

BEYOND BARS: EXPLORING THE REINTEGRATION EXPERIENCES OF RELEASED PERSONS DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY (PDLs) UNDER PAROLE

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ABSTRACT

This study intended to explore the reintegration experiences of released persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), along with their coping strategies and insights that can be shared with the community. Using qualitative research design, the researchers utilized in-depth interviews for data collection and employed thematic analysis to generate results. The findings revealed that released PDLs under parole have diverse experiences upon reintegration. These include difficulties in seeking job opportunities, adjusting to changes in current society, social stigma, financial instability, and issues in re-establishing relationships with their families. To navigate around these challenges, they employ coping strategies such as engaging in community and socio-civic activities, spiritual and religious activities, self-regulating activities, recreational activities, and looking for ways to earn money. Out of these experiences, released PDLs shared valuable insights. They highlighted that job opportunities are essential for released PDLs. Moreover, to ensure sound reintegration, individuals must have self-control to avoid committing unlawful acts, and the stigma towards released PDLs should be stopped. Through providing significant insights crucial to promoting equal opportunities for their successful reintegration into society, this study can contribute to Sustainable Development Goal no. 10, which is aimed at reducing inequalities.

Keywords: reintegration, released persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), parole, social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

The persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) are meant to reintegrate into the community through probation, parole, or their actual release after serving their sentences. In Parole and Probation Law (2023), parole and probation are defined as privileges granted to offenders to be freed from prison after serving only a portion of their sentences with the goal of rehabilitating and leading them back to the community, while reducing their chances of committing new offenses. Their reentry to the community is one of the things that PDLs hope for (Vivares, 2023). Community acceptance, mind-shifting, familial support, and hope toward successful outcomes have played a pivotal part in the reintegration process of any former PDLs as they reintegrate, rebuild their confidence, and live a normal life (Reamico, 2022). Furthermore, Palgan (2022) claimed that the established strong bond between families and released PDLs helps them cope with the challenges and enables them to start a new life. Having stable and fulfilling jobs and careers helps released PDLs to effectively reintegrate into civil society, allowing them to be physically and mentally productive citizens who contribute positively to the well-being of their communities (Chen & Shields, 2020).

As of February 29, 2024, the Philippines Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) has a total of 52,950 inmates (Pulta, 2024). The numbers signify that several PDLs will also be released from prison to aid the congestion. According to the Parole and Probation Administration, PDLs under parole are the individuals who have been served their minimum sentence in correctional facilities and granted the opportunity to reintegrate with the mainstream community. However, they are released under strict conditions and monitoring as well as supervised by the parole officers. Environmental transition and adjustment are crucial factors in their reintegration. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), spending more years in prison impacts the way of life and perception and indicates greater challenges in the adjustment period of individuals. Prison release is viewed as a sudden change in social position, where individuals with deeply embedded prison routines and dispositions must confront new patterns of daily life outside the cell. This mismatch between embodiment and environment can lead to significant challenges, such as triggering feelings of stress and anxiety, making it difficult to function in routine social situations, and increasing exclusion from the labor market and other institutions (Martin, 2018). It can also deteriorate adults' social spheres and connections upon their reentry into the community (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Efforts are made to let them live back on track, allowing released PDLs to access opportunities, programs, and services that would refrain them from committing crimes and law-offensive behaviors. Various programs have been developed to facilitate social reintegration, with the successful transition as the key objective of social justice systems worldwide (Richards et al., 2020). These efforts and initiatives started inside the correctional facilities. PDLs engage in purposive activities, such as education, training, and therapy sessions that aim to enhance their well-being (Stohr & Walsh, 2022). However, the stigma against released PDLs is fueled by the fear of their environment or their re-offending, which creates barriers to their successful reintegration into society and could lead to a higher tendency to relapse into committing offense (Sakib, 2022; Quinn-Hogan, 2021). The major hardships faced by released PDLs during their earlier stage of reentry to the community include no place to stay, unemployment, lack of resources, low educational backgrounds, harassment, inability to find new social circles, and often being discriminated against due to their unfavorable backgrounds (Gul, 2018). These circumstances resulted in challenges in socializing and connecting with others, which is hard for them since the community rejects them (Manaig et al., 2019). Former PDLs are anxious about possible adverse treatment from others, which leads them to seek community members' approval and just treatment. Some people in their environment feel

insecure having them around and have preconceived judgments that the parolees may recommit their offenses. Moreover, stigma further exacerbates the challenges as they expressed difficulty finding job vacancies and opportunities (Rearnico, 2022).

The above-presented literature highlighting the challenges experienced by released PDLs calls for efforts to further study this highly disadvantaged and often ostracized sector. With this, the researchers see the need to delve into the unexplored aspects of the post-release journey of the parolees, uncovering their unique experiences, challenges, and lessons gained. Thus, this study aimed to explore the experiences of released PDLs during reintegration, the challenges they experienced, and the insights they can share from their experience. Understanding the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of their reintegration and coping mechanisms could help provide relevant information to support policies and enhance interventions for released PDLs. Moreover, the findings of this study can contribute to Sustainable Development Goal no. 10 which focused on reducing inequalities. As a disadvantaged sector of society, much is needed to be done on the part of various agencies and organizations to ensure their successful reintegration into the free society.

METHOD

To carry out the aims of the study, the researchers utilized the purposive sampling technique. The researchers coordinated the Parole and Probation Office and purposely identified twelve (12) released PDLs under parole in the Province of Davao del Norte who were deemed knowledgeable and could provide accurate data for this study. This sampling guaranteed that the participants were selected because of their suitability and that they passed the study's eligibility requirements. The criteria included the following: (a) must be a released person deprived of liberty under parole; (b) have spent 1-10 years in Davao Prison and Penal Farm; (c) must be a resident of the Province of Davao del Norte; and (d) must be either a male or female aged 25-60 years old.

The researcher-made interview guide questions were utilized in the study to obtain the necessary data from the participants. This instrument was validated by a panel of experts to ensure the appropriateness of the questions to the context of this study. This interview guide question consisted of purposeful questions crafted to gather all significant information from the released PDLs. The researchers thoughtfully designed the instrument to delve into the experiences of participants that are relevant to the research focus. Moreover, the instrument used in this study underwent validity testing by gathering expert opinions from expert practitioners and researchers to ensure suitability and to improve the possibility of storytelling. The formulated instrument was also pre-tested through a dry run with one (1) released person deprived of liberty who was selected using the same inclusion criteria in the study but from a different locale. The instrument dry-run yielded significant observations, which the researchers used to improve the quality of the data collection instrument. The study utilized a phenomenological research design. According to Ayton (2023), phenomenology research design aims to discover how people generate meaning or understanding about their actual experiences. This research design was intended to delve into the depths of human experiences through the descriptions provided by the study participants. In this study, the researchers explored the participants' experiences as they divulged the meaning they ascribed to their experiences as released PDLs.

Given the innate sensitivity of the study and to protect the rights of the study participants, the researchers ensured that ethical guidelines in the conduct of research were thoroughly followed. The researchers coordinated with the Probation and Parole Office to identify participants. The researchers provided informed consent to ensure voluntary participation, and the study purpose,

rights of participants, and interview structure were carefully explained before data collection. The in-depth interviews took place in a comfortable and secure place for both the researchers and participants. The researchers ensured that no participants felt threatened or forced to participate in the data collection. The identities of the research participants were kept hidden through pseudonyms, and all recorded data, coded transcripts, and notes were safely kept.

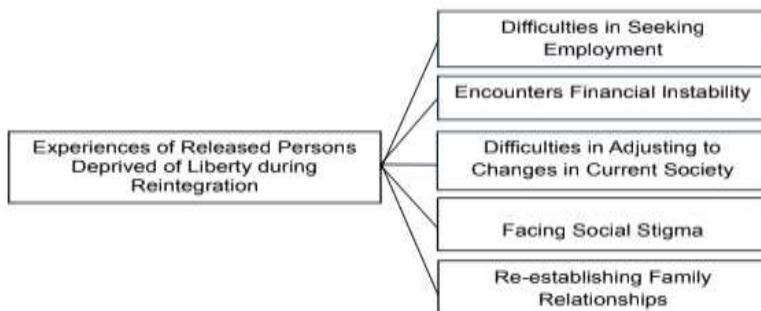
RESULTS

Experiences of Released Person Deprived of Liberty during Reintegration

Released PDLs under parole had diverse experiences during reintegration. Their reentry was complex, and everyone in their environment could hasten or deteriorate the successful reintegration. Based on the responses of the participants, the researchers were able to identify five essential themes.

Figure 1

Experiences of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) during Reintegration



Difficulty in Seeking Employment. The participants reported difficulty in seeking employment. This experience was attributed to their incarceration history, which limited their job opportunities and economic prospects. Employers remained hesitant to hire individuals with previous criminal records, hence resulting in immediate disqualification regardless of the PDLs' capacities and qualifications. Their difficulty in securing employment or any legitimate means of income affected their financial status and increased their vulnerability to recidivism. The participants expressed that they have difficulties seeking job opportunities. Even though they showcased perseverance in seeking employment, they were hindered by their unclean records and unfinished service as parolees. The study by Goodstein and Petrich (2019) mentioned that criminal records commonly become one of the hindrances to getting hired. This is strengthened by the assertion of Palmer and Christian (2019), which stated that former PDLs have a lower tendency to be favored with a job opportunity or even a chance for an interview compared to those individuals with clean records, even when they have the same credentials and work backgrounds.

Financial Instability. The participants emphasized that the lack of steady income, compounded by limited resources, made it challenging to meet basic needs and support their respective families. Without a reliable source of income, PDLs found themselves unable to afford essential needs such as food, medicine, utilities, and daily expenses to support children in school. The financial strain also placed immense pressure on their relationships, sometimes leading to feelings of helplessness and frustration. This assertion was supported by Vivares (2023) stated that

the released PDLs want to become as productive as possible during their reintegration into the community; however, the inability to secure employment leads to difficulties in meeting their needs. Rebuilding their lives as released individuals is daunting due to diverse reasons, including having no money and insufficient capital (Bidola et al., 2024).

Difficulties in Adjusting to Societal Changes. The narratives of participants also revealed difficulties in adjusting to changes in societal patterns and dynamics, especially those who had been incarcerated for a long period of time. They expressed that upon reentry to their communities; many things have already changed and were not able to see them happening during their period of incarceration. For instance, the advancements in technology, evolving social and familial norms, and unfamiliar societal structures often left them feeling disconnected and unprepared for their new life in the free society. With little to no exposure to these systems while being incarcerated, they found it difficult to keep up and adjust accordingly. A correctional facility's environment hugely differs from the outside community, and inmates often encounter diverse challenges as they try to adapt to these changes. This was strengthened by the claims of Martin (2018) revealed that the sudden transition of their routines and living conditions from prison to the community creates difficulties for the participants to adapt to their new realities. The longer the imprisonment period, the individual becomes used to the routine inside the cell, which makes them encounter shock and stress, as they face the new routines outside prison.

Facing Stigma and Judgment. This experience hindered them from building genuine relationships and reestablishing their place in the society. The stigma associated with their incarceration history significantly hindered their ability to rebuild their lives, as it often led to feelings of shame and self-worth. According to the participants, most of the hateful comments came from community members and even family members and friends. People were always skeptical of their intent to live a better life and their involvement in community activities, thus, making it challenging to form genuine relationships. Schwarz (2018) revealed that the stigma was rooted in the committed offenses and continued conviction of the community, making it hard for the former PDL to cope. Some of the people who discover their cases often give them unfavorable treatment. Moreover, Moak et al. (2020) claimed that negative treatment subsequently influences the success of the release of offenders upon their re-entry into their communities, giving consideration and showcasing empathy for released individuals is crucial to heightening the success in reintegration.

Difficulty in Reestablishing Family Relationships. Several participants shared that their family relationships were previously strained or broken due to their incarceration. Moreover, their prolonged separation led to weakened bonds, resentment, or disappointment. Many struggled to rebuild trust and repair bonds with family members, making their reintegration journey emotionally distressing and complicated. Some family members were either not accepting because they feared their past behaviors might resurface or had already learned to adjust to life without them. It was revealed that re-establishing family relationships is one of the key experiences of the participants during their reintegration. They asserted that this experience gives hope and delight to their reentry. Family orientation has become a sense of comfort to individuals, that no matter what happens, there are people they can turn to. Their strong family ties and bonds foster acceptance among released persons deprived of liberty, who, despite the circumstances they have faced, have someone they can rely on. Family providing psychological and emotional support during the reentry to society can foster positive outcomes (Mooney & Bala, 2018). Moreover, according to Taylor (2016), having strong emotional support between the family and the released PDLs can significantly reduce reoffending.

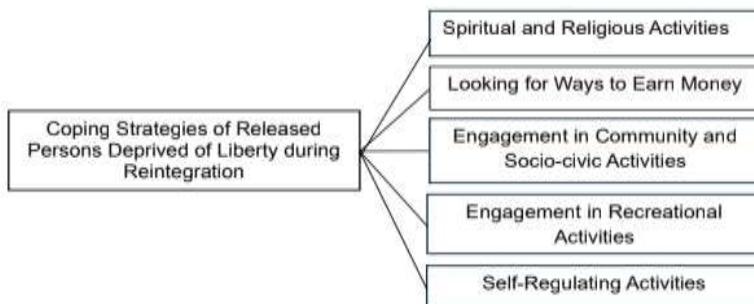
Coping Strategies of Released Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs)

The released PDLs went through many challenges during their reintegration. The change in their environment made it hard for them to adjust to the existing demands of the current society. However, despite the challenges encountered, they utilized coping strategies in response to situations that limited their successful reintegration. These strategies were what made them resilient during difficult times and helped them to alleviate the problems they were facing. Based on the participants' responses, the researchers were able to identify five essential themes:

Spiritual and Religious Activities. This coping mechanism provided PDLs with emotional strength, hope, and a sense of purpose. As one of the reformation activities implemented inside the correctional facilities, PDLs shared that they immersed themselves in these activities to aid their personal transformation. Building a deeper connection to their faith allowed them to cope positively with guilt, regret, and other negative feelings associated with their incarceration. It also helped them develop more their positive behaviors, and it became an avenue for moral reflection. A prior study by Palgan and Apolinario (2022) reveals that the released PDL has a subjective opinion about the uncontrollable obstacles outside of bars that are brought on by anxieties, opinions, and intents of others, however, they are hopeful that God's plan is what determines their transformation, not just what they do. In addition, they realized that God was in control of the unbearable difficulties by learning to give everything up to him.

Figure 2

Coping Strategies of Released Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs)



Community and Socio-Civic Activities. The participants also turned to community and socio-civic activities, participating in local initiatives that allowed them to build social connections and contribute positively to their community. Keeping themselves busy with community activities is also one way for them to deter from committing violations that might affect the conditions of their parole. Moreover, these engagements allowed them to demonstrate their willingness to be productive members of the society and to participate in small support networks that could help facilitate their reintegration journey. According to the Humanitarian Legal Assistance Foundation, Inc. (2023), participation in the community lowers stigma, promotes empathy, and gives PDLs the chance to establish relationships and obtain resources. It is essential to foster a sense of company, lessen isolation, and improve the probability of successful reintegration.

Recreational Activities. Participants shared that they also coped through engaging in recreational activities as it provides them with an outlet for stress relief and provides them a sense of normalcy. These activities, which included sports, crafts, and other forms of leisure, allowed them

to navigate the pressures of reintegration and improve their state of mind. It also helped them to somehow manage feelings of anxiety and other thoughts rather than resorting to negative coping mechanisms. According to Schmalz (2021), recreational activities are essential to human health and well-being. These are attributed to social processes and healthy behaviors. Participation in recreation can lead to individual engagement and a reduction of unhealthy behavior. It can also stimulate mechanisms for social activities and relationships with society, promote special learning or characteristics, and provide social resources. Moreover, people typically engage in recreational activities for amusement, socializing, or health benefits. Aside from enjoyment, the activity improves their physical health. While some people find comfort in connecting with like-minded people, others like the personal freedom that comes with activity to relieve stress (Divyesh, 2024).

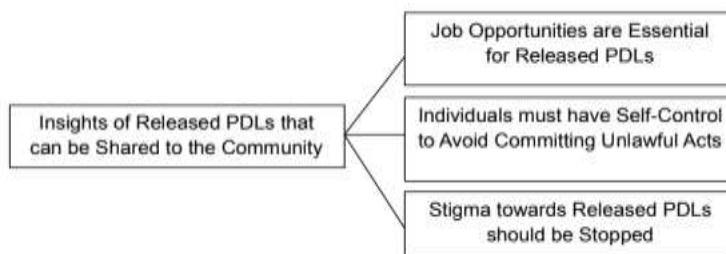
Self-regulating Activities. Recognizing that different triggers might eventually lead them to re-offending, released PDLs considered the insights they gained from being incarcerated and used these realizations as a motivation to control their emotions. These practices included being mindful, setting personal goals, and maintaining discipline. These activities allowed them to gain a sense of control over their lives and decisions whilst maintaining a sound mind and intention. Developing the ability to regulate oneself is essential for released PDLs to cope with the stress and temptations that may be encountered. Moreover, Veazey (2022) argues that a person who is good at managing their emotions can recognize a strong emotion and choose the most effective way of dealing with it, which will have minimal opposing impacts.

Looking for Ways to Earn Money. Released PDLs coped with their financial challenges by looking for ways to earn money. Whether through formal or informal employment, they strived to build financial independence in order to contribute to making ends meet for their families and for themselves. Most of them turned to informal means such as freelance labor work and small-scale businesses like selling goods, providing services, or engaging in skilled trades. Yin et al. (2022) mentioned that the former offender had a huge probability of beginning from the basics and indulging in small entrepreneurs to meet their daily needs and to decrease the burden they caused on their families. Their strategy for responding to criminal labeling and avoiding risking their lives by modifying their lifestyle is evidence of change. They are willing to accept the first available employment that is close to their home. They grabbed the chance and were satisfied with their ability to complete the task (Palgan & Apolinario, 2022). This explains that, despite limitations, former offenders stretch their abilities to every accessible chance. They learned to be satisfied with everything that they could carry out in their humble circumstances.

Insights of the Released Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs)

Shown in Figure 3 are the essential insights of PDLs about their experiences. Upon analyzing the data gathered from the participants, the researchers identified three essential themes anchored to the insights that PDLs could with the community. These insights also indicated the importance of the community in helping these individuals as they immerse themselves back into their respective communities. There were three themes gleaned from the insights of the PDLs, which include the ideas that job opportunities as essential interventions for released PDLs, the need for self-control to avoid committing unlawful acts, and the need for stigma towards released PDLs to be stopped.

Figure 3
Insights of Released Persons Deprived of Liberty



Job Opportunities are Essential for Released PDLs. Recognizing their own experiences, released PDLs stressed that having access to stable job opportunities would provide them with more chances of being financially independent, hence helping them build their self-esteem, since it would contribute to their sense of purpose. According to the participants, this opportunity would allow them to support their families and make them feel productive members of society once again. As stated in the study of Guterman (2022), every individual has the right to work for the job they want with a level of income that ensures that individuals still live a dignified and fulfilling life. The right to work allows the individual to have a job and earn money to sustain themselves and uphold their personal growth and liberty.

Strong Need for Individuals to Have Self-Control. The participants emphasized the crucial role of self-control in their reintegration process. They acknowledged that their challenges could sometimes lead to feelings of frustration and impulsive decision-making. Without self-discipline, they acknowledged that it would become easier for people to fall into negative patterns that could jeopardize their progress and reintegration into the society. This strengthens the assertion of Buckley (2021), that former offenders who stop engaging in crime have reasons that have allowed them to gain insights and make sense of their past experiences and have greater control of oneself and their future.

Stigma Towards Released PDLs Should be Stopped. The participants expressed that the stigma in the community toward PDLs should be stopped. They considered that one of the most significant barriers to successful reintegration was the stigma that released PDLs faced in the society. This stigma often led to discrimination and feelings of unacceptance, making it difficult for these individuals to reintegrate and move forward. To break these negative stereotypes, the participants shared that local leaders might help educate communities about them and help them be given a chance to rebuild their lives without judgment. According to the study of Warren (2023), labeling released PDLs greatly hinders their capacity to reintegrate into the community effectively. This has a negative effect on them, as these individuals start to accept this label as part of who they are, they begin to view themselves as what the community views them and behave in ways that do not conform to the law. When society expects and thinks that they will continue to commit crimes even if they are already released, this factor can push them to indulge themselves in unlawful actions again. Fair treatment is crucial for the well-being of released PDLs.

DISCUSSION

Released PDLs under parole faced a range of challenges during their reintegration into the free society. Their reentry process could be influenced by various factors, and unsuccessful reintegration might result in more complicated societal issues. The study findings revealed that the experiences of PDLs upon their release were complex. They often had difficulties in competing in terms of employment and seek ways to earn income to gain financial stability. On top of the financial issues, they also struggled to gain social acceptance and adjust to the evolving practices and norms of mainstream society. Re-establishing strained family ties also proves to be a challenging experience for them. These familial and social disconnects often make them feel anxious and unaccepted in the community where they will be re-entering.

Despite these challenges, released PDLs employed various coping strategies to manage their reintegration. These strategies helped them navigate the difficulties they faced and strengthened their resilience. Participants shared that they turned to spiritual and religious activities, which provided emotional support and a sense of purpose. Though difficult, they sought ways to earn money through formal or informal employment to improve their living conditions and support their families. In order to deter crimes and minimize the possibility of re-offending, participants shared that they have significantly increased their participation in community and socio-civic activities. This has significantly helped them build social connections and contribute positively to society while also keeping them occupied and reducing the likelihood of violating parole conditions. They have also turned to non-illegal recreational activities as they provide stress relief and a sense of normalcy. Finally, exercising self-control has been one of the most challenging coping mechanisms since triggers to relapse are always in their environment. Hence, self-regulating activities, such as mindfulness and goal setting, are exercised by the released PDLs to always remind themselves what they should avoid and let go of.

The study also highlighted three essential insights that released PDLs can share with the community. They strongly expressed that job opportunities are crucial for their successful reintegration. Thus, support systems and community structures should also allow them to compete fairly and will not be treated on the basis of the offenses they had previously committed. Moreover, self-control is essential for preventing recidivism. Participants emphasized the need for self-regulation and the ability to resist pressure to commit unlawful acts. Programs that promote personal responsibility, decision-making skills, and emotional management are crucial for fostering this self-control. Finally, the stigma that released PDLs face must be eliminated. Feelings of discrimination and unacceptance often lead to feelings of worthlessness; thus, it is imperative for community leaders to play a key role in breaking these stereotypes and providing an environment where released PDLs are given a fair chance to rebuild their lives without judgment.

Implications for Practice

The themes generated reveal that reintegrated PDLs under parole deal with various disadvantages. With this, the study suggests that various government instrumentalities and communities may consider giving a more holistic and multi-sectoral approach to reintegration more consideration to implement more successful reintegration programs. Reintegration must not be viewed as a singular task but as a continuum of coordinated support across different sectors. The Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, and the Probation and Parole Office may intensify their reintegration programs and collaborate with government agencies such as the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), TESDA, and the Department of Social

Welfare and Development in bringing about programs that will allow reintegrated PDLs to build the necessary competencies to seek employment and/ or venture into entrepreneurial activities. The DILG and the local government units may also collaborate in terms of strengthening local community structures that will increase the community's understanding and acceptance of released PDLs and minimize stigma. Community-based education campaigns and capacity-building for local officials can help shift perceptions and create an environment conducive to rehabilitation. If supported appropriately, the chances of recidivism will also be minimized, and more cohesive community dynamics may be achieved. It is essential to ensure that parole conditions are realistic and supportive rather than punitive. Programs must be tailored to individual needs and community contexts, especially for those with limited family or social support networks.

Since this study focuses solely on the experiences of PDLs from a qualitative perspective, the researchers would like to suggest and investigate the efficacy of the current aftercare programs and how these interventions influence their well-being. They can also look into studying further if successful reintegration interventions reduce the number of re-offending cases. Future researchers can also explore the perspective of the different stakeholders towards released PDLs, such as community leaders, duty bearers, and families, to allow a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. This could also provide various government offices with relevant insights that will aid in crafting more defined interventions that will have long-term effects and address critical environmental barriers that pose significant challenges in implementing PDL reintegration programs. It is also suggested to utilize other research designs, such as mixed methods, to gather more data, delving deeper into the conditions of reintegrated PDLs under parole.

Conclusion

Successful reintegration takes ample time and vigorous effort to ensure that these released individuals under parole can cope with the changes in their community. These results support the claim of the Person-Environment Fit theory by Murrell and Norris (1983) in determining how well they adapt to their surroundings and how their environment affects them. The researchers identified that community acceptance and support are significantly important for released PDLs to reintegrate into the community successfully. People should see them as individuals with worth and dignity and treat them fairly. Although they committed unlawful acts, they still learned and changed to become law-abiding citizens. With the right support and addressing barriers that can potentially cause dysfunction, released PDLs can become productive and responsible members of society.

This study highlights the complexity of reintegration for released PDLs under parole, showing that they face significant emotional, social, and economic hurdles in their return to society. While many exhibit resilience through spirituality, self-regulation, and participation in productive activities, these individual efforts must be matched with systemic support. The experiences of released PDLs affirm the Person-Environment Fit Theory (Murrell & Norris, 1983), illustrating how critical the surrounding environment is in shaping the journey of reintegration. When communities fail to welcome returning individuals or provide opportunities, these individuals are at greater risk of feeling alienated, potentially leading to recidivism. On the other hand, when society acknowledges their efforts to reform and supports their transition, PDLs are more likely to succeed and contribute positively to their communities. Ultimately, reintegration is not only a justice issue but a collective social responsibility. With coordinated interventions, supportive communities, and responsive policies, they can transform into empowered, law-abiding, and productive members of society.

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