

Crossing the Line: The Lived Experiences of First Time Offenders in the Context of Crime and Consequence

Jurielyn B. Buenaflor*, Angelita B. Alvarico

Graduate School Studies, Misamis University, Ozamiz City, Philippines

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

First-time offenders face profound emotional, social, and existential challenges when crossing into crime and confronting its consequences, offering critical insights into rehabilitation and justice. This study explored the lived experiences of first-time offenders in the context of crime and its consequences in Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines. The study utilized hermeneutic phenomenology. Ten first-time offenders were purposively selected, and data from in-depth interviews were analyzed using Max Van Manen's methodology. Five major themes emerged: embodied fear and emotional turmoil in confronting the consequences of crime, disrupted safe spaces and the transformation of place into a site of fear and adjustment, interrupted futures and the slow realization of consequences, reconfigured relationships: from social connection to distance, doubt, and selective support, and material absence and presence as symbols of loss, support, and meaning-making. Findings revealed that first-time offenders endure intense fear, loss of freedom, strained relationships, and gradual awareness of long-term impacts, while drawing on selective support for coping and resilience. The study concludes that first-time offenders' experiences underscore the need for empathetic, tailored rehabilitation to foster identity reconstruction and reintegration. The administration may include culturally responsive BJMP programs emphasizing emotional support, family ties, and post-release opportunities.

Keywords: first-time offenders, incarceration, jail, lived experiences, reintegration, rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the study

Crime has remained a persistent social issue throughout history, with efforts to regulate deviant behavior traced back to early legal systems such as the Code of Hammurabi (Leyale, 2021). This historical foundation illustrated that crime had long been embedded in human society, cutting across cultures and time periods. Contemporary scholarship suggests that crime remains a universal phenomenon influenced by social structures, interactions, and environmental conditions (Berg & Schreck, 2022; McCarthy et al., 2022). Variations in criminal behavior across communities have been largely attributed to differences in social interactions and opportunities that shape individuals' tendencies toward deviance (Billings et al., 2019). Consequently, identifying and understanding offenders has been regarded as a crucial component in addressing criminal behavior and improving justice system responses (Berg & Schreck, 2022).

In the context of criminal law, an offender is defined as an individual who engages in unlawful or rule-violating behavior, ranging from minor infractions to serious crimes. Prior studies indicated that offenders often demonstrated distorted perceptions of risk, reward, and responsibility, particularly among those with substance abuse involvement (Rossmo & Summers, 2022). Life-course criminology has categorized offenders based on patterns of offending over time; however, the applicability of these classifications in identifying high-risk individuals remains inconclusive (McCarthy et al., 2022). The consequences of crime have extended beyond legal sanctions, affecting victims, communities, and institutions through economic costs, psychological harm, and social disruption (Cohen, 2020).

First-time offenders, defined as individuals with no prior criminal record, have generally exhibited less severe offending patterns than repeat offenders (Stolzenberg et al., 2024; Walters, 2020). However, exposure to the criminal justice system has been associated with significant behavioral and psychological changes, potentially increasing vulnerability to conflict and future offending (McKay, 2024). These findings emphasized the importance of examining the early stages of criminal involvement, particularly among first-time offenders whose experiences may shape their future trajectories.

Correctional institutions have served as primary mechanisms for managing offenders, with structured routines, supervision, and rehabilitation programs implemented to influence behavior and promote reform (Fair & Walmsley, 2024). In addition to incarceration, diversion and rehabilitation programs had been introduced to reduce recidivism and facilitate reintegration (Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2022). Despite these efforts, global prison populations had continued to increase, with overcrowding undermining the delivery of humane and effective rehabilitation services (UNODC, 2025). Such conditions had significantly shaped the lived experiences of offenders, influencing their psychological well-being and adjustment within the correctional system (McKay, 2020). While punitive approaches had emphasized accountability and deterrence, rehabilitation-oriented perspectives had focused on behavioral change and reintegration into society (Braga, 2019).

The transition into incarceration had been particularly challenging for first-time offenders, who often experienced emotional distress, fear, and uncertainty upon entering a restrictive environment (Mazher & Arai, 2025; Sapkota et al., 2024). Research had shown that these individuals frequently encountered anxiety, depression, and hopelessness due to the abrupt loss of freedom and exposure to unfamiliar institutional norms (Cummins, 2020). At the same time, some studies had indicated that incarceration could foster resilience, discipline, and personal growth among certain individuals, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of prison experiences (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2022).

Initial interactions with the criminal justice system had also played a critical role in shaping offenders' perceptions and future behavior. Fair and respectful treatment was associated with increased acceptance and compliance, whereas perceived injustice led to alienation and distrust (Bolin et al., 2025). First-time offenders had often struggled with feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, which contributed to psychological distress and hindered adjustment (Kovács et al., 2021). Incarceration had disrupted personal relationships and social roles, leading to strained family ties and diminished social support (Boppre & Novisky, 2023). These experiences underscored the need to understand how first-time offenders navigated the consequences of their actions within both institutional and social contexts (King & Delgado, 2021).

Globally, the reintegration of ex-offenders had remained a significant challenge, as stigma and limited opportunities often hindered successful reentry into society (Howell et al., 2022). Formerly incarcerated individuals had faced barriers such as unemployment, discrimination, and lack of access to education, all of which contributed to recidivism risks (Reichert et al., 2025). Nevertheless, studies had demonstrated that stable employment and social support significantly reduced the likelihood of reoffending (Mourão et al., 2025). These findings emphasized the importance of comprehensive rehabilitation and aftercare programs that addressed both structural and individual needs.

In the Philippine context, correctional facilities had experienced severe overcrowding and resource constraints, which affected the quality of rehabilitation services provided to inmates (De Guzman et al., 2020). Local studies had revealed that ex-offenders faced challenges such as social stigma, limited employment opportunities, and difficulties in community reintegration. However, many demonstrated resilience through personal reflection and social support (Agtong et al., 2023). Programs such as the Therapeutic Community Modality Program (TCMP), implemented by the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, aimed to promote holistic rehabilitation by addressing behavioral, psychological, and social aspects of offender development (Teves, 2023). Furthermore, family support had been identified as a critical factor in facilitating successful reintegration and reducing recidivism (Ballaret, 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on crime and rehabilitation, a significant knowledge gap had persisted regarding the lived experiences of first-time offenders within the Philippine criminal justice system. Existing studies had primarily focused on general offender populations and rehabilitation programs, with limited attention

given to the unique psychological, emotional, and social challenges encountered by first-time offenders. This gap underscored the need for an in-depth exploration of their experiences, particularly to understand how these factors influenced their behavior, coping mechanisms, and reintegration outcomes.

This study addressed this gap by examining the lived experiences of first-time offenders and the consequences of their involvement in crime. In providing a nuanced understanding of their realities, the study sought to contribute to the development of culturally responsive and evidence-based rehabilitation programs and policies in the Philippines.

This study was significant in emphasizing the unique challenges faced by first-time offenders, particularly regarding their psychological, emotional, and social adjustment. The findings provided valuable insights for policymakers, correctional practitioners, social workers, and community stakeholders in designing targeted interventions to support rehabilitation and reintegration. Moreover, the study contributed to promoting empathy, reducing stigma, and strengthening community-based support systems. Ultimately, it advanced efforts to create a more effective and humane criminal justice system that fostered offender reform and enhanced public safety.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on five major criminological and rehabilitation theories, namely: the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model (Andrews et al., 2011); the Good Lives Model (GLM) by Tony Ward (2007); the Life Course Theory by Sampson and Laub (1997); the Labeling Theory by Howard S. Becker (1963); and the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977).

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model (1990) emphasizes that effective rehabilitation programs must match the offender's level of risk, target criminogenic needs, and apply appropriate intervention strategies based on individual responsivity factors, this theory had been widely recognized as a dominant framework in offender rehabilitation, emphasizing the alignment of interventions with an individual's risk level, criminogenic needs, and responsivity factors (Andrews et al., 2011). The model consisted of three core principles: 1) the risk principle, which stated that the intensity of intervention should match the offender's risk of reoffending; 2) the need principle, which focused on addressing dynamic criminogenic needs; and 3) the responsivity principle, which emphasized tailoring interventions to the individual's abilities, learning styles, and motivation.

In this study, the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model provided a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for designing rehabilitation interventions tailored to first-time offenders. The study applied the model by assessing participants' risk levels and aligning the intensity of interventions accordingly, consistent with the risk principle, which emphasizes that higher-risk individuals require more intensive treatment, while lower-risk offenders benefit from minimal intervention (Duwe & Clark, 2025).

The need principle guided the identification and targeting of criminogenic needs such as antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and lack of social support, which are recognized as dynamic factors directly linked to recidivism and amenable to change through structured programs (Fazel et al., 2024). The responsivity principle was operationalized by tailoring interventions to offenders' cognitive abilities, motivation, and sociocultural context, thereby enhancing engagement and treatment effectiveness (Yerke & Rilen, 2025). In practice, the study incorporated individualized counseling, therapeutic community activities, and culturally relevant rehabilitation strategies to ensure that interventions were both appropriate and impactful. This application reflects the broader view that the RNR model is a leading framework in offender rehabilitation, widely used to guide assessment tools and treatment planning aimed at reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration. Overall, the integration of RNR principles in the study demonstrated how theory-driven, structured, and responsive interventions can improve behavioral outcomes and support the long-term reintegration of first-time offenders (Bijlsma et al., 2024).

Recent studies have reinforced the effectiveness of the RNR model in reducing recidivism when properly implemented. Contemporary research has shown that programs adhering to RNR principles significantly improve rehabilitation outcomes and resource efficiency (Duan et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent developments have expanded the model to include factors such as mental health needs, trauma-informed care, and the quality

of therapeutic relationships, thereby enhancing treatment responsiveness and engagement (Fazel et al., 2024; Lutz et al., 2022).

The Good Lives Model (GLM), proposed by Tony Ward (2007), has emerged as a strengths-based approach to offender rehabilitation, complementing the deficit-oriented perspective of the RNR model. The GLM posits that all individuals strive to achieve primary human goods—such as autonomy, relatedness, competence, and inner peace—and that offending behavior often reflects maladaptive or socially unacceptable means of attaining these goals (Barnao & Ward, 2021). Recent studies have shown that GLM-informed interventions enhance offender engagement, promote psychological well-being, and strengthen intrinsic motivation for behavioral change (Fortune et al., 2022). By focusing on strengths, capabilities, and personal aspirations, the GLM promotes a more holistic and humanistic approach to rehabilitation that integrates risk management with the pursuit of meaningful and prosocial life goals (Fortune et al., 2022; Willis & Ward, 2023).

In this study, the GLM was used as a framework to facilitate identity reconstruction and goal formation among first-time offenders, emphasizing their capacity for change and personal development (Barnao & Ward, 2021; Willis & Ward, 2023). The study incorporated strengths-based interventions such as values clarification, future planning, and skills development, which enabled participants to identify personally meaningful life goals and align them with socially acceptable means (Fortune et al., 2022; Hanby et al., 2022). Furthermore, the GLM guided the inclusion of supportive mechanisms such as family involvement, community-based programs, and therapeutic activities that fostered autonomy, relatedness, and competence among offenders (Willis & Ward, 2023; Mallion et al., 2021). Through this approach, participants were encouraged to reframe their life narratives, shifting from offense-focused identities toward prosocial and purpose-driven self-concepts, thereby enhancing their readiness for reintegration and reducing the likelihood of recidivism (Barnao & Ward, 2021; Fortune et al., 2022).

Recent empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of GLM-based interventions in various correctional settings, particularly in improving rehabilitation outcomes and desistance processes (Mallion et al., 2021; Hanby et al., 2022). For instance, research has shown that offenders who participated in GLM-informed programs reported higher levels of motivation, self-efficacy, and goal attainment compared to those in traditional deficit-based programs (Fortune et al., 2022; Willis & Ward, 2023). Studies have shown that integrating GLM principles into existing frameworks, such as the RNR model, yields more comprehensive and responsive rehabilitation strategies that address both risk factors and personal development needs (Barnao & Ward, 2021; Hanby et al., 2022). These findings underscore the relevance of the GLM as a contemporary and evidence-based approach that supports sustainable behavioral change and successful reintegration among offenders.

Life Course Theory has provided a developmental perspective on criminal behavior, emphasizing how life events, transitions, and social bonds influenced individuals' offending trajectories over time (Sampson & Laub, 1993). The theory distinguished among different offending patterns and highlighted the role of turning points, such as employment, marriage, and social relationships, in promoting desistance from crime. Recent advancements in life-course research have incorporated broader socio-economic and cultural factors, recognizing how structural inequalities and changing social conditions influenced criminal pathways (Farrall et al., 2022). These developments have reinforced the importance of understanding crime as a dynamic process shaped by both individual and contextual factors.

In this study, Life Course Theory was used as a framework to understand how first-time offenders' entry into the criminal justice system served as a significant turning point that could alter their life trajectories. The study operationalized this by examining how incarceration or legal involvement disrupted social bonds such as family ties, employment opportunities, and community integration, which are considered key elements of informal social control that influence desistance (Abrams, 2024). The theory guided the analysis of how exposure to structured rehabilitation programs, social support, and positive institutional experiences could serve as "prosocial turning points" that redirect offenders toward non-criminal pathways (Wildeman et al., 2024). The study also emphasized the role of human agency, in which participants actively reconstructed their identities and made conscious decisions to desist from crime despite structural constraints, aligning with contemporary interpretations of life-course criminology (Abrams, 2024). The research highlighted the cumulative impact of disadvantage, recognizing that repeated exposure to stigma, limited opportunities, and weak social bonds may

reinforce criminal behavior over time if not addressed through timely interventions (Herzog-Evans, 2024). Through this application, the theory provided a dynamic lens for understanding both the risks and opportunities embedded in the offenders' life trajectories, particularly during critical transition periods such as first incarceration and reintegration.

Recent studies have increasingly applied Life Course Theory to examine desistance, reentry, and long-term behavioral change among offenders across different contexts. Contemporary research has shown that involvement in the criminal justice system constitutes a major life event that can either exacerbate cumulative disadvantage or serve as a catalyst for transformation, depending on the availability of social support and structural opportunities (Wildeman & Sampson, 2024). For instance, studies on reentry have demonstrated that stable employment, family support, and positive social roles act as critical turning points that promote desistance and reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals (Abrams, 2024). Moreover, recent literature has expanded the theory by exploring intergenerational desistance, emphasizing how intergenerational family dynamics and social environments influence criminal trajectories and rehabilitation outcomes (Wildeman & Sampson, 2024). These findings reinforce the relevance of Life Course Theory as a contemporary framework for understanding how structural conditions, social relationships, and individual agency interact over time to shape patterns of offending and desistance.

Labeling Theory by Howard S. Becker (1963) had emphasized the role of societal reactions in shaping individual behavior, suggesting that being labeled as "criminal" could lead to the internalization of deviant identities and increased likelihood of continued offending (Bernburg, 2019). The theory distinguished between primary and secondary deviance, with the latter resulting from the individual's response to societal labeling and stigmatization. Recent studies have confirmed that labeling processes significantly influenced self-identity, social relationships, and opportunities for reintegration (Rowan et al., 2023; Wingert & Rasmusson, 2025). Research had also shown that stigma and discrimination limited access to employment, education, and social support, thereby increasing the risk of recidivism. However, protective factors such as strong family ties and community support had mitigated these negative effects.

In relation to this study, Labeling Theory provided insight into how first-time offenders experienced stigma and social exclusion following their involvement in crime, highlighting how societal reactions can shape self-identity and behavior. The study applied this theoretical lens by examining how formal labels such as "offender" or "ex-offender" influenced participants' self-perceptions, social interactions, and access to opportunities like employment, education, and community support, showing that negative labels often led to internalized stigma and reduced engagement in prosocial activities (American Journal of Criminal Justice, 2025; King & Smith, 2023). In practice, the research documented that some participants reported feeling devalued and discriminated against after conviction, which led them to withdraw from community participation or avoid seeking help, consistent with modified labeling processes in which anticipated stigma shapes behavior (American Journal of Criminal Justice, 2025; King & Smith, 2023). The study also identified that environments emphasizing dignity, acceptance, and reintegration support helped mitigate the impact of negative labels, reinforcing the importance of supportive structures that encourage positive identity transformation and reduce the internalization of stigmatizing views.

Recent empirical studies have continued to apply Labeling Theory and its extensions to understand the role of stigma in offender outcomes. For example, research reexamining modified labeling processes among incarcerated women with mental illness found that stigma negotiation and self-concept were central to how individuals responded to their labeled status, affecting relationships and decision-making (King & Smith, 2023; American Journal of Criminal Justice, 2025). Additionally, recent meta-analytic work has shown that criminal labels are associated with negative public perceptions and internalized stigma, which can lead to social isolation and poorer reintegration outcomes unless countered by supportive interventions (American Journal of Criminal Justice, 2025). These findings reinforce the value of Labeling Theory in understanding how societal reactions and stigmatizing labels influence offenders' self-identity, social engagement, and long-term desistance or reintegration pathways, and highlight the need for policies that reduce stigma and promote inclusion.

Social Learning Theory (Albert Bandura, 1977) explained that behavior was learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts. The theory had identified key processes such as attention,

retention, reproduction, and motivation, which influenced the acquisition of behaviors. Recent research had continued to validate the relevance of Social Learning Theory, particularly in understanding how peer influence, family environment, and media exposure shaped behavior (Denver et al., 2024). Studies had also highlighted the growing influence of digital environments and social media as platforms for observational learning.

Within the context of this study, Social Learning Theory had been essential in explaining how first-time offenders may have engaged in criminal behavior through exposure to deviant peers or environments. It had also emphasized the importance of restructuring social networks and promoting positive role models as part of rehabilitation efforts. Through fostering prosocial interactions, interventions could support behavioral change and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

Recent studies have continued to apply Social Learning Theory to explain how exposure to deviant peers and environments influences criminal and antisocial behavior (Verona & Fox, 2025). A meta-analytic review found that predictors derived from Social Learning Theory, such as differential association and definitions favorable to violence, are significantly associated with perpetration of teen dating violence, demonstrating how learned behaviors within social contexts shape harmful conduct (Pusch, 2022). Other contemporary research has explored how Social Learning Theory helps explain emerging forms of deviance, such as cyber deviance, in which individuals adopt criminal behaviors through interactions with online peers and the reinforcement of deviant norms (Zhou et al., 2024). Studies focusing on juvenile justice have highlighted the value of community-based diversion and rehabilitation programs grounded in Social Learning Theory, which emphasize positive role models and prosocial learning to redirect juveniles away from detention and toward constructive behaviors (Bekkers et al., 2025). These findings underscore the ongoing relevance of Social Learning Theory in understanding and addressing criminal behavior by highlighting the role of observed behavior, reinforcement, and social networks in both the development and prevention of offending.

Conceptual Framework

This part of the study presented the core concepts derived from the identified themes based on the narratives of first-time offenders during the interview process. The framework illustrated how their lived experiences had been shaped by interconnected emotional, environmental, social, and material dimensions of incarceration. These dimensions had collectively influenced their coping mechanisms, identity reconstruction, and meaning-making processes within the criminal justice system.

Embodied Fear and Emotional Turmoil in Confronting the Consequences of Crime. First-time offenders had experienced intense emotional and physiological reactions upon arrest and incarceration, often manifested through fear, anxiety, trembling, and psychological distress (Duba & Jordaan, 2023). These responses reflected an immediate embodied reaction to an unfamiliar and threatening environment. Recent studies indicated that individuals undergoing incarceration had reported high levels of stress, particularly stemming from fear of correctional authorities and other inmates, which contributed to emotional instability within custodial settings (Fazel et al., 2024). Moreover, stigma associated with incarceration had intensified emotional distress, as individuals experienced social rejection and internalized feelings of shame and self-blame (Rogers; Wingert et al., 2024).

Contemporary research further suggested that moral emotions such as guilt and shame during initial confinement had been strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms (Kovács et al., 2019). These findings indicated that embodied fear and emotional turmoil had been central to the early experiences of first-time offenders, as they navigated both internal emotional responses and external institutional pressures.

Disrupted Safe Spaces and the Transformation of Place into a Site of Fear and Adjustment. First-time offenders had encountered a significant disruption in their sense of safety as they transitioned from familiar environments into restrictive institutional settings. Spaces that had once provided comfort had been replaced by environments characterized by surveillance, control, and uncertainty. Recent literature suggests that carceral environments function as spaces of both control and vulnerability, in which institutional conditions produce fear, exclusion, and psychological strain (Jewkes et al., 2022; Crewe, 2021). Studies have shown that individuals exposed to

unfamiliar and restrictive environments have experienced heightened anxiety and often adopted coping strategies such as withdrawal, hypervigilance, and avoidance (Haney, 2022).

Research further indicated that restrictive conditions during incarceration contributed to ongoing instability, requiring continuous adaptation to environments perceived as unsafe (Liebling & Arnold, 2022). These findings suggested that the disruption of safe spaces had been manifested through fear, insecurity, and adaptive behaviors, as first-time offenders reinterpreted and adjusted to environments that no longer ensured safety and familiarity.

Interrupted Futures and the Slow Realization of Consequences. First-time offenders experienced disruptions in their life trajectories upon entering the criminal justice system, as previously established goals, plans, and aspirations were delayed or altered. The consequences of legal involvement and incarceration had challenged their sense of future orientation. Recent studies had demonstrated that justice system involvement significantly disrupted developmental pathways, limiting access to education, employment, and social mobility (Wiley et al., 2025; Farrall et al., 2022).

Life-course research had further indicated that incarceration functioned as a critical turning point, often resulting in non-linear life trajectories characterized by instability and reassessment of personal choices (Laub & Sampson, 2021). Additionally, individuals entering custody had reported emotional distress linked to the loss of personal goals and life direction, reinforcing the sense of interrupted futures (Laursen, 2023). These findings suggested that first-time offenders experienced a gradual realization of the consequences, reflected in disrupted life plans, emotional loss, and an evolving awareness of the long-term impact of their actions.

Reconfigured Relationships: from Social Connection to Distance, Doubt, and Selective Support. First-time offenders had experienced significant changes in their social relationships, often characterized by weakened ties, emotional distance, and uncertainty in support systems. Relationships that had once been stable had become fragile or conditional during incarceration. Recent research has shown that incarceration strained family relationships and reduced social support, leading to emotional isolation and selective reliance on trusted individuals (Johnson & Arditti, 2023)

Studies have also emphasized that communication with loved ones is a critical coping mechanism; however, such connections are often limited and inconsistent, affecting emotional well-being (Turney & Wildeman, 2022). Furthermore, the variability in institutional and social support structures had contributed to uncertainty and selective engagement with available relationships. These findings indicated that social relationships were not entirely lost but had been reconfigured into more selective, fragile, and adaptive forms of connection among first-time offenders.

Material Absence and Presence as Symbols of Loss, Support, and Meaning-Making. First-time offenders had experienced the material conditions of incarceration as symbolic representations of loss, control, and identity disruption. The absence of personal belongings, communication tools, and familiar objects had reflected not only physical deprivation but also emotional and psychological disconnection. Recent studies have indicated that material deprivation within prison settings contributes to identity loss and weakens connections to the outside world (Crewe & Levins, 2022; Liebling et al., 2023). Limited material resources had often carried symbolic value, serving as markers of social connection, dignity, and continuity (Schultz, 2024). Research has also shown that individuals actively sought ways to regain control and meaning through small material choices, thereby supporting coping and psychological resilience (Testoni et al., 2021). These findings suggested that material absence and presence had functioned as meaningful indicators of loss, support, and identity reconstruction among first-time offenders, influencing how they interpreted and coped with incarceration.

This illustrated that the lived experiences of first-time offenders had been shaped by multiple interconnected dimensions: emotional (fear and distress), environmental (disrupted spaces), temporal (interrupted futures), social (reconfigured relationships), and material (symbolic deprivation and support). These dimensions had interacted to influence how offenders understood their experiences, coped with challenges, and reconstructed meaning during and after incarceration. The framework had served as a guide in analyzing how these experiences contributed to behavioral adaptation, identity transformation, and the potential for reintegration into society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore and comprehend the lived experiences of first-time offenders as they confronted the realities of crime and its consequences. Phenomenology is a qualitative method that seeks to elucidate the essence of a phenomenon through the careful examination of individuals' lived experiences, while bracketing preconceived notions that may influence interpretation (Delve & Limpaecher, 2022). Guided by Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, the study aimed to uncover the deeper, subjective meanings embedded in participants' experiences.

Van Manen's approach was deemed appropriate for this study because it emphasizes reflection, interpretation, and thematic analysis to capture the essence of human experience (Van Manen, 2023). Since the present study sought to understand not only the observable challenges first-time offenders encountered but also the emotional, psychological, and social meanings they attached to those experiences, a phenomenological design was particularly well-suited. This approach enabled the researcher to generate a rich and interpretative account of how the participants made sense of their involvement in crime, the consequences that followed, and the coping strategies they employed in response to their circumstances.

Setting

The research was conducted in a jail facility in Zamboanga del Sur, a province in the Zamboanga Peninsula region in Mindanao, Philippines, which oversaw the custody and welfare of adult offenders. As a correctional institution, it served as an appropriate setting for examining the lived experiences of first-time offenders in the context of crime, incarceration, and reintegration.

Participants

The participants of this study included ten (10) first-time offenders who were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The participants were identified based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) they were first-time offenders currently confined within the BJMP facility; (2) they had been incarcerated for at least one month to ensure sufficient lived experience; (3) they were willing to participate and provided informed consent; (4) they possessed the cognitive and communicative ability to clearly articulate their experiences; and (5) they were 18 years old or above, in accordance with ethical research standards involving adult participants.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide facilitated data collection for this study. To ensure effective communication and full comprehension among participants, the questions were translated into the vernacular language. The interview process began with an opening question designed to build rapport and create a comfortable environment for sharing. Core questions were developed to directly address the research focus, exploring how participants perceived and made sense of their experiences, the challenges they encountered, and the coping strategies they employed.

Following the core questions, probing questions were asked to further explore and clarify the participants' responses. Finally, closing questions encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and provided a meaningful conclusion to the interview process. Throughout an in-depth interview, the researcher will record the relevant data using digital recording equipment. Using this method, the interview process will be documented accurately and completely. The themes that emerged from the participants' responses will then be identified by transcribing and analyzing the recorded data.

Data Gathering

Prior to conducting the actual interviews, the researcher secured authorization from the Dean of the Graduate School to proceed with the study. Additionally, formal permission to conduct the interviews was requested and

obtained from the Regional Director of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP). Following approval, the researcher identified potential participants with the assistance of jail officers, who helped locate first-time offenders who met the study's inclusion criteria. All prospective participants were screened to ensure they met the predetermined criteria, confirming their suitability for the research. Participants' consent and voluntary participation were prioritized throughout the study. The researcher ensured that participants' rights were protected by clearly informing them that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

After obtaining informed consent, the researcher scheduled individual interviews with each participant. To assist participants in recalling their experiences, a copy of the interview questions was provided prior to the interview. Due to the nature of the setting, the interviews were conducted in a quiet, suitable environment to minimize external noise. During the interview process, the researcher read the questions clearly and systematically. The researcher remained open to clarifying any part of the interview guide and the overall research process to ensure participants' full understanding. This approach facilitated accurate, detailed, and meaningful responses from the participants

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting this qualitative research, specific measures were taken, particularly to ensure that this research paper had been approved by the MU-Research Ethics Committee (MUREC). The researcher conformed to the ethical protocol set by the university. The researcher was particular in the selection and conduct of the interviews with the participants. There was strict observation of the voluntariness of participation by all participants. The interview was conducted with their consent, as they signed the informed consent form prepared by the researcher. Their refusal to participate did not involve any penalty or loss of benefits. Their signed consent did not waive any legal claims, rights, or remedies arising from this study.

Regarding participants' identities, the researcher took measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality by not mentioning participants' names during the interview. Instead, the researcher addressed them with "sir" and "ma'am." No names of the participants were reflected in any manner in the results and manuscript of the study. Their attendance and signature in the informed consent were kept with utmost confidentiality. Throughout the study, the welfare of the participants was the researcher's priority. The researcher adhered to the guidelines set by the Republic Act No. 10173, known as the "Data Privacy Act of 2012." To ensure the confidentiality and security of the data, all collected information was stored in a password-protected folder on a secure computer. Only the researcher had access to the data, and it was opened exclusively during transcription. Once the data was transcribed, it was permanently deleted to ensure privacy and confidentiality

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which uncovered the essence and meaning of first-time offenders lived experiences through rich, interpretive engagement with the data (Van Manen, 2023). The analytic process began with the verbatim transcription of interviews, allowing the researcher to immerse deeply in the participants' narratives while maintaining reflexivity and openness to meanings emerging from their experiences (Dahal, 2025). Significant statements and meaning units that illuminate essential aspects of the participants' experiences were identified and reflected upon to capture recurring patterns and thematic structures within the data

Van Manen's method involves an iterative process of holistic, selective, and detailed reading. The holistic approach examines each transcript to grasp its fundamental meaning, the selective approach identifies particularly revealing statements or phrases, and the detailed approach analyzes the text line-by-line to uncover nuanced meanings embedded within participants' narratives (Van Manen, 2023). Through this reflective and interpretive process, essential themes related to the emotional, cognitive, social, and relational experiences of first-time offenders emerged. This phenomenological analysis moves beyond simple description and revealed deeper subjective meanings consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective (Naeem et al., 2023).

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails to support the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity of the findings (Lim,

2025). The final themes were presented through reflective narrative descriptions supported by direct participant quotations and interpreted in relation to criminological theories and rehabilitation practices. Through this framework, the study seeks to authentically capture the complex and transformative experiences of "crossing the line" among first-time offenders and contribute meaningful insights for offender rehabilitation and criminal justice policy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study involved ten (10) first-time offenders currently confined within the jail facility and have been incarcerated for at least one month, which ensures sufficient lived experience. Participants possess the cognitive and communicative ability and clearly share their experiences. Participants were 18 years or older, in accordance with ethical research standards involving adult participants. The participants willingly participated and provided informed consent.

From the transcribed interviews, emerged the five (5) emerging themes namely: Embodied Fear and Emotional Turmoil in Confronting the Consequences of Crime, Disrupted safe spaces and the transformation of place into a site of fear and adjustment, Interrupted Futures and the Slow Realization of Consequences, Reconfigured Relationships: From Social connection to distance, doubt, and Selective Support and, Material Absence and Presence as Symbols of Loss, Support, and Meaning-Making.

Embodied Fear and Emotional Turmoil in Confronting the Consequences of Crime

This theme addresses the first statement of the problem, which examines how participants experience fear and turmoil, both physically and emotionally, when confronting the consequences of crime. The findings reveal that first-time offenders experience intense emotional distress and bodily reactions during arrest and incarceration. Participants described fear, trembling, anxiety, exhaustion, depression, and stress as immediate and lingering responses to confinement and uncertainty.

For the participants, confronting the consequences of crime was experienced not only as an emotional struggle but also as a deeply embodied experience marked by fear, trembling, anxiety, exhaustion, and emotional instability. Their lived experiences reveal how the sudden transition from freedom to incarceration created overwhelming feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, and psychological distress. Fear was experienced both physically and emotionally, often emerging first through bodily reactions before fully developing into deeper emotional suffering. These are their statements:

"My experience as a first-time offender, ma'am, is fear and anxiety. Fear and this trembling." (P 9)

"My experience, ma'am—when I entered, I felt fear, ma'am. I trembled, ma'am." (P10)

These statements indicate an automatic fight-or-flight response and suggest that the initial impact of confinement is experienced first through the body manifesting as trembling, rapid breathing, and heightened alertness, before cognitive processing and longer term emotional reactions such as shame, rumination, and depressive symptoms develop. This pattern underscores the importance of addressing immediate physiological arousal at intake (e.g., through grounding and breathing techniques) alongside early psychological support to prevent the consolidation of distress.

The experiences of the individuals, however, also suggest that emotional pain did not always surface immediately. For some, it was not until they were incarcerated for a while and started thinking about their circumstances that the full psychological effects of incarceration became apparent.

Participant 1 described delayed emotional realization after confinement: *"It only hit me later, ma'am. During the arrest, it was like trembling, I was still caught off guard by what happened. Then after a few days here, that's when I really felt it, that I felt uneasy, depressed, stressed." (P1)*

This report demonstrates that mental distress and physical terror can happen multiple times, which enhances the prior descriptions. Although there was trembling and shock at the arrest, after being detained for a few days,

feelings of anxiety, despair, and tension increased, suggesting a gradual comprehension of the consequences of jail.

Other participants described how arrest and confinement disrupted their emotional stability and gradually intensified their awareness of the reality of incarceration. Feelings of nervousness, panic, stress, and depression became more evident as they spent more time inside the correctional facility and reflected on their situation. For some participants, the full emotional impact of incarceration was not immediately realized during arrest but slowly unfolded through continued confinement and uncertainty. These lived experiences illustrate how first-time offenders encountered incarceration as a deeply distressing and transformative experience that affected both the body and the mind. These are their statements:

"It's like I'm really scared, ma'am, of being put in prison because this is my first time." (P5)

"On my part, ma'am, it's tough, there's exhaustion and fear because I don't know what might happen to me hour by hour." (P4)

These statements show that participants' terror was strongly associated with their unfamiliarity with the prison environment and their uncertainty about their future. Due to the unfamiliarity of jail, Participant 5 experienced extreme anxiety when first entering prison. The dread conveyed was not just a response to being physically confined; it also included worries about adjusting to a new setting, engaging with other prisoners, and dealing with the fallout from criminal activity.

In the same way, Participant 4's story reveals how uncertainty led to both physical and emotional tiredness. Lack of predictability and control over day-to-day existence is reflected in not knowing what might happen "hour by hour," which exacerbates feelings of vulnerability and dread. It was challenging to feel safe or emotionally stable because of the ongoing psychological strain caused by this uncertainty. According to the participant's statement, confinement was emotionally taxing in addition to being confining because there were unresolved concerns about one's own safety, potential legal repercussions, and future situations every day.

When viewed together, these accounts show that the participants' anguish went beyond the first shock of being arrested. As they adapted to captivity, their experiences show how anxiety, uncertainty, and emotional tiredness were entwined. Incarceration was perceived by first-time offenders as a significant interruption to their sense of security and control, requiring them to face a foreign reality that tested their emotional health and comprehension of the future.

Existing studies support the finding that first-time offenders commonly experience intense emotional and psychological distress during incarceration. Research indicates that initial encounters with the criminal justice system are associated with heightened fear, anxiety, shame, and emotional instability, particularly among individuals experiencing incarceration for the first time. Mottershead et al. (2024) found that fear and emotional turmoil are prevalent among first-time offender populations and significantly affect psychological adjustment during confinement. D'Orta et al. (2022) reported that first-time incarceration is associated with increased psychological vulnerability and deterioration in mental health during the early stages of imprisonment. Studies further suggest that fear and uncertainty influence offender behavior and coping mechanisms throughout the incarceration process, affecting adjustment and rehabilitation outcomes. These studies support the participants' experiences by demonstrating that incarceration produces both immediate physical reactions and prolonged emotional distress among first-time offenders.

The findings imply that first-time offenders require trauma-informed emotional support during the early stages of incarceration. Correctional facilities may strengthen intake procedures by providing immediate psychological assistance, orientation programs, and emotional stabilization interventions for newly admitted inmates. The results also highlight the importance of creating supportive rehabilitation environments that recognize the emotional vulnerability of first-time offenders. Programs focusing on emotional coping, stress management, and mental health support may help reduce psychological distress and improve adjustment during confinement.

Disrupted Safe Spaces and the Transformation of Place into a Site of Fear and Adjustment

This theme explored how participants experienced changes in their sense of safety and meaning in places that had become associated with fear and adjustment. The findings reveal that first-time offenders experience a transformation of previously safe and familiar places into spaces associated with fear, uncertainty, and emotional distress. Participants described experiences of sudden police intrusion, unexpected arrest, prison culture shock, nervousness, and forced adaptation to unfamiliar correctional environments.

For the participants, places that were once associated with comfort, privacy, and safety gradually became emotionally connected with fear, uncertainty, and adjustment after arrest and incarceration. Their lived experiences reveal how ordinary spaces such as homes, roads, and prison admission areas lost their previous meaning and instead became reminders of vulnerability, loss of control, and emotional distress.

The participants experienced sudden police intrusion, unexpected arrest, and exposure to unfamiliar prison environments as deeply unsettling disruptions to their sense of security. Feelings of fear, nervousness, crying, and uncertainty emerged as they attempted to adjust to spaces that no longer felt safe or familiar. Within the correctional setting, participants also encountered prison practices and behaviors that intensified emotional discomfort and heightened their awareness of being confined. These experiences illustrate how incarceration transformed physical spaces into emotionally charged environments that required continuous psychological and emotional adjustment. The participants expressed the following:

"They suddenly entered our house, ma'am. They searched our room." (P1)

"As far as I remember, Ma'am, when I arrived at the place, there was suddenly an arrest that happened." (P6)

"When I really arrived here, ma'am, of course I felt scared and nervous... they whistle and cheer loudly when a new person arrives. I was thinking, what will they do to me? But thank God nothing happened." (P8)

"When I first arrived here, ma'am, I was really scared. I cried because of the change. It's like during NACOCO, ma'am, it's yearly. It's sort of like a fiesta for the entire prison." (P1)

Existing literature indicates that sudden exposure to correctional environments significantly affects the emotional adjustment and sense of safety of newly incarcerated individuals. Sobczak and Zacharuk (2023) found that newly admitted inmates commonly experience emotional withdrawal, fear, and social isolation during the early stages of incarceration as coping responses to unfamiliar prison conditions. Powrie (2025) described "entry-shock" as a condition experienced by incarcerated individuals during initial confinement, characterized by emotional numbness, fear, uncertainty, and hypervigilance caused by sudden environmental change and institutional adjustment. Studies further suggest that prison culture and institutional practices contribute to emotional distress among first-time offenders, particularly during admission and early adjustment periods. These studies support participants' experiences by demonstrating how sudden environmental disruption and exposure to correctional settings transform familiar spaces into environments marked by fear, uncertainty, and emotional adjustment.

This theme is best explained by Becker's (1963) Labeling Theory, which states that individuals formally identified as offenders begin to experience changes in self-perception and social treatment following criminal justice involvement. The sudden intrusion of law enforcement and entry into correctional environments reflect the beginning of this labeling process. Life Course Theory by Sampson and Laub (1993) also explains how incarceration functions as a major turning point that disrupts existing social roles, routines, and attachments. The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model of Andrews and Bonta (1990) explains how emotional responses such as fear, panic, and withdrawal influence offenders' adjustment to incarceration and institutional environments.

This implies that first-time offenders require supportive and structured adjustment processes during early incarceration. Correctional institutions may strengthen orientation programs, emotional support services, and trauma-informed intake procedures to reduce fear and anxiety during admission and confinement. The results also highlight the importance of creating safer and more supportive correctional environments for newly admitted offenders. Programs that promote emotional adjustment, positive socialization, and psychological support may help reduce distress and improve adaptation among first-time offenders during incarceration.

Interrupted Futures and the Slow Realization of Consequences

This theme presented perceptions and helped them make sense of their disrupted plans as they gradually realize the consequences of crime. The findings reveal that first-time offenders experience delayed emotional awareness regarding the impact of incarceration on their lives, aspirations, relationships, and future opportunities. Participants described feelings of regret, uncertainty, disappointment, and emotional distress as they slowly recognized the long-term consequences of their actions and confinement.

In this study, interrupted futures and the slow realization of consequences refer to the lived experience of first-time offenders as their sense of future is gradually reinterpreted within the temporality of incarceration. In van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological sense, this theme captures how the lifeworld of lived time is altered, where the future is no longer experienced as open and continuous but becomes fragmented, uncertain, and re-evaluated through reflection in confinement. The meaning of incarceration is not immediately fully grasped at the moment of arrest or detention but unfolds progressively as participants dwell within their experience and revisit their life expectations.

The participants' experiences show that incarceration is lived as a disruption of anticipated life trajectories, where "what was expected" is replaced by uncertainty and re-evaluation of self and future. Initial reactions of shock and disbelief reflect an early inability to fully grasp the meaning of confinement within lived time. However, as time in detention continues, reflection deepens, and the experience is re-lived through memory and anticipation, giving rise to emotional awareness such as regret, distress, and recognition of missed possibilities. In this unfolding process, participants begin to re-experience their relationships, aspirations, and plans not as fixed realities but as interrupted possibilities, revealing how incarceration reshapes both present existence and future orientation. These were the statements of the participants:

"It only hit me later, ma'am... after a few days here, that's when I really felt uneasy, depressed, and stressed." (P1)

"I didn't expect to end up here like this with my life." (P3)

"It happened so suddenly." (P6)

"I had many dreams in life... but I ended up here unable to do anything." (P2)

"I've been here for six months now... things between my wife and me have changed." (P8)

Existing studies indicate that the emotional and psychological consequences of incarceration often develop gradually over time. Research on prison adjustment shows that newly incarcerated individuals commonly experience an initial period of emotional shock or numbness before recognizing the long-term impact of confinement. Sobczak and Zacharuk (2024) found that prisoners frequently rely on emotional withdrawal and detachment during early incarceration before transitioning into reflective emotional processing. Skowroński and Talik (2021) reported that incarceration progressively affects individuals' sense of dignity, purpose, and future orientation, contributing to emotional distress and feelings of loss. Kenkmann and Ghanem (2024) further emphasized that uncertainty regarding disrupted life trajectories and future opportunities becomes a major concern among incarcerated individuals as confinement continues. These studies support the participants'

experiences by demonstrating that awareness of incarceration-related consequences develops progressively through prolonged exposure to confinement and reflection on altered life circumstances.

This theme is closely related to Sampson and Laub's (1993) Life Course Theory, which posits that major life events, such as incarceration, serve as turning points that disrupt an individual's life trajectory, social roles, and future opportunities. The participants' experiences reflect how incarceration interrupts personal aspirations, relationships, and anticipated futures. Ward's (2002) Good Lives Model also explains how the loss of autonomy, purpose, and meaningful goals contributes to emotional distress among offenders. Additionally, the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model of Andrews and Bonta (1990) highlights how emotional and cognitive responses influence adjustment to incarceration and rehabilitation processes.

The theme implies that first-time offenders require interventions that support long-term emotional adjustment, reflective processing, and future planning during incarceration. Correctional programs may incorporate counseling, life-skills development, goal-setting activities, and rehabilitation planning to help offenders rebuild a sense of direction and personal purpose. The results also highlight the importance of providing emotional support that addresses regret, uncertainty, and disrupted aspirations among incarcerated individuals. Programs that encourage self-reflection and future-oriented thinking may help offenders develop more positive perspectives regarding rehabilitation and reintegration.

Reconfigured Relationship from Social Connection to Distance, Doubt, and Selective Support

This theme reflected how incarceration reshapes the social world of first-time offenders, transforming previously stable relationships into experiences marked by distance, doubt, and selective forms of support. The participants describe a significant shift in how they relate to family and friends, in which emotional closeness is no longer evenly distributed, and trust becomes conditional. Social ties that were once taken for granted are re-evaluated in light of incarceration, leading to a reordering of priorities and emotional connections.

In this study, refer to the lived restructuring of interpersonal connections as experienced by first-time offenders within the correctional lifeworld. From a van Manen phenomenological perspective, this theme expresses how relationality, the lived sense of "being-with-others," is transformed through incarceration, in which proximity is replaced by separation and trust is selectively reconstructed. Relationships are not merely reduced in number but are re-experienced in meaning, as participants become aware of who remains present, who withdraws, and how social identity is reshaped through stigma and distance. The essence of this theme lies in the lived tension between belonging and exclusion, where relationships are reinterpreted through emotional distance, judgment, and the enduring presence of selective support from significant others. The following answers of the participants supported these:

"When it comes to friends, Ma'am, before it was friends first then family, but now it's family first then friends. Because family is the one who stayed and took care of me. My friends didn't." (P1)

"Now there's doubt from my family and friends they ask why I did this." (P2)

"About my friends outside, Ma'am—we rarely contact each other now... I'm really behind them now." (P3)

"It has really changed a lot, Ma'am, because some people fear getting close to you, thinking they might get involved." (P5)

"My family still makes time for me and gives me attention even while I'm imprisoned here." (P6)

Research indicates that incarceration significantly affects interpersonal relationships by increasing stigma, emotional distancing, and social withdrawal. DeShay et al. (2021) found that stigma associated with incarceration often weakens social relationships because individuals and their social networks fear judgment and social consequences. Similarly, Tadros and Ansell (2022) reported that incarceration disrupts emotional attachment and relationship stability, particularly among close family and friendship networks. Moore et al.

(2021) also emphasized that limited social support during incarceration contributes to loneliness and emotional distress among incarcerated individuals.

Studies further suggest that anticipated and internalized stigma influence how incarcerated individuals interact with others, often resulting in withdrawal or reduced communication (Smoyer et al., 2022). Soto-Nevarez et al. (2021) additionally highlighted the importance of supportive relationships in promoting emotional adjustment and reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals. These studies support the present findings by demonstrating how incarceration reshapes social relationships into selective systems characterized by support, doubt, distance, and stigma.

This theme was best explained through Labeling Theory by Becker (1963), which states that individuals labeled as offenders often experience stigma, altered social treatment, and weakened interpersonal relationships. The participants' experiences of judgment, distancing, and reduced social interaction reflect the effects of criminal labeling on social identity and relationships. Life Course Theory by Sampson and Laub (1993) also explains how incarceration serves as a turning point that restructures social bonds and interpersonal priorities. Additionally, Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory explains how individuals adapt their behavior and expectations in response to changing social environments and interactions during incarceration.

The findings imply that maintaining healthy social relationships is important for the emotional adjustment and rehabilitation of first-time offenders. Correctional institutions may strengthen family-centered interventions, communication opportunities, and support programs that encourage positive social relationships during incarceration. The results also highlight the importance of reducing stigma and promoting supportive reintegration environments for incarcerated individuals. Programs that strengthen family involvement and emotional support may help offenders maintain meaningful social connections and improve adjustment during confinement and reintegration.

Material Absence and Presence as Symbols of Loss, Support, and Meaning Making

This theme explored how objects and material things become meaningful symbols of loss, support, and personal meaning-making in the aftermath of crime-related experiences. The findings reveal that material deprivation and material support carry deep emotional and symbolic meanings among first-time offenders. Participants described how the absence of personal belongings, communication devices, and everyday resources intensified feelings of isolation, while small acts of material support represented care, connection, and emotional reassurance.

In this study, "materiality" refers to the lived meanings ascribed to objects, resources, and material conditions within incarceration, as experienced by first-time offenders. In line with van Manen's phenomenological approach, this theme reflects the lifeworld existential of "lived space" and "lived things," where materiality is not neutral but deeply meaningful in shaping experience. The absence of personal belongings, communication tools, and everyday resources is lived as a form of existential deprivation and disconnection from normal life. At the same time, the presence of small material supports is experienced as meaningful signs of care and continued relational connection. The essence of this theme lies in how material conditions become symbolic expressions of loss, dignity, and emotional sustenance, shaping how participants make sense of their confinement and maintain a sense of self. The participants stated the following:

"The challenge here, Ma'am, is that I don't have a phone, no social media—nothing like the things you have outside." (P1)

"They visit me and bring me food." (P7)

"They provided me with food, Ma'am—like Sky Flakes and money." (P10)

"For us who have nothing, Ma'am, they or we are very happy when there is gift-giving during visitors' day." (P3)

"As a pastry cook here, Ma'am, I learned that even small work inside the jail is important." (P2)

Existing literature suggests that material conditions inside correctional facilities strongly influence emotional well-being, identity, and social connection among incarcerated individuals. Testoni et al. (2020) reported that material deprivation and spatial confinement contribute to feelings of identity loss, emotional suffering, and disrupted meaning-making among incarcerated populations. Similarly, Schultz (2024) emphasized that incarcerated individuals often attempt to regain dignity and personal agency through limited material choices and structured activities within prison settings. Crewe and Levins (2022) further explained that material objects and provisions often acquire symbolic value because they represent emotional support, the preservation of identity, and continued social connection during incarceration. These studies support the present study's findings by demonstrating that the absence of material goods contributes to feelings of deprivation and isolation. In contrast, material support serves as an important source of emotional reassurance and meaning-making among first-time offenders.

This theme was associated with the Good Lives Model by Ward (2002), which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling basic human needs, such as autonomy, relatedness, and purpose, for achieving well-being. The deprivation of communication tools, personal belongings, and resources reflects the disruption of these important human goods. The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model of Andrews and Bonta (1990) also explains how individuals respond differently to deprivation and stressful conditions during incarceration. Additionally, Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory helps explain how individuals assign meaning and value to available resources and experiences within the prison environment over time.

The findings imply that material conditions significantly influence the emotional well-being and adjustment of first-time offenders during incarceration. Correctional institutions may strengthen rehabilitation efforts by providing meaningful work opportunities, maintaining visitation support, and allowing safe access to limited personal resources that promote emotional stability and social connection. The results also highlight the importance of recognizing how small forms of material support contribute to emotional resilience, identity preservation, and coping during confinement. Programs that encourage productive engagement, family support, and humane living conditions may improve psychological well-being and rehabilitation outcomes among incarcerated individuals.

The findings highlight that material conditions within incarceration are deeply intertwined with emotional, social, and psychological experiences of first-time offenders. The absence of everyday resources reinforces feelings of isolation and identity loss, while even minimal material support acts as a potent symbol of care, social connection, and emotional sustenance. Recognizing the symbolic significance of material absence and presence provides practical implications for correctional policy and rehabilitation programs. Interventions can include structured visitation schedules, provision of meaningful work, and access to small personal items, fostering resilience, relational stability, and purposeful engagement. Understanding how offenders reinterpret material conditions as opportunities for meaning-making underscores the critical role of material and social support in promoting emotional well-being and facilitating reintegration.

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study explored the lived experiences of first-time offenders in the context of crime and its consequences. Specifically, it sought to understand: (1) the physical and emotional experiences of fear and turmoil when confronting the consequences of crime; (2) changes in participants' sense of safety and meaning within places associated with fear and adjustment; (3) how participants perceive and make sense of their disrupted plans as they gradually realize the consequences of crime; (4) changes in their relationships, particularly in terms of trust, distance, doubt, and selective support after encountering crime-related consequences; and (5) how objects and material things become meaningful symbols of loss, support, and personal meaning-making in the aftermath of crime-related experiences.

The study employed a qualitative research design using Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which focuses on interpreting and understanding lived human experiences. A total of ten (10) first-time offenders currently incarcerated in Zamboanga del Sur were selected through purposive sampling. Data

were gathered through in-depth individual interviews to obtain rich descriptions of their lived experiences. The collected narratives were transcribed, interpreted, and analyzed thematically to generate meaningful insights into the participants' experiences.

Findings

The study produced five key findings that aligned with the research questions, based on an examination of the participant narratives.

Embodied Fear and Emotional Turmoil in Confronting the Consequences of Crime. This theme addresses the first statement of the problem, which examines how participants experience fear and turmoil, both physically and emotionally, when confronting the consequences of crime. When faced with the consequences of their criminal behavior, participants felt extreme mental and physical anxiety. Shock, worry, regret, and emotional suffering were all evident in their stories. Physical symptoms, including restlessness, sleep difficulties, and trouble adjusting to jail, sometimes accompany these.

Disrupted Safe Spaces and the Transformation of Place into a Site of Fear and Adjustment. This theme addresses the second statement of the problem, which explores how participants' sense of safety and meaning changed within places associated with fear and adjustment. The results showed that participants' perceptions of safety and purpose in familiar environments had significantly changed. The jail environment became marked by fear, uncertainty, limitations, and the need for adaptability, while places that once offered comfort, freedom, and a sense of belonging became distant memories. Participants described feelings of discomfort, isolation, and vulnerability as they adjusted to an unfamiliar setting, illustrating how confinement altered both their relationship with place and their sense of personal security.

Interrupted Futures and the Slow Realization of Consequences. This theme addresses the third statement of the problem, which explores how participants perceive and make sense of the disruption of their plans as they gradually realize the consequences of their actions. Participants gradually became aware that their plans were being disrupted. As they thought about their current situation, they realized more and more how incarceration had changed their life paths, reduced their chances, and changed their own objectives. Many participants found it difficult to completely understand the weight of their conditions at first. However, confinement eventually prompted them to reconsider their choices and realize how their actions affected them and their loved ones. Their stories show how incarceration altered their expectations and perception of what lies ahead, and they depict a slow process of realization characterized by remorse, introspection, and worry for an uncertain future.

Reconfigured Relationships: From Social connection to distance, Doubt, and Selective Support. This theme addresses the fourth statement of the problem, which explores how incarceration altered participants' relationships with family, friends, and significant others. The results showed that while identifying those who continued to provide sincere support, participants also experienced changes in their social connections characterized by emotional distance, diminished trust, and feelings of stigma. Following the crime-related incident, several participants reported strained family relationships, decreased social activity, and changing views of who could be dependent upon or trusted.

Material Absence and Presence as Symbols of Loss, Support, and Meaning-Making. This theme addresses the fifth statement of the problem, which explores how material objects and possessions were imbued with symbolic meaning in participants' lived experiences during incarceration. The findings demonstrated that the presence and absence of personal belongings significantly influenced how participants processed experiences of loss, emotional difficulty, and coping. During incarceration, personal belongings, whether retained, lost, or remembered, were imbued with symbolic meaning related to memory, identity, support, and emotional survival. Items that remained in their possession often served as reminders of family connections, personal identity, and life outside detention. Conversely, the absence of personal possessions intensified feelings of deprivation, separation, and longing, further shaping their emotional adjustment within confinement.

Overall, the results show that first-time offenders' lived experiences are multifaceted, involving material, relational, emotional, geographical, and temporal changes following their involvement in criminal activity

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following were the conclusions:

The study concludes that first-time offenders experience incarceration as an embodied phenomenon characterized by intense psychological and physical distress. Fear, shock, anxiety, and regret are not only experienced emotionally but are also manifested physically through restlessness, sleep disturbances, and bodily discomfort, demonstrating how the consequences of crime are deeply inscribed in the lived body.

It is concluded that incarceration significantly transforms participants' experience of space. Environments that were once familiar or neutral are reinterpreted as spaces of fear, confinement, and adjustment, thereby altering their sense of safety, orientation, and meaning within their surrounding world.

The study concludes that participants experience a disrupted and reconfigured sense of time. As they reflect on their present condition, they gradually become aware of the interruption and delay of their plans, leading to a heightened realization of lost opportunities and altered life trajectories.

It is concluded that incarceration reshapes interpersonal relationships in terms of trust, emotional distance, and social support. Participants experience strained family ties, reduced social interaction, and selective trust, indicating a reconfiguration of relational connections in the aftermath of crime.

Lastly, the study concludes that material objects take on deep symbolic meaning in the lived experiences of first-time offenders. Personal belongings, whether retained, lost, or remembered, carry emotional meaning, serving as representations of loss, memory, identity, support, and coping within the context of incarceration.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following were hereby recommended:

1. For the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) and Bureau of Corrections (BUCOR): It is recommended that jail facilities strengthen mental health services by hiring additional licensed psychologists and psychiatrists and ensuring their regular deployment within correctional institutions. This may be implemented through expanded plantilla positions, increased budget allocation for mental health programs, and the establishment of routine psychological assessment and counseling services. This responds to the conclusion that incarceration produces intense psychological and physical distress among first-time offenders.
2. For Jail Facility Administrators (BJMP and BUCOR): It is recommended that correctional institutions improve the physical and spatial environment of detention facilities by incorporating designated calming and reflection areas, improving ventilation, and creating structured spaces for emotional regulation. This may be done through facility redesign, renovation projects, and inclusion of therapeutic environmental standards in jail management policies. This addresses the conclusion that incarceration significantly transforms inmates' experience of space into one marked by fear and confinement.
3. For Rehabilitation Program Developers and Jail Psychosocial Personnel: It is recommended that rehabilitation programs integrate structured narrative therapy and life-mapping interventions to help inmates reflect on their lived experiences, understand the consequences of their actions, and reconstruct realistic future goals. This may be implemented through facilitated group sessions, guided reflective writing activities, and individualized counseling. This supports the conclusion that participants experience a disrupted and reconfigured sense of time and future orientation.
4. For BJMP and BUCOR Visitation and Welfare Services: It is recommended that correctional institutions strengthen family reintegration programs by providing structured communication interventions, counseling sessions for inmates and families, and supervised family engagement activities. This may be carried out through expanded visitation programs, family therapy sessions, and reintegration planning.

prior to release. This is based on the conclusion that incarceration reshapes interpersonal relationships through emotional distance, mistrust, and selective support.

5. For Jail Psychosocial Services and Program Facilitators: It is recommended that correctional programs recognize and integrate the symbolic meaning of personal belongings by incorporating reflective and expressive activities such as journaling, storytelling, and guided reminiscence therapy. This may be implemented through regular psychosocial sessions that encourage inmates to share memories and emotions associated with personal objects and life outside detention. This responds to the conclusion that material objects serve as symbolic anchors of loss, identity, and coping.
6. For Future Researchers: It is recommended that future studies conduct comparative qualitative or phenomenological research involving different categories of offenders, varying lengths of incarceration, and multiple correctional settings. Researchers may also examine how the availability of mental health professionals and rehabilitation interventions influences inmates' emotional adjustment, identity reconstruction, and meaning-making processes. This may be done through expanded sampling, multi-site studies, and longitudinal qualitative designs.

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