

THE SOCIAL STIGMA OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUAL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Reintegration into society remains a significant challenge for formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly due to the persistence of social stigma. This study explored the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in Marawi City, Philippines, focusing on the social stigma they encounter during their reintegration into society. A qualitative approach using a transcendental phenomenological research design was employed. Eight formerly incarcerated individuals were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, supported by field notes and observations. For data analysis, Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological method was utilized. The study revealed six themes: embodied stigma after release, family as anchor amid social stigma after prison, struggling to belong while navigating stigma and social reentry after prison, redefining family, community, and self after release, restricted lives within judgmental worlds, and resilience and self-redemption after incarceration. The findings indicate that stigma significantly influences the social relationships, opportunities, and community participation of formerly incarcerated individuals. Despite these challenges, family support, personal determination, and the desire to rebuild their lives enable them to move toward meaningful reintegration.

Keywords: *formerly incarcerated individuals, reintegration, resilience, social stigma*

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Imprisonment in the Philippines carries social ramifications that extend far beyond the physical and legal restraints of confinement and remain even after one is released. Incarceration is the state-imposed deprivation of liberty through confinement in a jail or prison (Clear et al., 2021). However, it goes beyond physical restriction, as it exposes individuals to institutionalized living, loss of autonomy, separation from family, and limited access to educational, occupational, and social opportunities. These conditions produce enduring psychological, social, and economic consequences that continue to affect individuals after their release.

Reintegration is the process through which formerly incarcerated individuals regain societal acceptance, resume socially valued roles, and rebuild meaningful relationships (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2020). However, this process is often complicated by stigma. In this study, the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals are primarily anchored on Social Support Theory (Cullen, 1994), which emphasizes that strong social relationships, particularly with family, community, and support systems, play a crucial role in helping individuals cope with stress, overcome challenges, and successfully reintegrate into society. This framework highlights how the presence or absence of support influences how individuals respond to stigma and rebuild their lives after incarceration. While stigma remains evident in their experiences, the study focuses on how support systems mitigate its effects and promote resilience and reintegration. This theoretical lens aligns with the themes generated in the study, particularly in understanding family support, social reintegration, coping mechanisms, structural challenges, and identity reconstruction.

A formerly incarcerated individual refers to a person who has been released from jail or prison and is readjusting to community life while facing various socio-economic and psychosocial challenges (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In the Philippine context, stigma is further intensified by cultural values such as *hiya* (shame), which reinforce social judgment and exclusion (Bidola et al., 2024). As a result, individuals are often perceived as untrustworthy or morally flawed by neighbors, employers, and even family members, leading to social isolation and limited opportunities.

Studies in the Philippines have shown that stigma results in employment barriers, strained family relationships, and social exclusion (Bidola et al., 2021; Vivares & Cuevas Jr., 2023). Formerly incarcerated individuals are often labeled negatively, reinforcing discrimination and limiting their ability to

reintegrate (Ignacio et al., 2022). These experiences also affect psychological well-being, as stigma lowers self-esteem, increases emotional distress, and contributes to social withdrawal (Harris, 2021). In some cases, individuals internalize these negative perceptions, resulting in self-stigmatization and reduced confidence (Cabael et al., 2022).

Beyond individual experiences, stigma is reinforced by structural and institutional barriers. Limited access to employment, inadequate reintegration programs, and weak coordination among support systems restrict opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals (Lopez et al., 2024). Although the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) has implemented rehabilitation programs, these often focus on vocational training while giving less attention to psychosocial reintegration (Cabael et al., 2022). Consequently, many individuals continue to experience difficulty in rebuilding their lives despite completing their sentence.

Cultural perceptions further sustain stigma. In the Philippines, crime is often associated with moral failure, resulting in long-term judgment and social distancing (Dela Cruz et al., 2022). Communities may limit opportunities due to fear of recidivism, reinforcing exclusion (Calope & Maldepeña, 2025). **These conditions demonstrate that while stigma creates barriers, the availability of social support systems becomes essential in helping individuals overcome exclusion and regain acceptance in society.** Despite existing studies, most research in the Philippine context has focused on economic and employment outcomes, with limited attention to how stigma is experienced and interpreted in everyday life. There remains a lack of in-depth qualitative research that captures the embodied, relational, spatial, and temporal dimensions of stigma. **This gap highlights the need to examine how social support influences the ways formerly incarcerated individuals navigate stigma and reconstruct their identities within their social environments.**

Thus, this study aimed to examine the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in the Philippines, focusing on how stigma shapes their bodily presence, family relationships, social reintegration, experiences of space, structural conditions, and sense of purpose after release. **Grounded in Social Support Theory (Cullen, 1994), the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how supportive relationships help individuals cope with stigma and facilitate successful reintegration.**

The findings of this study offer important implications for policymakers, particularly the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), by highlighting the need to integrate psychosocial support into reintegration programs. Community and faith-based organizations may use these findings to develop more inclusive support systems, while educators and researchers may use the results to deepen discussions on stigma and reintegration. Most importantly, the study gives voice to formerly incarcerated individuals and emphasizes the shared responsibility of society in promoting acceptance and meaningful reintegration.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on four major sociological theories, namely: Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963), Howard Becker's Labeling Theory (1963), Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), and Social Support Theory (Leahy-Warren, 2014). These theories collectively explained the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly in relation to stigma, labeling, identity reconstruction, and the role of support systems in their reintegration into society.

Stigma Theory, as introduced by Goffman (1963), described stigma as an attribute, behavior, or characteristic that discredits an individual and reduces one's social identity. It explained how individuals labeled as "ex-convicts" were often perceived as socially undesirable, leading to stereotyping, social exclusion, and discrimination. Goffman emphasized that stigma operated through social interactions, where individuals were judged and categorized based on perceived negative attributes. In the context of this study, this theory explained how formerly incarcerated individuals experienced devaluation and marginalization upon reintegration into the community (Goffman, 1963).

The stigma attached to criminal records extended beyond interpersonal interactions and influenced access to opportunities and social participation. Formerly incarcerated individuals were often perceived as threatening or morally deficient, which resulted in exclusion from employment, community engagement, and personal relationships (Tyler & Brockmann, 2021). These experiences of public stigma also contributed to internalized stigma, such as feelings of shame, reduced self-worth, and decreased motivation to reintegrate. Furthermore, structural stigma manifested through institutional barriers that limited access to housing, employment, and social services, thereby complicating reintegration (Maroto & Pettit, 2020).

Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) explained how individuals constructed and reconstructed their identities based on social roles and interactions within society. This theory emphasized

that identity was shaped through continuous interaction with others and influenced by social expectations and feedback. For formerly incarcerated individuals, reintegration involved redefining their sense of self beyond the label of “ex-offender.” Identity Theory highlighted how individuals actively negotiated their identities in response to stigma and societal reactions. The development of a positive self-identity was essential in overcoming the negative effects of stigma, as it influenced behavior, decision-making, and social participation (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Complementing these perspectives, Becker’s Labeling Theory (1963) explained that deviance was socially constructed and resulted from the labels assigned by society. Individuals became “deviant” not solely because of their actions but due to societal reactions and classifications. In the case of formerly incarcerated individuals, being labeled as “ex-offenders” reinforced negative stereotypes and limited opportunities for reintegration (Becker, 1963). These labels, often imposed by institutions such as the justice system and employers, contributed to self-stigmatization, reduced self-esteem, and diminished motivation to pursue positive life changes. Moreover, labeling increased the likelihood of recidivism by restricting access to economic and social resources (Paternoster & Simpson, 2020; Liu et al., 2021).

In addition, Social Support Theory by Leahy-Warren (2014) provided an essential lens in understanding how relationships and support systems influenced reintegration outcomes. This theory emphasized that individuals who received emotional, informational, and instrumental support from family, peers, and the community were more likely to cope with challenges and achieve positive outcomes. For formerly incarcerated individuals, strong family ties, community acceptance, and support from organizations played a critical role in mitigating the negative effects of stigma and facilitating successful reintegration. Social support acted as a protective factor that enhanced resilience, restored self-worth, and encouraged participation in social and economic activities (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Overall, these four theories provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. Stigma Theory explained the processes of social exclusion, while Labeling Theory described how societal reactions reinforced deviant identities. Identity Theory highlighted the process of self-reconstruction during reintegration, and Social Support Theory emphasized the importance of supportive relationships in overcoming these challenges. Together, these perspectives offered a holistic understanding of the barriers and enabling factors that shaped the reintegration process of formerly incarcerated individuals.

Conceptual Framework

This section presents the conceptual structure of the study by explaining the major themes that describe the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in relation to social stigma after release. The six themes identified in the study include internalizing and negotiating stigma, family as anchor amid social stigma, struggling to belong during social reentry, redefining family and community after release, restricted lives within judgmental social systems, and resilience and self-redemption after incarceration. The themes show how stigma affects various dimensions of the reintegration process such as self-concept, social relations, chances, and development. Reintegration is the process of formerly incarcerated people achieving social acceptance and integrating back into the community to recreate meaningful roles and relationships (Bidola et al., 2024).

Embodied Stigma after Release. The first theme that emerged is internalizing and negotiating stigma after incarceration. This theme reflects how formerly incarcerated individuals become aware of the negative labels attached to them and attempt to cope with the emotional and psychological consequences of these judgments. Participants often experience feelings of shame, embarrassment, and self-doubt when confronted with negative perceptions from others. Stigma occurs when individuals are socially discredited through labeling and stereotyping (Calope & Maldepeña, 2023). It results in exclusion and loss of social acceptance within communities (Liamputtong & Rice, 2021). Stigma is also understood as a social process involving labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination (Friedman et al., 2021).

This theme is best explained by Goffman’s Stigma Theory (1963), which posits that individuals with socially discredited attributes are reduced from a whole person to a tainted identity. As individuals internalize these negative labels, they may begin to see themselves through the lens of societal judgment. This internalization can weaken self-esteem and influence their confidence in pursuing opportunities. Over time, the constant exposure to stigma may shape their identity and limit their sense of belonging in society. As a coping mechanism, some individuals attempt to conceal their past, while others strive to prove their worth through positive behavior and social conformity (Le & Lewis, 2024).

Family as Anchor Amid Social Stigma after Prison. This theme underscores the significance of familial support in assisting formerly incarcerated people in dealing with stigma and readjusting to life after incarceration. Some individuals experience relational disruptions due to the stigma of imprisonment. Family relationships are often strained due to incarceration experiences (Bidola et al., 2021). Stigma may also create tension and emotional distance within families (Adu et al., 2022). These disruptions can lead to social isolation among both individuals and their families.

This theme is supported by Social Support Theory (Leahy-Warren, 2014), which emphasizes that emotional, informational, and instrumental support from significant others plays a crucial role in helping individuals cope with life challenges. Despite these challenges, family support provides emotional stability during reintegration. It also serves as a source of encouragement and guidance. Strong family ties can help rebuild confidence and restore a sense of belonging (Singh et al., 2026). In many cases, family members act as primary support systems by offering financial assistance, emotional reassurance, and motivation to change. As a result, family support becomes a crucial factor in overcoming stigma and facilitating successful reintegration.

Struggling to Belong: Navigating Stigma and Social Reentry after Prison. This theme outlines the difficulties individuals face while trying to reintegrate into their communities. Participants described experiences of isolation and discrimination from neighbors and community members. These experiences create uncertainty regarding their acceptance in society. In the Philippine context, formerly incarcerated individuals are often negatively perceived by society (Ignacio et al., 2022). Cultural perceptions may reinforce stigma and marginalization. Social labeling further contributes to exclusion and discrimination.

Furthermore, this theme is grounded in Becker's Labeling Theory (1963), which explains that deviance is socially constructed through societal reactions and labels imposed on individuals. These labels shape how individuals are perceived and treated within society. These experiences make it difficult for individuals to rebuild trust and establish meaningful social connections. As a result, many individuals struggle to participate fully in community life and may feel socially disconnected (Adabanya et al., 2023). This ongoing struggle highlights the complexity of social reintegration in stigmatizing environments.

Redefining Family, Community, and Self After Release. This theme illustrates how individuals attempt to reconstruct their identity and life perspectives after incarceration. Participants frequently described shifts in their understanding of family roles and community relationships. Incarceration disrupts social and economic connections (Clear et al., 2021). It also limits access to opportunities and social mobility. Reintegration involves redefining personal identity and social roles (Cid & Di, 2026). Social bonds also play a role in shaping reintegration outcomes. Individuals often engage in self-reflection to reassess their values and life goals (Corpuz et al., 2025).

This theme is best explained by Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), which emphasizes that individuals construct and reconstruct their identities through social interaction and role redefinition. This process allows them to reconstruct a more positive identity and align their actions with socially acceptable norms. Through this transformation, individuals attempt to regain dignity and rebuild their place within the community.

Restricted Lives within Judgmental World. This theme emphasizes how systemic and structural barriers contribute to the continued marginalization of formerly incarcerated individuals. Participants reported persistent difficulties in securing employment, reflecting how stigma operates within formal institutions and limits access to opportunities. Employment discrimination remains a major barrier that restricts economic participation among formerly incarcerated individuals (De La Haye et al., 2023). Likewise, criminal records significantly reduce hiring opportunities and reinforce exclusion from the labor market (Kuhn, 2024).

This theme can also be explained through Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963), particularly its structural implications, where stigma extends beyond interpersonal interactions and becomes embedded in institutional practices and social systems. Structural inequalities further limit access to stable income, housing, and essential social services needed for reintegration. These intersecting barriers create long-term disadvantage and reinforce cycles of social and economic exclusion. As a result, individuals experience restricted mobility and limited life chances, making reintegration a continuous struggle rather than a one-time transition (Bidola et al., 2024).

Resilience and Self-Redemption after Incarceration. The final theme highlights the determination of formerly incarcerated individuals to rebuild their lives despite stigma and discrimination. Participants expressed a strong desire to regain trust, restore dignity, and demonstrate personal change within their communities. Incarceration has lasting psychological effects that continue to influence behavior and

emotional well-being after release (Curib et al., 2023). These effects often include emotional distress, social withdrawal, and difficulty in adjusting to community life (Kjellstrand et al., 2022). Mental health challenges may persist and shape the reintegration process by affecting motivation and self-perception (Maroto & Petit, 2020).

This theme is supported by Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), which explains how individuals actively reconstruct a positive self-identity, as well as Desistance Theory (Maruna, 2001), which highlights the process of moving away from criminal behavior through identity transformation. Despite these challenges, individuals actively pursue personal transformation and strive to reconstruct a positive identity (Purohit et al., 2024). This process of resilience reflects an ongoing effort to overcome stigma and achieve meaningful reintegration into society.

Statement of the Problem

This study explored the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in the Philippines regarding social stigma following their release. It sought to understand how social stigma was experienced and interpreted in their daily lives, community reintegration, employment opportunities, and interpersonal communication and relationships, as well as how these experiences influenced their overall well-being.

Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do formerly incarcerated individuals experience social stigma in their daily bodily presence, appearance, and physical interactions with others after release?
2. How do social relationships and interactions with family, friends, and the community change due to stigma following incarceration?
3. How do formerly incarcerated individuals perceive time after their release, particularly in relation to stigma—past experiences, present social treatment, and future opportunities?
4. How do formerly incarcerated individuals experience physical and social spaces after release, considering the impact of stigma?
5. How do material conditions, objects, and social systems influence the experiences of stigma for formerly incarcerated individuals?
6. How do formerly incarcerated individuals perceive their purpose, goals, and agency in life after release in light of social stigma?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

A phenomenological approach was used in this study to capture the formerly incarcerated persons' experiences with societal stigma during the reintegration process in the Philippines. The essence of phenomenological research focuses on the description of lived experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to those experiences, particularly through the processes of describing, reflecting, and interpreting the essence of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This approach aims to provide a rich and detailed description of lived experiences in order to capture the essence of the phenomenon.

A qualitative approach facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay of human behaviors and experiences related to social stigma, particularly among formerly incarcerated individuals. This approach sought to understand the phenomenon of social stigma in its full complexity rather than merely measuring it in quantitative terms.

Setting

This study took place in Marawi City, the Philippines only Islamic city. Marawi has great cultural, religious, and historical significance, but in recent years, has also faced overwhelming social, economic, and political challenges, especially after the 2017 Siege of Marawi, where wide-scale displacement and disruptions of local community and institutional structures occurred.

Marawi City was chosen as the study site due to the unique and rich context the city offers the study of formerly incarcerated people and the stigmas associated with and the processes involved in social reintegration. The community of Marawi has a distinct culture with strong religious values of the Maranao Muslim community, and the community has unique social structures where close extended family and community networks exist. This cultural setting was critical in shaping how families and communities accepted or rejected formerly incarcerated people.

Participants

The participants of this study were formerly incarcerated individuals who had been released from jail or prison and were residing in Marawi City at the time of the study. A purposive sampling method was

employed to recruit individuals who possessed direct and meaningful experiences related to social stigma during their reintegration into society. This sampling strategy ensured that participants could provide rich and in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

In addition, a total of eight (8) participants were included in the study, as participant selection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) were at least 18 years old; (2) had been released from incarceration for five years or more; (3) were residing in Marawi City or nearby barangays; and (4) voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Instruments of the Study

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from the participants. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding the various forms of social stigma the participants experienced, how these experiences affected their daily lives, and the strategies they employed to cope with or overcome such challenges. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and was reviewed by local experts to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and contextual relevance to Marawi City.

When necessary, a translator assisted during the interviews to allow participants to express themselves comfortably and accurately in their preferred language. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes and observational notes were also documented during and immediately after each interview to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and reflective insights. This data collection approach facilitated the gathering of rich, in-depth, and personal accounts, enabling a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of social stigma and reintegration.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles to ensure the protection of the participants' rights and welfare. Approval from the appropriate Ethics Committee was secured prior to the conduct of the study. Although the study involved human participants, participation was completely voluntary. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and were provided with a clear explanation of the procedures prior to giving their consent. Additionally, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative repercussions.

Consent was obtained either verbally or in written form, depending on the participants' preference. Participants were adequately informed to ensure full understanding, and the researcher explained the measures taken to maintain confidentiality. Participants' identities, along with any identifying information, were protected through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details in transcripts and reports. All research data, including audio recordings, were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

Because the study involved sensitive topics such as social stigma, incarceration, and mental health concerns, the researcher conducted the interviews with empathy, respect, and cultural sensitivity. Participants were reminded that they had the right to decline answering any questions they found uncomfortable. In cases of emotional distress, participants were provided with appropriate support information and were offered the option to pause or terminate the interview, as well as seek counseling if needed.

Data Analysis

Clark Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological method was used in this study in order to determine how to best describe any participant's experience, while focusing on precisely the center of the participant's experience. Given that this study sought to gain a better understanding of the collective lived experiences of multiple people, the researcher determined that this was the best option. After confirming this, the researcher then clearly defined the particular phenomenon that was to be investigated.

A vital component of this method involves epoche, or bracketing. This is when the researcher sets aside his or her own beliefs, assumptions, and experiences in order to remain open and neutral to the study in order to ensure clarity. Following bracketing, data was then collected through in-depth interviews of people who had first-hand experience concerning the phenomenon. In accordance with phenomenological research (Polkinghorne, 1989), the researcher used a small number of research subjects in order to obtain a rich and detailed description of the phenomenon. In order to support the research analysis, the researcher consulted and other materials that were available (i.e. field notes and observations) in order to enrich the research. The

interviews also provided open and broader questions in order to both the phenomena and how the subjects in the study experienced it.

Analysis of the data employed the techniques explicated by Moustakas. The researcher undertook the first step of horizontalization, which consists of selecting a subset of statements from the transcripts that are related to the participants' lived experiences. These statements are considered of equal value. These statements are then organized into meaning units, which can later be used to construct themes that represent the salient facets of the experience.

The themes serve to develop a textural description of what the participants experienced. Then, using the technique of imaginative variation, a structural description is created to explain how the experience occurred, inclusive of the conditions and context that shaped the experience. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions are integrated to capture the composite essence of the phenomenon. The textural description articulates the collective significance and the essential quality of the lived experiences of all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the in-depth interviews conducted with formerly incarcerated individuals in Marawi City. A transcendental phenomenological approach was employed to explore and understand their lived experiences of social stigma following incarceration. All participants took part in face-to-face interviews and provided voluntary informed consent prior to data collection. No participant withdrew from the study during the interview process.

The participants of the study consisted of eight (8) formerly incarcerated individuals, both male and female, whose ages ranged from 28 to 62 years old. In terms of gender distribution, the majority were male, with two female participants included in the study. The length of incarceration among the participants varied, ranging from five (5) years to fifteen (15) years and nine (9) months, reflecting diverse experiences in terms of duration of confinement. With regard to the causes of imprisonment, most participants were previously charged with illegal drug-related offenses, while one participant was incarcerated due to murder. These variations in age, gender, length of incarceration, and type of offense provided a broader perspective on the lived experiences of stigma and reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals.

The findings presented in this chapter were derived from the participants' narratives, reflections, and self-descriptions. Through a systematic phenomenological process involving bracketing, horizontalization, and the identification of significant statements, the study sought to capture the essence of their shared experiences. The subsequent discussion presents the results of the data analysis in an organized and coherent manner, focusing on the lived experiences and expressions of the participants.

Embodied Stigma after Release

Data from the interviews revealed an important dimension of the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals, identified as the first theme of the study, Embodied Stigma after Release. Participants described how stigma becomes visible in their daily physical presence and interactions after returning to the community. Once their incarceration history becomes known, individuals are often perceived as untrustworthy or morally flawed, which affects how they are treated in routine social encounters. This includes interactions with neighbors, employers, and other community members, where judgment and social distancing are commonly experienced. As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals develop a sense of carrying a socially marked identity that shapes their everyday experiences and relationships. This finding aligns with studies showing that stigma continues even after release and influences how individuals are socially categorized and treated (Bidola et al., 2021). Similar patterns of labeling and social exclusion were also observed among formerly incarcerated individuals in community settings (Ignacio et al., 2022). Stigma, therefore, operates as a persistent social force that reinforces negative identity construction and limits acceptance (Hatzenbuehler, 2025).

Furthermore, participants expressed that reintegrating into the community often led to feelings of social rejection, resentment, and diminished self-confidence. Many shared that despite their efforts toward self-improvement, their past continued to define how others perceived them, overshadowing any positive change. Negative evaluations from community members often resulted in emotional pain, described by participants as an "invisible wall" that separated them from others. This experience led some individuals to withdraw socially as a way of coping with rejection and judgment. Such responses demonstrate how stigma not only affects external interactions but also shapes internal perceptions and behaviors. Studies have shown that internalized stigma can lead to self-isolation and reduced participation in social life (Vecchio Camargo et al., 2022). The persistence of negative labeling also contributes to diminished self-worth and identity

struggles among formerly incarcerated individuals (Link & Phelan, 2001). These findings support the idea that stigma functions both as a social and psychological barrier to successful reintegration as reiterated in the study of Doyle and Barreto (2023).

The following statements from the participants illustrate these experiences:

"When you are newly released from prison, it feels like you can no longer do anything good. It feels as if you are not acceptable in society. You think that no one will trust you because you came from prison." (P1)

"It really hurts! Because when people find out that you came from prison or that you are an ex-convict, they immediately see you as a bad person." (P2)

"When you return to the community, it feels like your identity already carries a stain. You are seen as bad and as a criminal." (P8)

These responses suggest that participants experience stigma not only as a social label but also as something that shapes how their presence is interpreted in everyday interactions. The feeling of carrying a "stain" reflects how individuals believe their physical presence is constantly evaluated through the lens of their criminal past. This perception creates emotional distress and reinforces feelings of exclusion, particularly when individuals attempt to rebuild trust and social acceptance within the community. Stigma toward formerly incarcerated individuals often leads to social discrediting and discrimination, which limits their participation in community life (Calope & Maldepeña, 2023). This process of being socially marked is also linked to the broader concept of stigma as a discrediting attribute that affects identity and social interaction (Goffman, 1963). Such experiences further demonstrate how stigma contributes to marginalization and reduced opportunities for reintegration (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Another pattern that emerged from the interviews involves the ways participants cope with the negative perceptions associated with their incarceration history. Some respondents expressed fear of rejection and limited employment opportunities, while others described personal strategies such as focusing on self-improvement and relying on faith as a source of strength. These coping mechanisms reflect efforts to reclaim a positive identity despite the persistence of negative societal labels. Individuals actively negotiate their sense of self as they respond to stigma and attempt to rebuild their lives. Formerly incarcerated individuals often rely on resilience and personal determination to cope with the psychological burden of stigma (Curib et al., 2023). Coping strategies such as cognitive reframing and identity reconstruction are also essential in managing stigma-related stress (Rodat, 2020). These adaptive responses highlight the role of personal agency in overcoming stigma and facilitating reintegration (Bidola et al., 2024).

These experiences are reflected in the following statements of the participants:

"We are used to people viewing us differently because we came from prison. But I always say to myself that I will change. No matter what they say, what matters is that I have changed." (P3)

"For me, I leave everything to God. Whatever they think about me, I no longer care." (P4)

"I worry that I may not be accepted in the community. I wonder if I will still have hope of finding a job, or if someone will hire people like us who came from prison." (P6)

These statements indicate that although participants encounter stigma in their daily lives, they continue to pursue personal transformation and social acceptance. The participants demonstrate awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with formerly incarcerated individuals, yet they attempt to reconstruct their identity through personal change and resilience. This reflects their effort to move beyond socially imposed labels and regain a sense of dignity within the community. Stigma has been shown to reduce self-esteem and social confidence among formerly incarcerated individuals (Harris, 2021). However, individuals also engage in identity reconstruction as part of the reintegration process (Corrigan, 2025). This process highlights the role of personal agency in overcoming stigma and rebuilding one's social identity (McGaw et al., 2025).

This implies that stigma experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals extends beyond social labeling and becomes deeply embedded in their everyday interactions, self-perception, and opportunities for reintegration. The persistence of negative judgments within the community suggests the need for interventions that promote awareness, acceptance, and inclusive practices to reduce discrimination.

Addressing stigma at both the social and institutional levels may help improve the psychological well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals and support their successful reintegration into society.

The experiences of the participants may be explained through Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963). According to this theory, stigma occurs when society identifies certain attributes as socially undesirable and uses them to discredit an individual's identity. Individuals who carry stigmatized identities are often perceived primarily through the attribute that society considers negative. In the case of formerly incarcerated individuals, the label of being an ex-prisoner becomes a dominant social marker that influences how they are viewed and treated by others. Contemporary research supports this perspective by emphasizing that stigma functions as a social process involving labeling and stereotyping (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigma also contributes to unequal treatment and social exclusion in everyday interactions (Liamputtong & Rice, 2021). Furthermore, stigma continues to manifest through distrust and discrimination that affect reintegration outcomes (Golden, 2021).

The findings indicate that formerly incarcerated individuals experience stigma as an embodied social reality that shapes their daily interactions within the community. Their physical presence often becomes associated with suspicion and moral judgment, reflecting how deeply stigma influences identity after incarceration. These experiences highlight how stigma operates not only at the level of labeling but also through repeated social encounters that affect individuals' sense of belonging and dignity. Stigma in the Philippine context is influenced by cultural perceptions of shame and social judgment (Bidola et al., 2021). Cultural norms can intensify stigma and reinforce exclusion from community life (Ignacio et al., 2022). These conditions further demonstrate how stigma limits opportunities for acceptance and meaningful reintegration (Gronholm et al., 2024).

Family as Anchor Amid Social Stigma after Prison

The second theme that emerged from the participants' narratives is Family as Anchor Amid Social Stigma after Prison. This theme reflects how relationships with family members, relatives, and the community are affected by the stigma associated with incarceration. Many participants shared that returning to society after imprisonment changes how people interact with them, often leading to judgment, avoidance, or feelings of shame within social relationships. Despite these challenges, family members frequently remained a significant source of support, encouragement, and emotional strength.

For several participants, the presence and acceptance of their families helped them endure community criticism and motivated them to rebuild their lives after release. This observation aligns with the findings of Bidola et al. (2021), who emphasized that family support plays a crucial role in helping formerly incarcerated individuals cope with stigma and adjust to life after imprisonment. This finding is further supported by Butler et al. (2022) who highlighted that strong family relationships serve as protective factors against the negative effects of stigma. In addition, Fahmy and Testa (2025) explained that supportive family environments contribute to emotional stability and promote successful reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals.

Participants also described situations where certain relatives avoided them or expressed shame due to their imprisonment. Such reactions were often interpreted as consequences of the negative perceptions associated with incarceration within the community. For the participants, these experiences created emotional pain because rejection was coming from individuals with whom they previously shared close relationships. These relational tensions demonstrate how stigma can alter patterns of interaction within families and extended kinship networks. Similar patterns were observed by Vivares and Cuevas Jr. (2023), who found that formerly incarcerated individuals frequently experience indifference or avoidance from relatives and acquaintances as a result of the stigma surrounding imprisonment. This observation is supported by Aranda et al. (2023), who explained that stigma may extend to family members and affect relational dynamics. Furthermore, Martino et al. (2025) noted that incarceration-related stigma can lead to strained family relationships and emotional disconnection.

The following statements from the participants illustrate these experiences:

"Since I was imprisoned, some relatives avoided me. However, there were others who did not turn their backs on me. It hurts, but I choose to ignore them. Instead, I show them that I have changed and that people who came from prison can also change." (P1)

“Family is the one who stands by you in times when you need help. However, there are some who do not accept you. There are even those who are ashamed of you because you came from prison.” (P2)

Despite these difficulties, many respondents emphasized that family members remained their most important source of encouragement and emotional stability after release. Support from loved ones helped them cope with the judgment they encountered from the wider community. Participants explained that reconnecting with family strengthened their motivation to rebuild their lives and demonstrate personal change. This suggests that while stigma may strain certain relationships, supportive family bonds can provide a foundation for resilience during the reintegration process. A similar observation was made by Curib et al. (2023), who reported that family acceptance significantly contributes to the emotional well-being and rehabilitation of formerly incarcerated individuals. This finding is further supported by Liu and Visher. (2021), who emphasized that strong family support increases the likelihood of successful reintegration. In addition, An et al. (2024) explained that emotional support from family promotes confidence and active participation in community life.

These experiences are reflected in the following statements of the participants:

“Our relationship became deeper. They showed me that just because I was imprisoned does not mean they would reject me. It hurts emotionally, but they also have a point because we have done something wrong. However, we also show them that we are capable of change.” (P3)

“Judgment from the community will never disappear, especially when you come from prison. But I no longer care about what people say. What matters now is that I am free and I can see my children and family. All we ever wanted inside prison was freedom and the chance to make up for our families and loved ones.” (P7)

“My family was my source of strength while I was in prison. However, it cannot be avoided that some people will say things about your family as well. Some people changed the way they looked at me, while others understood what happened. There is a fear that we may not be accepted in the community because we came from prison. It is difficult for people to trust us again.” (P8)

Another perspective shared by the participants relates to the role of personal belief systems in coping with relational stigma. Some respondents described relying on faith, self-acceptance, and reflection to manage the judgment they encountered from others. These strategies helped them endure criticism while maintaining emotional strength and dignity. Such coping mechanisms demonstrate how individuals attempt to reconstruct their sense of self while navigating strained social relationships. In a related study, Cabael et al. (2022) found that formerly incarcerated individuals frequently rely on spirituality and internal resilience to cope with social stigma and rebuild interpersonal relationships following release. This finding is supported by Pargament (1997), who explained that faith-based coping provides emotional comfort and meaning-making. Furthermore, Srivastava (2022) emphasized that internal coping strategies strengthen resilience and psychological well-being.

These experiences are reflected in the following statement of the participant:

“We already know that once we return to the community, people will always have something to say. Self-love and trust in Allah help me endure the judgment. Not everyone who goes to prison wanted to be imprisoned; some had reasons that led them to do what they did.” (P5)

This implies that family plays a crucial role as both a source of vulnerability and strength in the reintegration process of formerly incarcerated individuals. While stigma can strain familial relationships and create emotional distance, strong family support can serve as a protective factor that enhances resilience, restores self-worth, and promotes successful reintegration. Strengthening family-based interventions and support systems may therefore help reduce the negative impact of stigma and improve reintegration outcomes.

The relational changes experienced by the participants may be understood through Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963). This theory explains that individuals who are socially labeled as offenders may

continue to encounter reactions that shape how others interact with them. Once a person is identified as an “ex-offender,” this label can influence how relatives, friends, and community members perceive their behavior and character. Contemporary research supports this perspective. Liu et al. (2021) emphasized that the label of being an ex-offender often leads to strained interpersonal relationships and mistrust, making it difficult for individuals to fully regain social acceptance even within their own social circles. This explanation is further supported by Link and Phelan (2001), who emphasized that stigma operates through labeling and stereotyping. In addition, Goffman (1963) explained that stigmatized individuals are often socially discredited in everyday interactions.

This finding may also be explained through Social Support Theory (Cullen, 1994), which emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships in helping individuals cope with stress and life challenges. Social Support Theory posits that emotional, informational, and instrumental support from significant others, particularly family members, plays a crucial role in promoting psychological well-being and resilience. This theory supports the idea that strong family support can buffer the negative effects of stigma and facilitate successful reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals. This perspective is supported by Cohen and Wills (1985), who explained that social support acts as a protective factor against stress. In addition, Acoba (2024) emphasized that emotional support enhances coping and resilience. Furthermore, Fahmy and Testa. (2025) noted that family support is a critical factor in the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals.

In sum, the findings of the study demonstrate that family relationships play a critical role in shaping the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. Although stigma may alter how some relatives interact with them, supportive family members often remain a crucial source of encouragement and emotional stability. Through these relationships, participants are able to rebuild trust, sustain hope, and pursue meaningful change despite the social stigma associated with imprisonment. This conclusion is supported by Cohen and Wills (1985), who emphasized that social support acts as a buffer against stress. Furthermore, Braithwaite and Gooden (2023) explained that strong support systems enhance resilience and coping among individuals facing social challenges.

Struggling to Belong: Navigating Stigma and Social Reentry after Prison

The third theme that emerged from the narratives of the participants is Struggling to Belong: Navigating Stigma and Social Reentry after Prison. This theme reflects how formerly incarcerated individuals perceive the passage of time after their release, particularly in relation to their past experiences in prison, their present encounters with stigma, and their expectations for the future. For many participants, returning to the community is not simply a moment of freedom but a prolonged process of rebuilding identity and regaining social acceptance. The stigma attached to imprisonment often continues to shape how individuals are perceived and treated by society even after they have completed their sentence.

In the Philippine context, incarceration carries deep social consequences because individuals who have been imprisoned are often labeled and judged by their past, making reintegration difficult. Stigma is understood as the process of social discrediting through negative labels, stereotypes, and discrimination that lead to exclusion and loss of social acceptance (Calope & Maldepeña, 2023). As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals frequently face rejection, distrust, and social isolation when they attempt to return to their communities. These experiences illustrate how reintegration is not only a social transition but also a temporal struggle in which individuals attempt to move forward while continually confronting the stigma of their past. This finding may be further explained by Goffman (1963), who emphasized that stigma becomes a “spoiled identity” that continues to affect individuals even after the original condition has passed. In addition, Link and Phelan (2001) explained that stigma persists through ongoing social processes such as labeling and separation.

Several participants described how the emotional burden of incarceration continues to affect them even after their release, particularly when they encounter distrust and rejection from others. These experiences often create feelings of discouragement, hopelessness, and emotional distress as individuals attempt to rebuild their lives while carrying the stigma associated with imprisonment. Participant P1 expressed how the emotional weight of stigma can make everyday life feel overwhelming and exhausting.

“It is difficult and can make me lose hope. One day feels like a whole week. It becomes even harder when you hear about problems outside the prison and you know you cannot help because you are inside. It is also accompanied by depression.” (P1)

“When you are newly released from prison, it feels like you can no longer do anything good. It feels as if you are not acceptable in society. You think that no one will trust you because you came from prison. This is one reason why many people return to prison.” (P1)

These experiences demonstrate how stigma can negatively influence the psychological well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals. Research indicates that stigma often lowers self-esteem, increases mental distress, and contributes to feelings of isolation among individuals who have previously been imprisoned (Harris, 2021). In the Philippine setting, this emotional burden is intensified by cultural perceptions of crime and shame, where incarceration is frequently associated with moral failure and social disgrace (Bidola et al., 2021). As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals may feel that their past mistakes permanently define their identity, making it difficult for them to envision a positive future. This observation is supported by Goffman (1963), who explained that individuals with stigmatized identities often internalize negative societal perceptions. Furthermore, Omondi (2024) noted that stigma can lead to emotional distress and reduced psychological well-being.

Moreover, participants also emphasized that the attitudes of people within the community strongly influence how they experience life after release. Some respondents described encountering suspicion, discrimination, and mixed reactions from others who continue to associate them with their past offenses. Participant P2 explained that society often holds conflicting views toward individuals who have previously been imprisoned.

“Discrimination is expected for those who are newly released from prison. Some people will say, ‘Be careful with him because he came from prison,’ while others will say, ‘Respect him because he came from prison.’ People have different views about ex-convicts.” (P2)

These statements highlight how social stigma shapes everyday interactions for formerly incarcerated individuals. According to Goffman’s Stigma Theory (1963), stigma occurs when society labels certain individuals as socially undesirable, leading to stereotyping, separation, and discrimination. Once individuals are labeled as deviant or criminal, they may be stripped of their “normal” social identity and treated differently by others. In the case of formerly incarcerated individuals, the label of “ex-convict” often becomes a dominant identity that overshadows other aspects of their character. Studies in the Philippines support this observation, showing that former inmates are frequently perceived as untrustworthy or morally flawed, which reinforces discrimination and social exclusion within communities (Ignacio et al., 2022). This finding is further supported by Link and Phelan (2001), who emphasized that stigma involves labeling, stereotyping, and status loss. In addition, Kapadia (2023) explained that stigma contributes to unequal treatment and reduced opportunities in society.

Another important aspect of the participants’ narratives involves the transformation of their perception of time and daily life as a result of incarceration. Several respondents explained that life inside prison is governed by strict routines and restrictions that significantly alter how individuals experience time, autonomy, and personal freedom. Participant P7 described how incarceration imposes rigid control over everyday activities, forcing individuals to adapt to a highly structured environment.

“A lot has changed in terms of time because of the unexpected event. The things you used to do outside are no longer things you would want to do once you are free. When you are inside, you do whatever you can just to get by each day. You learn to discipline yourself. Inside, your movements are limited. You cannot simply do what you want because there are authorities overseeing you. Everything is restricted, your time for bathing, eating, everything. You can no longer do the things you desire.” (P7)

These accounts illustrate how incarceration reshapes individuals’ understanding of time and personal control. Cunha et al. (2023) explained that imprisonment often involves the loss of autonomy, separation from family, and disconnection from social opportunities, which may have long-term psychological and social consequences even after release. The experience of living under strict institutional control can affect how individuals perceive freedom and independence once they return to society. As a result, formerly incarcerated individuals must not only adjust to social expectations but also relearn how to manage their time and personal responsibilities outside the prison environment. This observation is supported by Goffman (1963), who described how institutional environments reshape individual identity and behavior. Furthermore, Phillips (2021) noted that the effects of institutionalization may persist even after release from prison.

Consequently, the participants also expressed concerns about their future opportunities and their ability to regain trust from the community. Some respondents described feeling uncertain about whether

society would ever fully accept them again, particularly when they encounter persistent judgment and negative stereotypes. Participant P8 shared how these experiences can lower morale and create doubts about their future.

“It is painful and lowers one’s morale. People think that you no longer have the right to change. No matter what you do, they still see you as a bad person. To avoid feeling too hurt, I just let it pass, because if we respond to them, their negative view of people who came from prison might only worsen. There is a fear that we may not be accepted in the community because we came from prison. It is difficult for people to trust us again.” (P8)

These experiences demonstrate how stigma can limit the opportunities available to formerly incarcerated individuals as they attempt to reintegrate into society. Studies in the Philippines have shown that stigma often leads to employment barriers, social isolation, and strained family relationships, which further complicate the reintegration process (Bidola et al., 2021). This situation can create a cycle of exclusion in which individuals internalize the negative perceptions directed toward them, eventually believing that they are undeserving of acceptance or opportunity (Cabael et al., 2022). This finding is further supported by Goffman (1963), who explained that stigma leads to social exclusion and reduced life chances.

This implies that reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals is not a single event but a continuous and complex process shaped by persistent stigma, emotional struggles, and societal reactions. The findings suggest that efforts to support reintegration should not only focus on release from incarceration but also address long-term psychological support, community acceptance, and inclusive opportunities that enable individuals to rebuild trust and social identity over time.

The experiences of the participants can also be understood through Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963), which explains how individuals become socially defined by labels imposed by society. According to this theory, deviance is not inherent in an act but is created through social reactions and labeling. Once individuals are labeled as criminals or ex-offenders, they may continue to be treated according to that label even after they attempt to reform. Research suggests that such labeling can lead to self-stigmatization, low self-esteem, and reduced motivation to pursue social reintegration (Liu et al., 2021). In the context of formerly incarcerated individuals, the persistent label of “ex-inmate” can reinforce feelings of exclusion and create barriers to employment, housing, and community participation (Gibson & Dixon, 2022). This explanation is further supported by Goffman (1963), who emphasized that stigmatized identities become central to how individuals are socially defined.

Finally, the findings indicate that reintegration is experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals as a continuing struggle shaped by the interaction of past incarceration, present social judgment, and future uncertainty. The stigma attached to imprisonment often persists across time, influencing how individuals interpret their experiences and envision their future possibilities. Through the perspectives of Stigma Theory, these findings demonstrate that the stigma surrounding incarceration is not only a personal burden but also a social process that shapes the opportunities and relationships available to formerly incarcerated individuals as they attempt to rebuild their lives. This conclusion is supported by Goffman (1963), who explained that stigma is a deeply embedded social process that affects identity and interaction. In addition, Charlesworth and Hatzenbuehler (2024) emphasized that stigma operates across time and contexts, influencing long-term reintegration outcomes.

Redefining Family, Community, and Self-After Release

Beyond the bodily, relational, and temporal experiences previously discussed, another important dimension of the participants’ narratives relates to how they experience the physical and social spaces they occupy after being released from prison. The theme Redefining Family, Community, and Self After Release captures how formerly incarcerated individuals attempt to reposition themselves within the environments they return to, such as their homes, neighborhoods, and broader communities. Although release from prison restores physical freedom, participants explained that returning to these spaces often requires significant adjustment because the meaning of these places has changed after incarceration. The process of reintegration involves not only regaining freedom but also reestablishing social acceptance and valued relationships within society (Bidola et al., 2024).

For many formerly incarcerated individuals, the spaces they once considered normal may now feel unfamiliar due to the social stigma and altered relationships they encounter upon their return. This finding may be explained by Identity Theory, which posits that individuals continuously reconstruct their identities based on social interactions and roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In addition, Maehler and Hernández-Torrano

(2025) emphasized that identity is shaped through social expectations and feedback from others, which may be disrupted after incarceration.

Subsequently, the study participants initially described how incarceration drastically alters their experience of space by imposing strict limitations on movement and personal autonomy. Life inside prison is characterized by rigid routines, controlled environments, and restricted access to everyday activities that people outside commonly take for granted. Participant P1 expressed how the prison environment limits the range of actions individuals can perform.

“There are things you can do outside that you can no longer do inside prison. What we can do inside is very limited.” (P1)

Similarly, Participant P4 emphasized that even basic aspects of daily living are strictly regulated while inside prison.

“Unlike outside where you control your time, inside prison it is limited.” (P4)

These experiences illustrate how incarceration transforms the way individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings. The institutional environment restricts autonomy and shapes the routines of incarcerated individuals, which can significantly influence how they experience freedom and independence once they return to society. According to Calope and Maldepeña (2023), stigma associated with imprisonment does not disappear after release; instead, it often follows individuals into their social environments, affecting their ability to fully participate in community life and regain a sense of normalcy. This observation is supported by Van Der Gaag et al. (2025), who explained that institutional experiences reshape identity and behavior. Furthermore, Crane and Pascoe (2020) noted that the effects of institutionalization may persist even after release.

Another dimension that emerged from the participants’ narratives relates to the role of family spaces as important environments where reintegration begins. After release, family members often become the first group of people with whom formerly incarcerated individuals attempt to reconnect and rebuild relationships. For many participants, family represented a source of emotional strength and acceptance, although they also acknowledged that not all family members respond in the same way to their return. Participant P2 shared that while some relatives remain supportive, others may feel ashamed or uncomfortable because of the incarceration experience.

“Family is the one who stands by you in times when you need help. However, there are some who do not accept you. There are even those who are ashamed of you because you came from prison.” (P2)

Despite these challenges, Participant P3 explained that imprisonment sometimes deepened the appreciation of family relationships and strengthened emotional bonds.

“Our relationship became deeper. They showed me that just because I was imprisoned does not mean they would reject me.” (P3)

These accounts demonstrate that family spaces often serve as crucial environments where individuals attempt to rebuild trust, restore emotional connections, and regain a sense of belonging after incarceration. However, stigma may still influence family dynamics and create tension within these relationships. Research has shown that stigma attached to formerly incarcerated individuals can create barriers to social acceptance and may lead to strained family interactions as relatives struggle to reconcile the individual’s past with their desire to move forward (Harris, 2021). This finding may be explained through Family Systems Theory, which views the family as an interconnected system where changes in one member affect the entire unit (Bowen, 1978). In addition, Furlong et al. (2025) emphasized that family relationships adjust and reorganize in response to disruptions such as incarceration.

Meanwhile, participants also described the emotional difficulties caused by the physical separation from their families while they were incarcerated. Being confined within the prison environment prevented them from fulfilling their responsibilities as parents, partners, or family members. This inability to support loved ones during times of need created lasting feelings of regret and sadness that remained even after release. Participant P5 explained how painful it was to be unable to respond when family members needed help.

“One of the most painful parts of staying inside is wanting to do something but being unable to do it. Another is when something happens to your family and you cannot go to them because you are inside.” (P5)

These experiences reveal how incarceration disrupts the natural connections between individuals and their families. The absence from family life during imprisonment can weaken relationships and alter the roles individuals once held within their households. According to Cunha et al. (2023), the experience of incarceration often leaves emotional and psychological scars that continue to influence how formerly incarcerated individuals interact with others even after they regain their freedom. This observation is supported by Furlong et al. (2025), who explained that separation due to incarceration disrupts family roles and emotional bonds. Furthermore, Jardine (2023) noted that imprisonment reshapes family relationships and dynamics over time.

At the level of the broader community, participants explained that returning to familiar neighborhoods and social environments can be particularly challenging because stigma continues to influence how others perceive them. Even after serving their sentence, individuals may still be viewed primarily through the lens of their past criminal record. Participant P6 described how the stigma associated with imprisonment affects the way they are seen within their community.

“When you return to the community, it feels like your identity already carries a stain. You are seen as bad and as a criminal.” (P6)

This experience reflects Goffman’s Stigma Theory (1963), which explains how individuals with socially discredited identities may experience exclusion and discrimination in everyday interactions. According to the theory, stigma reduces individuals from a whole and normal person to someone whose identity is overshadowed by a negative label. Contemporary studies also emphasize that such stigma may be reinforced by cultural and moral judgments within communities, particularly in societies where crime is strongly associated with personal character and morality (Dela Cruz et al., 2022). This finding is further supported by Link and Phelan (2001), who emphasized that stigma involves labeling, stereotyping, and status loss. In addition, Liamputtong and Rice (2021) explained that stigma contributes to exclusion and reduced opportunities in community life.

This implies that the process of reintegration among formerly incarcerated individuals is not limited to physical return to society but involves a deeper reconstruction of identity, relationships, and social roles within family and community spaces. The findings suggest that stigma continues to shape how individuals are perceived and treated, thereby influencing their ability to reclaim belonging and redefine their sense of self. As identity is socially constructed through interaction, the presence of supportive family systems and accepting community environments becomes essential in facilitating positive identity reconstruction. Conversely, persistent stigma and relational disruptions may hinder this process, resulting in difficulties in restoring trust, stability, and meaningful participation in society.

Taken together, the participants’ experiences illustrate that returning to society involves a complex process of renegotiating one’s relationship with the spaces they inhabit. Homes, families, and communities become environments where individuals must rebuild trust, redefine their identities, and demonstrate their capacity for change. Although physical freedom marks an important step toward reintegration, the persistence of stigma often makes the process of reclaiming these spaces both emotionally challenging and socially demanding. These narratives highlight how formerly incarcerated individuals continue to navigate the tension between belonging and exclusion as they attempt to reconstruct their place within society. This conclusion is supported by Stryker and Burke (2000), who emphasized that identity is continuously shaped through social interaction. Furthermore, Bowen (1978) explained that family systems play a crucial role in influencing individual behavior and adjustment within social environments.

Restricted Lives, Judgmental Worlds

The fifth theme that emerged from the participants’ narratives, Restricted Lives, Judgmental Worlds, highlights how material conditions, institutional systems, and social structures influence the stigma experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals. The participants described how life after prison is shaped not only by personal efforts to change but also by the limitations imposed by social systems such as employment opportunities, institutional regulations, and community perceptions. These conditions often create barriers that make reintegration difficult even after individuals have completed their sentence. This study is supported by the Stigma Theory of Link and Phelan (2001), which explains stigma as a process

involving labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination that operates within systems of power. In this perspective, stigma is not limited to individual prejudice but is reinforced by structural conditions that restrict opportunities for certain groups.

Research also indicates that structural stigma significantly affects the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals, as social systems related to employment, housing, and social services often contribute to continued exclusion after release (Le & Rew, 2023). This finding may also be explained by Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals' identities are shaped and constrained by social roles and expectations (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In addition, Chen (2024) emphasized that when social structures limit opportunities, individuals may struggle to maintain a positive self-identity.

Within the participants' accounts, the restrictive nature of prison life emerged as a significant experience that shaped their understanding of autonomy and independence. Correctional institutions operate under highly structured systems that regulate the daily routines of incarcerated individuals. These systems control basic activities such as eating, bathing, and movement, leaving individuals with minimal personal choice. Participant P7 described how the institutional environment strictly governed everyday activities.

"Everything is restricted—your time for bathing, eating, everything. You can no longer do the things you desire." (P7)

Likewise, Participant P1 emphasized the difference between the freedom outside prison and the limitations experienced inside correctional facilities.

"Inside prison, the things you can do are very limited compared to outside." (P1)

These experiences illustrate how incarceration places individuals in environments characterized by strict control and limited autonomy. According to Gómez-Figueroa and Camino-Proañó (2022), long-term confinement in highly regulated institutional environments can significantly influence the psychological and behavioral adjustment of incarcerated individuals. The constant regulation of daily routines may shape how individuals perceive personal freedom and independence once they return to society. This observation is supported by Goffman (1963), who explained that institutional settings reshape identity and behavior. Furthermore, Mahlangu (2025) noted that the effects of institutionalization may persist even after release.

Beyond the restrictions experienced inside prison, participants also emphasized the structural barriers they faced when attempting to secure employment after release. Many described repeated rejection from employers due to their criminal history, even when they were motivated to rebuild their lives. Participant P2 expressed frustration about the lack of opportunities despite their willingness to demonstrate personal change.

"When you apply for a job, they do not accept you. But if they would only give you a chance, many ex-convicts actually have strong self-discipline." (P2)

Employment is widely recognized as a critical factor in successful reintegration, yet individuals with criminal records often face discrimination in the labor market. The study of Rade and McChesney (2024) explains that employers frequently associate criminal records with risk, which results in fewer job opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals compared with other job applicants. This pattern of exclusion contributes to economic instability and may hinder the process of rebuilding a stable and productive life after incarceration. This finding is supported by Cullen et al. (2021), who demonstrated that criminal records significantly reduce employment opportunities. In addition, Grawert and Terry-Ann (2020) emphasized that structural inequalities contribute to long-term economic disadvantage among formerly incarcerated individuals.

Another dimension highlighted in the participants' narratives is the continued presence of mistrust and social distance within the community. Even after release, formerly incarcerated individuals often encounter doubts about their character and intentions. These perceptions influence how they are treated and whether they are welcomed back into social environments. Participant P8 described the uncertainty that accompanies their attempts to reconnect with the community.

"There is a fear that we may not be accepted in the community because we came from prison. It is difficult for people to trust us again." (P8)

This experience demonstrates how stigma persists within everyday social interactions even after individuals regain their freedom. Community perceptions of formerly incarcerated individuals are often shaped by stereotypes that portray them as dangerous or untrustworthy. Such perceptions can lead to social distancing and discrimination, which further complicate the process of reintegration. Brehmer et al. (2024)

emphasize that negative community attitudes toward individuals with criminal records often reinforce social exclusion and limit opportunities for rebuilding trust and social relationships. This finding may be explained through Identity Theory, which highlights that identity is shaped through social interaction and feedback from others (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Furthermore, Link and Phelan (2001) explained that stigma leads to separation and status loss within social relationships.

This implies that the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals is not solely dependent on personal willingness to change but is significantly influenced by structural and societal conditions that either enable or restrict opportunities. The findings suggest that institutional controls, limited employment access, and persistent community mistrust collectively shape individuals' life chances and self-identity after release. When social systems continue to impose barriers, individuals may experience difficulty reconstructing a positive identity and achieving stability. Therefore, addressing stigma requires not only individual efforts but also systemic changes that promote inclusive policies, equitable opportunities, and supportive environments that facilitate successful reintegration.

Finally, the participants' narratives reveal that stigma operates through a complex interaction of institutional control, structural barriers, and social perceptions that shape the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. The restrictions experienced within prison, the difficulties encountered in securing employment, and the mistrust present within communities collectively influence how individuals navigate life after incarceration. Research suggests that successful reintegration requires not only individual determination but also supportive social systems that provide access to employment, community acceptance, and social support networks (Mourão et al., 2025). Addressing stigma therefore requires broader societal efforts aimed at reducing discrimination and creating inclusive opportunities for individuals seeking to rebuild their lives after prison. This conclusion is supported by Family Systems Theory, which emphasizes that individuals' outcomes are influenced by interconnected social systems such as family and community (Bowen, 1978). Furthermore, Corpuz et al. (2025) explained that supportive systems are essential in promoting stability and adaptation among individuals facing life transitions.

Resilience and Self-Redemption after Incarceration

The sixth theme that emerged from the participants' narratives, Resilience and Self-Redemption after Incarceration, highlights how formerly incarcerated individuals develop a renewed sense of purpose and determination in rebuilding their lives despite experiencing social stigma. The participants described how they intentionally focus on personal transformation, responsibility, and positive contributions to society after their release from prison. Their narratives suggest that stigma does not entirely define their future, as many individuals actively pursue meaningful goals and seek opportunities to demonstrate change. This theme can be understood through Desistance Theory by Maruna in 2001 as cited by Sundt (2010), which explains how individuals gradually move away from criminal behavior by developing new identities, goals, and social roles that support lawful living. Desistance emphasizes that individuals can reconstruct their sense of self after incarceration by adopting positive life narratives that highlight personal growth, responsibility, and commitment to change. This finding may also be explained by Identity Theory, which posits that individuals actively reconstruct their identities through social interaction and personal meaning-making (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In addition, Piotrowski et al. (2025) emphasized that identity change is central to behavioral transformation and social reintegration.

The narratives of the participants illustrate how resilience becomes a strategy for responding to social judgment and negative perceptions. Instead of confronting criticism directly, many individuals choose to focus on their actions as a way of demonstrating personal change. Participant P1 described how proving transformation through behavior becomes more meaningful than responding to stigma.

"We do not respond to them anymore. Instead, we show them that we are capable of change and that we can once again be accepted and trusted in society." (P1)

Similarly, Participant P2 emphasized that ignoring negative comments allows individuals to concentrate on rebuilding their lives and contributing positively to the community.

"One of the things I do to overcome judgment is to ignore what they say. Nothing good will come from arguing with them. What matters is that you have changed and that you will not harm the community; in fact, you can even help it." (P2)

These responses reflect how formerly incarcerated individuals manage stigma by prioritizing personal growth and constructive behavior. According to Gålnander (2024), individuals who are attempting to desist from crime often adopt strategies that focus on self-improvement and responsible living as a way to rebuild trust and social acceptance. This finding is supported by Sundt (2010), who emphasized that desistance involves constructing a positive identity narrative. In addition, Stryker and Burke (2000) explained that identity reconstruction plays a key role in guiding behavior and social reintegration.

Meanwhile, the participants also emphasized the importance of internal determination and personal reflection in shaping their future goals. Despite the persistence of negative stereotypes, individuals expressed a strong commitment to changing their lives and proving that personal transformation is possible. Participant P3 described how personal conviction motivates them to move forward regardless of others' opinions.

"We are used to people viewing us differently because we came from prison. But I always say to myself that I will change. No matter what they say, what matters is that I have changed." (P3)

Likewise, Participant P4 acknowledged that mistakes are part of human experience but emphasized the importance of taking responsibility and finding ways to correct them.

"Sometimes we make mistakes, and we must find ways to correct them. When you have been imprisoned, discrimination is already there, but it depends on you how you will face it." (P4)

These reflections demonstrate how individuals exercise personal agency in shaping their future despite social stigma. Research indicates that developing a strong sense of personal responsibility and self-efficacy plays a crucial role in sustaining behavioral change after incarceration, as individuals who believe in their ability to transform are more likely to pursue positive life paths (Cabael et al., 2022). This finding is supported by Weir (2025), who emphasized that self-efficacy influences motivation and behavior. Furthermore, Alfrey et al. (2023) explained that identity commitment strengthens consistency in behavior and decision-making.

Another important element emerging from the participants' narratives is the belief that individuals should not be permanently defined by their past mistakes. Participants emphasized that incarceration does not necessarily determine a person's character or future potential. Participant P7 expressed the idea that imprisonment can become an opportunity for reflection and change.

"Not everyone who comes from prison is a criminal by nature. Some were simply given an opportunity to change." (P7)

In a similar reflection, Participant P8 emphasized the difficulties faced by individuals who attempt to rebuild their lives after experiencing discrimination and ridicule.

"These are people who once committed mistakes but stood up again to change their lives. It is difficult to imagine the situation of people who come from prison. They receive a lot of ridicule and discrimination." (P8)

These accounts highlight how formerly incarcerated individuals strive to reclaim dignity and purpose despite facing stigma. Research suggests that developing positive future aspirations and meaningful life goals is essential in the process of reintegration, as individuals who perceive a hopeful future are more likely to maintain lawful behavior and sustain their efforts toward personal transformation (Estrada et al., 2024). This finding may also be explained through Family Systems Theory, which suggests that individuals are influenced by their social environments and relationships (Bowen, 1978). In addition, An et al. (2024) emphasized that supportive family systems contribute to personal growth and behavioral adjustment.

This implies that resilience and self-redemption among formerly incarcerated individuals are not merely individual traits but are dynamic processes shaped by both internal determination and external social conditions. The findings suggest that the ability to reconstruct a positive identity, maintain motivation, and pursue meaningful change is strengthened when individuals are supported by affirming social relationships and opportunities for reintegration. Conversely, persistent stigma and discrimination may challenge these efforts, requiring individuals to rely more heavily on personal agency and coping strategies. Therefore, successful reintegration depends on the interaction between individual resilience and the presence of supportive environments that enable identity transformation and sustained behavioral change.

In summary, the participants' narratives reveal that resilience, personal determination, and the pursuit of self-redemption play a vital role in shaping life after incarceration. While stigma continues to

influence how society perceives formerly incarcerated individuals, many participants expressed a strong commitment to redefining their identities and demonstrating that meaningful change is possible. These experiences highlight that reintegration involves both personal agency and the ongoing effort to rebuild trust, dignity, and purpose within society. This conclusion is supported by Stryker and Burke (2000), who emphasized that identity is continuously shaped through social interaction. Furthermore, Bowen (1978) explained that social systems such as family play a crucial role in influencing individual adaptation and long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Formerly incarcerated individuals often become highly conscious of their physical presence, appearance, and behavior after their release from prison. Feelings of shame, self-consciousness, and fear of judgment influence how they interact with others in their daily lives.
2. Family members serve as an important source of emotional support and stability for formerly incarcerated individuals. The presence of understanding and encouragement from family helps them cope with the stigma and challenges they encounter during their reintegration into society.
3. The process of reintegration into society involves a continuous effort to regain a sense of belonging. Formerly incarcerated individuals often experience difficulties rebuilding relationships and gaining acceptance within their communities.
4. Life after incarceration encourages individuals to reassess their roles within their families and communities. Many attempt to rebuild trust, restore relationships, and redefine their identity beyond their past experiences.
5. Social systems and community attitudes often create barriers that limit opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals. Challenges in employment, livelihood, and social acceptance contribute to the difficulties they encounter in rebuilding stable lives.
6. Despite these challenges, formerly incarcerated individuals demonstrate resilience and determination to change their lives. Many strive to regain trust, pursue meaningful goals, and move forward with a renewed sense of purpose.

Recommendations

Per the recommendations of the study, the following suggestions are made:

1. Government agencies and correctional facilities, such as the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), may improve reintegration programs for formerly incarcerated individuals that focus on the social and psychological issues caused by the trauma of incarceration.
2. To destigmatize formerly incarcerated individuals, community leaders and local government units may focus on creating awareness and community conversations that promote respectful and equitable behaviors toward formerly incarcerated individuals.
3. Social work and supportive services organizations may assist formerly incarcerated individuals with obtaining self-sustaining psychosocial and functional services, and supportive services through self-esteem rehabilitation services and psychosocial rehabilitation services.
4. Families of formerly incarcerated individuals may help their relatives reintegrate by encouraging, counseling, and sustaining their emotional support through the process of combating stigma, and reestablishing their lives as community members.
5. Formerly incarcerated individuals may be encouraged to actively participate in socially accepted and community-approved activities, skills training, self-employment, or wage labor to restore confidence and demonstrate a level of change to the community.
6. Formerly incarcerated individuals, community institutions, including employers, and local organizations, are encouraged to integrate socially and economically to provide equal employment and participatory opportunities.
7. Future researchers are invited to consider other dimensions associated with the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals—such as the mental health and employment difficulties, and the enduring challenges of reintegration—so as to broaden the understanding of social stigma and rehabilitation.

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