

Exploring Rehabilitation and Reintegration Efforts for Ex-Offenders: A Case Study of Malaysian Initiatives

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARAFMS/v14-i4/24234> DOI:10.6007/IJARAFMS/v14-i4/24234

Published Online: 20 December 2024

Abstract

The rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders remain a critical issue in community development. This study explores the experiences of community workers in Malaysia, focusing on the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders through a restorative justice lens. A qualitative case study approach was used, with data collected from focus group discussions involving stakeholders such as ex-offenders, volunteers, prison officers, social workers, and counsellors. The thematic analysis identified five key themes: (i) structured reintegration programs, (ii) community and family involvement, (iii) volunteer training, (iv) advocacy and policy reforms and (v) systemic challenges. Family support was found to be essential for emotional stability, while community networks help reduce isolation and foster acceptance. However, challenges such as family resistance, social stigma, and bureaucratic barriers persist. Volunteers play a critical role but require structured recruitment and training to address the complex needs of ex-offenders. The study highlights the importance of collaboration across all sectors of social welfare to ensure successful and effective reintegration.

Keywords: Restorative Justice, Ex-Offender Reintegration, Social Rehabilitation

Introduction

The rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders has garnered increasing attention as a global concern (Ike et al. 2023). This issue necessitates a multidisciplinary approach, drawing insights from criminal justice, psychology, social work, and public policy to effectively address the complexities involved in reintegrating individuals who have committed crimes back into society. For many years, rehabilitation efforts for ex-offenders were rooted in punitive measures, with a strong focus on punishment and deterrence (Hirschfield & Piquero 2010). However, in recent decades, there has been a shift toward more restorative justice practices that emphasize repairing the harm caused by crime, fostering accountability, and preparing offenders for their reintegration into society (Kausalya et al., 2021; Mpofu, Mkhize, & Akpan,

2024). This evolving understanding of rehabilitation, which prioritizes restoration over punishment, has significantly changed the landscape of criminal justice and rehabilitation systems worldwide.

Research has highlighted the importance of structured, multi-phase rehabilitation programs that begin during incarceration and continue post-release, focusing on skill development, mental health support and educational opportunities. In countries such as Singapore, successful models like the Yellow Ribbon Project promote the idea of second chances by combining public education campaigns with vocational training, family reintegration efforts, and community support (Chua, 2012). Similar initiatives are emerging in Malaysia, where rehabilitation programs are tailored to fit local cultural and religious contexts, integrating values such as hikmah (wisdom) and taubat (repentance), which are deeply embedded in Malaysian social and spiritual traditions.

Over the years, rehabilitation models have shifted from traditional punitive approaches to more rehabilitative and restorative practices. As Robinson (2018) suggests, restorative justice seeks to repair the harm caused by crime rather than focusing solely on punishing the offender. This shift has led to the adoption of models that not only address the needs of the offenders but also aim to heal the damage inflicted on victims and communities. One of the key aspects of contemporary rehabilitation models is their emphasis on accountability and reparation, which allows offenders to take responsibility for their actions and work towards making amends. By prioritizing accountability, these models support ex-offenders in understanding the impact of their behaviour and actively engaging in the process of reintegration.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) has become a prominent tool in these rehabilitative models, as it is designed to address maladaptive behaviours and cognitive distortions that may lead to reoffending (Harrison et al., 2020). CBT helps offenders to recognize and challenge the thought patterns that underpin their criminal behaviour, enabling them to develop healthier coping strategies. In Malaysia, however, the integration of CBT into rehabilitation programs is complemented by the incorporation of local religious and cultural values, which offer a unique approach to healing and transformation. For example, the concepts of taubat (repentance) and hikmah (wisdom) guide ex-offenders through a process of moral and spiritual reflection, fostering personal growth and transformation alongside behavioural change.

Despite the positive strides made in rehabilitation models, ex-offenders still face significant barriers to reintegration into society. The transition from prison to community life is fraught with challenges, many of which stem from social, psychological, and structural issues. One of the most significant barriers to reintegration is stigma. Social stigma associated with having a criminal record can be deeply harmful, affecting an individual's self-esteem and limiting their opportunities for employment, housing, and social inclusion (McWilliams & Hunter, 2021). Research in Malaysia highlights that societal attitudes toward ex-offenders are often shaped by cultural norms and a lack of awareness about the rehabilitative efforts available to support these individuals (Sathoo et al., 2021). These negative perceptions further exacerbate the challenges faced by ex-offenders, making it difficult for them to reintegrate successfully into their communities.

Another major challenge in reintegration is the limited access to employment opportunities (Goger et al. 2021). Ex-offenders often struggle to find stable jobs due to the stigma attached to their criminal history (Kılıç & Tuysuz, 2024). Employment plays a crucial role in successful reintegration, as it provides not only financial stability but also a sense of purpose and belonging within society. Vocational training programs, which are an integral component of rehabilitation efforts, have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism by improving employability and helping ex-offenders gain the skills necessary to re-enter the workforce (Rusli, Hamzah & Weng, 2024). In Malaysia, partnerships between correctional facilities and local businesses have provided job opportunities for ex-offenders, reflecting the positive impact of such collaborations. However, broader structural changes are needed to ensure that the entire system of rehabilitation and reintegration is effective in the long term.

The issue of housing instability is also critical. Secure housing is essential for ex-offenders to rebuild their lives after release. Without stable housing, the likelihood of reoffending increases significantly. According to Jacobs & Gottlieb (2020), individuals who lack stable housing are at greater risk of reoffending and falling into cycles of homelessness and criminal behaviour. In Malaysia, while there have been efforts to address housing challenges for ex-offenders, more comprehensive support is needed to ensure that individuals have access to safe and affordable housing upon their release from prison.

Family support plays a crucial role in the reintegration process. Strong family connections have been shown to improve reintegration outcomes by providing both emotional and practical support. Best (2019), stated the importance of family involvement in rehabilitation, as it can help rebuild trust and foster emotional healing. In the context of Malaysia, where family and community relationships are deeply valued, reintegration programs often incorporate family mediation and counselling to help mend strained relationships between ex-offenders and their families. These programs aim to facilitate communication and promote understanding, which is essential for the long-term success of reintegration.

Equally important is the role of the community in the reintegration process. Communities that are accepting of ex-offenders and willing to support their efforts to reintegrate into society are more likely to see positive outcomes. Community involvement not only helps reduce stigma but also fosters a sense of belonging and social inclusion (Lin, Chen & Wu 2023). Programs that encourage local communities to actively participate in the reintegration process, such as volunteer-driven initiatives inspired by restorative justice principles, have proven effective in offering support and guidance to ex-offenders (Zandile, Sazelo & James, 2024). In Malaysia, community-based reintegration efforts often involve collaboration between local NGOs, religious groups, and volunteers, creating a robust network of support for ex-offenders.

Advocacy campaigns have played a significant role in changing public perceptions of ex-offenders and influencing policy reforms. Public education initiatives such as Singapore's Yellow Ribbon Project have succeeded in reducing stigma and promoting second chances for ex-offenders (Tay et al., 2020). By raising awareness about the challenges ex-offenders face and highlighting the importance of rehabilitation over punishment, such campaigns have been instrumental in shifting societal attitudes toward a more inclusive and supportive

approach to reintegration. Efforts to replicate these campaigns in Malaysia show the potential for transformative change when public awareness and policy reforms are aligned.

In terms of policy development, there has been a growing recognition of the need to incorporate restorative justice principles into rehabilitation efforts. Restorative justice focuses on repairing the harm caused by crime, promoting accountability, and facilitating the reintegration of offenders into society. Malaysian policymakers have begun to adopt restorative justice practices, particularly within the juvenile justice system. However, more systemic changes are needed to expand the use of restorative justice across the broader criminal justice system and ensure its effectiveness in reintegration efforts (Nayah Ahidjo, 2024). Policy reforms that emphasize rehabilitation over punishment and incorporate restorative justice principles are essential for sustaining effective rehabilitation programs and reducing recidivism rates.

The purpose of this article is to explore the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders in Malaysia, with a particular focus on the application of restorative justice principles. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by ex-offenders during reintegration and the role of family, community, and technological interventions in supporting their successful reintegration. By examining the experiences of key stakeholders, including prison officers, counsellors, and NGOs, the article seeks to identify effective practices and policy frameworks to improve rehabilitation efforts in Malaysia. Despite extensive research on ex-offender reintegration globally, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding the application of restorative justice in Malaysia, where cultural, religious, and social norms influence rehabilitation practices (Nayah Ahidjo, 2024; Sathoo et al., 2021). Additionally, while community and family involvement are recognized as critical to successful reintegration, the role of local NGOs, religious organizations, and volunteers in reducing stigma and fostering social inclusion requires further exploration (Vanstone & Priestley, 2022). Furthermore, although Malaysia has made strides in adopting restorative justice policies, particularly in the juvenile justice system, there is limited research on the broader application of these policies within the criminal justice system, necessitating an evaluation of their effectiveness and areas for improvement (Tay et al., 2020). This research aims to address these gaps by investigating the intersection of restorative justice, community involvement, family support and volunteer involvement in the reintegration process, offering valuable insights for policy and practice.

Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a case study approach to explore the experiences of ex-offenders reintegrating into society through restorative justice practices in the Malaysian context. A case study design is appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of complex, real-life phenomena within their social, cultural, and institutional settings (Yin, 2018). By using a case study, the study sought to understand the nuances of how restorative practices are implemented in the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders, drawing from the perspectives of various stakeholders, including ex-offenders, NGOs, prison officers, and counsellors. The focus group discussion (FGD) method was used to gather rich qualitative data through group interactions, fostering a deeper understanding of the shared and individual experiences of participants (O.Nyumba et al., 2018).

Participants and Sampling

The study used purposeful sampling to select participants who are community workers to provide rehabilitation and reintegration to ex-offender in Lembah Klang area. Inclusion criteria for ex-offender participants will require them to have been released from prison in the past year and to have actively engaged in a reintegration program. NGOs included in the study must be social workers involved in the rehabilitation and support of ex-offenders, while prison officers and counsellors must have direct experience with reintegration programs. Exclusion criteria will involve excluding participants who have not been involved in reintegration efforts or those whose experiences are unrelated to restorative justice or rehabilitation programs. The sampling aimed to include a range of perspectives by balancing the number of participants from each group. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring they are aware of the study's purpose, procedures and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants ~~will be~~ were assured that their data will remain confidential and anonymised.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through thematic analysis developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), which will help identify patterns and themes within the data to better understand the effectiveness of restorative justice in the reintegration process. The process involves transcribing the audio-recorded focus group sessions, generating initial codes, grouping these codes into broader themes, and refining these themes to capture the key findings of the research. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and sensitivity to the vulnerability of ex-offender participants, was closely observed. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Ethics Committee Review Board prior to the commencement of the study, in adherence to the ethical standards for research involving human participants.

This methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of the role of restorative justice in the reintegration of ex-offenders, with an emphasis on challenges faced, support systems in place, and the effectiveness of community and family engagement. Through this, the research aims to contribute to the improvement of rehabilitation and reintegration programs in Malaysia, aligning with both local needs and global practices.

Findings

There are five main themes of rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders that have been identified from the verbatim of the focus group discussion which are (i) reintegration programs for ex-offenders, (ii) community and family engagement, (iii) volunteer involvement and training, (iv) Advocacy and policy development, (v) Challenges in Rehabilitation and Reintegration. The table below shows the themes and sub themes that demonstrate the overall results of the findings for this study.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes of the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Ex-Offenders

Main Theme	Reintegration programs for ex-offenders	Community and family engagement	Volunteer involvement and training	Advocacy and policy development	Challenges in Rehabilitation and Reintegration
Sub-theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured programs and post-release initiatives Individualised case management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The role of families and community Community support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The role of volunteer Training of volunteer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocacy work Policy reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client's behaviour Lack of human resources bureaucratic barriers
Number of informat	5/6	3/6	3/6	2/6	4/6

The process of reintegrating ex-offenders into society is complex and requires a multidimensional approach. This study is structured around five main themes that explore the various aspects of reintegration, emphasising the importance of a collaborative and restorative practice.

Reintegration Programs for Ex-Offenders

Reintegration Programs for Ex-Offenders focuses on the structured programs implemented both within correctional facilities and after release. These programs include preparatory support, such as spiritual and general awareness classes, aimed at preparing inmates for life outside prison. Post-release initiatives like relocation programs, vocational training and job placement aim to facilitate their reintegration. For instance,

“There are programs conducted in prisons to equip ex-prisoners with the necessary skills before their release, including spiritual classes and general awareness sessions. These programs aim to provide options and early preparation for inmates before they are released from prison.”

Informant 1

“The resettlement process involves careful planning, including interview sessions, selection of temporary housing and assistance in finding employment and educational opportunities. This program focuses on providing comprehensive support after release to ensure that ex-prisoners do not re-enter the criminal justice system.”

Informant 2

Additionally, individualised case management is central to these efforts, ensuring that each ex-offender receives personalised support to guide their recovery and reintegration. They receive personalised support through case managers who guide them in achieving their recovery and reintegration goals. Support systems involve families, communities and volunteers. For example,

“Each ex-prisoner is assigned a case manager responsible for monitoring their rehabilitation process. The case manager plays a crucial role in ensuring that everyone

receives the necessary attention to address their personal issues, including recovery from drug addiction and criminal behaviour.”

Informant 2

Community and Family Engagement

Community and Family Engagement highlights the role of families and communities in the reintegration process. Families are crucial in the reintegration process. They provide essential emotional and practical support. Efforts are made to mend relationships through family conferences, advocacy, and success stories of reconciliation. For instance,

“Families play an important role in the rehabilitation process of ex-prisoners. We are striving to improve family relationships through platforms such as family conferences and joint activities. Emphasis is placed on healing and restoring family relationships that may have been damaged during the imprisonment period.”

Informant 3

Community support, involving local organisations, volunteers and community members, creates a network of care that reduces isolation and fosters inclusion, ensuring that ex-offenders have access to the resources they need to reintegrate successfully. These relationships ensure ex-offenders are not isolated and have access to a network of care. For example,

“Malaysia Care involves the community, particularly volunteers and churches, to support the reintegration of ex-prisoners. This community acts as a support system for ex-prisoners as they work to adjust to life in society.”

Informant 1

“There are efforts to reduce the stigma against ex-prisoners by raising awareness within the community. Although acceptance from the community around our care’s home seems relatively positive, there are still significant challenges in addressing the stigma that exists against ex-prisoners.”

Informant 2

Volunteer Involvement and Training

Volunteer Involvement and Training 1200 emphasizes the role of volunteers in supporting ex-offenders during their reintegration journey. Volunteers play critical roles, such as mentoring and accompanying ex-offenders through their recovery journey. These individuals are recruited from both church communities and independently. For instance,

“Volunteers play an important role in assisting former prisoners through support sessions, joint activities and paying attention to their reintegration process. Volunteers are also regularly trained to carry out their tasks effectively.”

Informant 4

Volunteers undergo training, including on-the-job shadowing of case workers. Training focuses on reintegration efforts and community-based recovery. For example,

“Volunteers involved in this program receive annual internal training, focusing on rehabilitation and community awareness. We are also engaged in “on-the-job training” or shadowing sessions with experienced case managers from the NGO.”

Informant 5

Advocacy and Policy Development

Advocacy and Policy Development explores the advocacy work that drives systemic change, including the collaboration between government agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders to influence policies that impact ex-offenders. For example,

“Our NGO strives to influence better policies for former prisoners by promoting equal opportunities, family reconciliation, and reintegration into society through advocacy platforms and prison reform work.”

Informant 1

Efforts such as the Newton Project focus on creating public awareness and changing societal perceptions, while policy reforms aimed at promoting rehabilitation over punishment are essential for sustaining long-term reintegration efforts. Core values include equal opportunities, family reconciliation and community reintegration. For instance,

“Malaysia Care is involved in advocacy activities to raise awareness about former prisoners and improve policies related to them. The Newton Project and collaboration with government agencies and international bodies are part of these efforts.”

Informant 3

Challenges in Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Rehabilitation and reintegration process, especially involving ex-offender clients, is a challenging field that tests the physical, mental, and emotional capacities of workers. These challenges can be categorised into several key aspects such clients’ behaviour, lack of human resources and bureaucratic barriers. Change requires deep internal readiness from the clients. Despite the dedication of community workers in providing guidance and support, clients’ unwillingness to take the first step makes the process extremely difficult. This situation causes frustration for workers as the success of their efforts heavily relies on the clients’ proactive actions. For example,

“Sometimes it’s really hard when clients are not ready to change. No matter how much we try to help them, if they don’t take the first step themselves, it becomes very difficult for us.”

Informant 4

Besides, clients who express a desire to change but fail to adhere to the structured plan or frequently modify it pose a significant obstacle. Such non-compliance not only slows the recovery process but also requires workers to continuously adapt their strategies, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion. For instance,

“Some clients want to change but often fail to follow the planned schedule. After a month, they change the plan again. So, they are inconsistent, and this is very challenging.”

Informant 3

"There are clients who try to challenge us, for example, when we set a rule for them to return by 10 pm, they come back late and then ask for more leniency. It's like they want to test how far we are willing to accommodate them."

Informant 5

Most of the informants highlighted about limited human resources force workers to handle more cases than they are realistically capable of. This leads to burnout as the workload often extends beyond official working hours, including intrusions during personal time. Over the long term, this situation can negatively impact workers' mental health. For example,

"Currently, we limit active cases to only two per caseworker. Even that feels very challenging due to the lack of staff and human resources."

Informant 2

"Sometimes, clients call us in the middle of the night. It disrupts personal time, and in the long run, it affects our mental health."

Informant 4

Complex and time-consuming bureaucratic processes present a significant challenge in implementing rehabilitation programs that require collaboration between non-governmental organizations and government authorities. These delays hinder program execution, reduce the effectiveness of initiatives, and limit the positive impact on clients in need.

"For example, the Newton project last year. We sent a letter to the Director-General, but it was referred to another department, and then another. This process took too long, and in the end, we only received feedback at the very last minute."

Informant 6

"Although we want to collaborate with government departments, bureaucratic processes sometimes become the main obstacle to performing our tasks more effectively."

Informant 3

All these themes provide a comprehensive view of the reintegration process, highlighting the importance of a holistic approach that includes preparatory support, family and community engagement, volunteer involvement, policy advocacy and challenges for rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders.

Discussion

The reintegration of ex-offenders is a complex and multifaceted process that requires a comprehensive approach to address the psychological, social, and economic challenges faced by individuals returning to society. A key factor in this reintegration is the provision of preparatory and post-release support programs. These programs, including vocational training, relocation assistance, and job placement services, are essential for helping ex-offenders rebuild their lives and reintegrate into their communities. Research consistently shows that such programs improve employability, reduce recidivism and increase the likelihood of successful re-entry into society (Latessa, 2012; Newton et al., 2018).

Furthermore, individualised case management is crucial, as it provides tailored support based on the unique needs of each ex-offender. When practitioners working closely with case managers, ex-offenders are better able to navigate the reintegration process, set achievable goals and receive consistent emotional and practical support. Case management that involves families, communities, and volunteers has been shown to foster a supportive environment, increasing the chances of successful reintegration (Terry, R., & Townley, 2019).

Family support is another vital component of reintegration. Strong family relationships can provide the emotional stability and encouragement that ex-offenders need to overcome the challenges of re-entry. However, in some cases, families may be unwilling or unprepared to support their loved ones. Mediation and counselling programs are necessary to address these challenges and rebuild fractured relationships between ex-offender and family (Chen & Rine-Reesha, 2022). Community engagement is equally important, as it can help reduce the stigma surrounding ex-offenders and provide them with the social connections needed for successful reintegration. Volunteers, community organizations, and local leaders can offer mentorship, resources and emotional support, all of which contribute to a more inclusive and supportive reintegration process (Sathoo et al., 2021).

However, reintegration is not without its challenges. Resistance from families, societal stigma and difficulties in assimilating into communities remain significant barriers. Families may resist reconnecting with ex-offenders due to fear of reoffending or concerns about their safety. This resistance requires the intervention of mediation programs and advocacy to help families overcome their fears and rebuild trust (Golann & Folberg, 2022). Moreover, societal stigma often leads to social exclusion and hinders ex-offenders' ability to find employment and establish positive relationships within the community. Public awareness campaigns and community education initiatives can play an important role in reducing stigma and fostering social acceptance (Sathoo et al. 2021; Tay et al., 2020).

Volunteers play an essential role in supporting ex-offenders through mentorship and guidance. The recruitment and training of volunteers are crucial to ensuring that they can effectively assist ex-offenders in navigating their reintegration journey. Research shows that well-trained volunteers provide ex-offenders with valuable support, serving as role models and sources of stability during the reintegration process (Siliunas, Small & Wallerstein, 2019). Training programs should equip volunteers with the skills needed to support individuals with complex needs, including conflict resolution, emotional support, and understanding of the reintegration challenges ex-offenders face.

Advocacy and policy reform are also critical in supporting the reintegration of ex-offenders. Systemic changes are necessary to ensure that rehabilitation programs are effective and aligned with the needs of individuals re-entering society. Advocacy efforts that promote restorative justice and rehabilitation over punitive measures can help reduce recidivism and provide ex-offenders with the tools they need to reintegrate successfully. In Malaysia, for example, efforts to integrate restorative justice principles within the juvenile justice system have shown promise but require broader application (Sathoo et al., 2021). Public awareness initiatives, such as the Newton Project, can also help reduce the stigma associated with ex-offenders and foster a culture of second chances, which is essential for successful reintegration (Tay et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reintegration of ex-offenders requires a comprehensive, collaborative approach that involves multiple stakeholders, including families, communities, volunteers, and policymakers. By addressing the emotional, social, and economic challenges ex-offenders face and integrating restorative practices, individualized case management, and community involvement, successful reintegration becomes achievable. Continued advocacy for systemic reforms, along with the integration of technology in rehabilitation programs, will further enhance their effectiveness. This ensures that ex-offenders are equipped with the necessary resources and support to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society. In Malaysia, efforts to reintegrate ex-offenders have emphasized a holistic, multi-sectoral framework that combines insights from criminal justice, education, and community development. By incorporating restorative justice principles, fostering family and community engagement, and addressing critical barriers to reintegration, Malaysia is making strides toward effective reintegration strategies. These efforts align with global best practices, underscoring the importance of multi-phase rehabilitation models that include skill development, education, and mental health support. With the support of NGOs, public policy reforms, and the effective use of technology, Malaysia is advancing towards creating a more inclusive society where ex-offenders have opportunities to contribute and succeed, ultimately reducing recidivism and ensuring long-term societal benefits.

Acknowledgment: This study was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) with the research code: FRGS/1/2020/SS0/UKM/02/11. Special thanks are also extended to the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM, the Malaysian Prison Department, and all co-researchers who contributed to the success of this study.

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