growth and fulfillment, but this process requires an environment that supports personal authenticity, self-reflection, and emotional development. For the Participants, the rehabilitation program provided the initial conditions for growth, and their ongoing commitment reflects a desire to continue this journey of self-actualization.

Burnett (2004) showed that offenders who engaged in continuous personal development activities, such as therapy or educational programs, were more successful in maintaining their reformed behavior. The personal growth activities helped probationers maintain motivation and continue their journey toward self-actualization.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the lived experiences of probationers in the Province of Iloilo, focusing on their challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations during community-based rehabilitation. The findings revealed that probationers encountered social prejudice, restrictions on autonomy, and economic struggles, yet they developed coping strategies through family support, personal resilience, and community involvement. Despite these obstacles, their aspirations reflected a strong desire for self-improvement, stable livelihoods, and meaningful reintegration into society.

The results underscore that while probation serves as a viable alternative to incarceration, its success extends beyond legal compliance. Effective rehabilitation requires programs that address psychological, social, and

economic dimensions of probationers' lives, while also reducing stigma and strengthening support systems. Ultimately, the study highlights the need for inclusive, family-centered, and community-driven interventions that not only prevent recidivism but also foster long-term personal growth and social reintegration.

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