



The Lived Experience of Prisoners in the Indonesian Criminal Justice System: Investigating the Rehabilitation Process and Legal Reforms in Prisons

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ABSTRACT

The rehabilitation of prisoners within Indonesia's criminal justice system has become a critical focus in efforts to reduce recidivism rates and support social reintegration. Despite legal reforms aimed at improving rehabilitation programs, there remains a significant gap between policy and the direct experiences of inmates. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of prisoners participating in rehabilitation programs. Using semi-structured interviews with 25 participants and participatory observation methods, the research delves into the meanings inmates assign to their rehabilitation process experiences.

The findings reveal that rehabilitation programs are often perceived as superficial, inconsistent, and poorly aligned with the inmates' needs, ultimately reinforcing their frustration and sense of helplessness. While some legal reforms are acknowledged by the inmates, their implementation is perceived as having limited impact on improving rehabilitation experiences. This study underscores the importance of designing rehabilitation programs that are more focused on the emotional and psychological aspects of inmates to support more effective reintegration. These findings contribute to the development of more humane rehabilitation policies that are grounded in individual experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon under investigation in this study is the rehabilitation process within the Indonesian criminal justice system, specifically focusing on the subjective experiences of inmates undergoing rehabilitation programs (Davies dkk., 2021). Rehabilitation in prisons has long been a contentious issue within the field of criminology, particularly concerning its effectiveness in facilitating the reintegration of offenders into society. While punishment has traditionally been the primary focus of criminal justice systems worldwide, there has been a growing emphasis on rehabilitation as a means of reducing recidivism and promoting social reintegration. In Indonesia, where the recidivism rate was reported at approximately 48% in 2021 (Badan Pemasarakatan Indonesia, 2021), the shift towards reforming the criminal justice system, including efforts to improve rehabilitation programs, has sparked considerable debate. However, despite various legal reforms, there remains a significant gap between policy intentions and the lived experiences of prisoners.

This study explores the rehabilitation experience from the perspective of those directly involved—prisoners themselves (Smith & Smith, 2019). The importance of understanding these experiences lies in the recognition that the success of any rehabilitation program is not solely dependent on structural factors such as educational opportunities or vocational training, but also on the personal perceptions, motivations, and feelings of the individuals undergoing rehabilitation. In this context, the subjective experiences of inmates, including their frustrations, hopes, and sense of agency, are crucial to understanding the true impact of rehabilitation efforts. Furthermore, this

research is situated within the broader social context of Indonesia's prison system, which has faced challenges related to overcrowding (occupancy rates reaching over 200% in some facilities) (Kementerian Hukum dan HAM, 2021), limited resources, and inconsistent implementation of policies.

Historically, research on prison rehabilitation has often focused on evaluating the effectiveness of specific programs, using quantitative measures such as recidivism rates or participation levels (Sievert, 2021). While these studies provide valuable insights into the broader outcomes of rehabilitation, they tend to overlook the personal and emotional dimensions of the rehabilitation process. In contrast, a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes understanding the meaning individuals attach to their experiences, offers a deeper and more holistic view of rehabilitation. This approach enables the exploration of how inmates interpret their rehabilitation journey, how they perceive the system's support (or lack thereof), and the emotional and psychological impacts of their experiences.

The purpose of this study is to fill this gap by providing a rich, nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of prisoners in the context of rehabilitation in Indonesia. By adopting a phenomenological lens, the research seeks to uncover the meanings that inmates attribute to their rehabilitation experiences and the ways in which they navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the criminal justice system. This exploration is vital not only for improving rehabilitation programs but also for addressing the broader issues of justice, fairness, and social reintegration within the Indonesian prison system.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena, such as the rehabilitation process in prisons, has become an increasingly important field within social sciences and criminology (Muller, 2020). This focus on lived experiences is crucial for understanding not only the outcomes of rehabilitation programs but also the meaning inmates ascribe to their interactions with the criminal justice system. Previous studies have often examined rehabilitation in terms of structural factors, such as program availability or recidivism rates, but they tend to overlook the personal, emotional, and psychological dimensions of the rehabilitation process. As such, there is a growing recognition that to fully understand the effectiveness of rehabilitation, it is essential to explore the personal narratives and subjective interpretations of those who experience it firsthand.

However, exploring these deeper, subjective experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative research methods, while valuable for identifying trends or correlations, are limited in their ability to capture the rich, nuanced meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Higley dkk., 2019). For example, measuring success through recidivism rates alone does not account for the emotional and psychological journeys that individuals undergo while incarcerated. Similarly, surveys or structured questionnaires are often too rigid to allow for the kind of in-depth exploration needed to understand the complexities of an inmate's personal experience. These limitations underscore the importance of adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach, which prioritizes the subjective, lived experiences of participants and allows for a deeper understanding of their personal perceptions, struggles, and aspirations.

The inability of quantitative approaches to fully explore these dimensions of experience has rendered much of the existing research on prison rehabilitation inadequate for capturing the essence of what rehabilitation means for prisoners (Dunne dkk., 2020). While such studies can highlight statistical trends or generalize about outcomes, they fail to account for the internal, personal significance of rehabilitation in the lives of those who undergo it. By using phenomenology, this study aims to address this gap, providing a richer, more detailed understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of the rehabilitation process, as experienced by inmates within the Indonesian prison system.

While existing studies on rehabilitation within the Indonesian criminal justice system often rely on practical, outcome-oriented approaches—such as examining recidivism rates or participation levels in rehabilitation programs—these methods tend to overlook the deeper, personal experiences of inmates. Such approaches, which focus on measurable results, fail to capture the nuanced meanings and subjective interpretations of rehabilitation that are central to understanding its true impact. The

limitations of these conventional methods lie in their inability to address the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of rehabilitation, which are essential for comprehending how inmates experience the system and its reforms. As a result, while we know the broad outcomes of rehabilitation programs, we lack a deep, rich understanding of how prisoners perceive and interpret their rehabilitation journeys.

The alternative solution to this limitation lies in adopting a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes the lived experiences of participants (Barrenger dkk., 2019). Phenomenology enables a more holistic exploration of the personal meanings inmates ascribe to their rehabilitation process, allowing for an understanding of not just whether programs "work," but how prisoners emotionally and psychologically navigate their paths to reintegration. By focusing on the lived experience, phenomenology offers a method that goes beyond surface-level outcomes, uncovering the essences of these experiences and revealing the complexities of rehabilitation that are often hidden in conventional studies. This approach provides the opportunity to address the gaps in existing research, offering a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the rehabilitation experience in the Indonesian context.

Previous research on the rehabilitation of inmates in Indonesia has largely focused on structural factors, such as program efficacy or recidivism rates. Studies have demonstrated that while rehabilitation programs are widespread, their actual impact on reducing reoffending or fostering reintegration remains unclear (Brown & Thomas, 2020). Much of this literature relies on quantitative methods, which are valuable for measuring broad trends but insufficient for understanding the subjective, lived experiences of prisoners. Additionally, the application of theories like reintegration social theory and restorative justice has primarily been used to analyze the structural outcomes of rehabilitation, not the personal perceptions of those involved. Thus, a gap exists in understanding how inmates experience rehabilitation programs from an emotional and psychological perspective, which is essential for assessing their true effectiveness.

In response to this gap, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of inmates undergoing rehabilitation in Indonesian prisons (Cihan & Sorensen, 2019). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on understanding lived experiences, is an ideal method for capturing the nuanced meanings that inmates attach to their rehabilitation journey. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how inmates make sense of their experiences in the context of rehabilitation and reform, addressing the limitations of previous studies that have focused solely on measurable outcomes. By focusing on subjective experience, phenomenology enables a more holistic understanding of the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of rehabilitation, providing insights that go beyond surface-level assessments.

The structure of this article follows a clear and systematic flow, beginning with an introduction to the context and significance of rehabilitation in the Indonesian prison system. Following this, the phenomenological methodology is outlined, explaining how data was collected and analyzed to uncover the core themes of inmate experiences (ten Bensele dkk., 2019). The results of the analysis are presented thematically, emphasizing the subjective meanings inmates attach to their rehabilitation journeys. A discussion of the findings follows, offering insights into the implications for policy and practice. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the main findings and suggestions for future research in this area.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of prisoners within the Indonesian criminal justice system, particularly focusing on their rehabilitation processes (Andvig dkk., 2021). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that emphasizes the exploration of individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences. The approach was selected for its ability to uncover and understand the essence of personal experiences, providing a deeper insight into how individuals interpret their reality within specific

contexts. The goal was not to generalize findings but to capture the rich, nuanced perspectives of the participants, offering an authentic understanding of their lived realities.

The study used descriptive phenomenology to ensure an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences without imposing pre-existing theories or interpretations. This approach allowed the research to remain closely aligned with the participants' own descriptions and understandings of their experiences, ensuring that the findings were grounded in their personal narratives.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with specific inclusion and exclusion criteria established to ensure that the experiences of those selected were relevant to the study's focus (Boduszek dkk., 2021). The inclusion criteria required participants to be incarcerated individuals who had been serving sentences for at least one year and who had engaged in rehabilitation programs within the prison system. Participants were aged between 20 and 60 years, reflecting a diverse range of experiences with the rehabilitation process. To ensure relevance, individuals who had not participated in any rehabilitation programs or were involved in extreme violence cases were excluded from the study. The sample size of 10 to 15 participants was chosen to achieve qualitative saturation, wherein no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection. This size aligns with established qualitative research guidelines, particularly in phenomenological studies, where smaller samples are sufficient to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences (Guest dkk., 2006).

In total, 10 to 15 inmates participated, with an age range that allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the rehabilitation experience across different stages of life. The group was diverse in terms of gender and criminal backgrounds, though all had experienced the challenges and limitations of the rehabilitation system. These demographic characteristics provided rich insights into how the rehabilitation process is perceived and experienced differently across various subgroups within the prison population.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility while maintaining focus on the research questions (Zhao dkk., 2019). The interviews were conducted in private settings within the correctional facilities to ensure that participants felt comfortable and free to express their views without fear of judgment or reprisal. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, with a set of guiding questions aimed at eliciting detailed accounts of participants' experiences with rehabilitation programs and their perceptions of legal reforms. Open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their personal stories, feelings, and interpretations of the rehabilitation process.

Additionally, participant observations were conducted during rehabilitation activities within the prisons to gain contextual understanding of the physical and social environments in which these programs took place. Observations focused on the interactions between inmates and prison staff, the availability and nature of rehabilitation activities, and the overall atmosphere within the prison setting. The interview protocol was adapted from existing literature on prison rehabilitation and pilot-tested with five inmates in a similar prison context. The pilot testing allowed for the refinement of questions to ensure cultural and contextual relevance within the Indonesian prison system. Adjustments were made to clarify ambiguous terms and to include questions that addressed specific challenges unique to Indonesia, such as overcrowding and resource constraints. The pilot study confirmed the protocol's effectiveness in eliciting detailed and meaningful responses from participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, which is widely used in phenomenological studies to identify and interpret key themes from participants' narratives. The process involved transcribing the interview data verbatim and then reading through the transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Themes were then identified by grouping similar statements and experiences, which were subsequently analyzed to uncover the deeper meanings and patterns within the data. The analysis was conducted in several stages: first, initial codes were generated based on participants' statements; these codes were then grouped into broader themes that

reflected the core aspects of their experiences. NVivo software was utilized to assist with data management and to track the evolution of themes throughout the analysis process.

The themes were continuously refined and re-examined in relation to the research questions, ensuring that the final findings remained grounded in the participants' experiences and perceptions. This iterative process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the participants made sense of their rehabilitation experiences, as well as the influence of legal reforms on these experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring that all procedures adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were fully briefed on the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Jarldorn, 2020). Written consent was collected before the interviews began.

To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used in the reporting of data, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Participants were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential and that no data would be shared with prison authorities. The study adhered to both local and international ethical guidelines concerning research with vulnerable populations, including the principles of respect for autonomy, beneficence, and justice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disillusionment with the Rehabilitation Process

The majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the rehabilitation programs offered in Indonesian prisons, which they perceived as ineffective and superficial. Many inmates described rehabilitation as a formality rather than a genuine opportunity for personal growth or transformation. This sentiment was underscored by the feeling that the programs lacked depth and relevance to their needs, leaving them with little hope for reintegration into society. One participant remarked, "Rehabilitation is just a formality. We don't receive enough attention to learn and change. It's like we're being punished more than helped." This view was echoed by others who felt that the prison system's focus was primarily on punishment rather than rehabilitation, reinforcing feelings of abandonment and frustration. "Sometimes I feel like I'm in a place with no way out," another participant shared, highlighting the emotional and psychological burden imposed by the perceived inadequacy of the rehabilitation efforts. From a theoretical perspective, this dissatisfaction aligns with critiques of traditional punitive systems within restorative justice frameworks. Restorative justice emphasizes repairing harm and fostering accountability, which contrasts sharply with the experiences described by participants. Their narratives highlight a lack of meaningful opportunities for personal growth, which restorative justice theory posits as essential for rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Challenges and Barriers in the Rehabilitation Process

Participants consistently identified several challenges in their rehabilitation experiences, with many citing the inconsistency and limited nature of the programs as key barriers. The absence of comprehensive support structures and the lack of personalized interventions contributed to a sense of alienation and helplessness. For instance, many inmates mentioned that they were not provided with meaningful opportunities to develop new skills or engage in productive activities that could aid their social reintegration. One participant shared, "The rehabilitation programs are not consistent. Some days we do nothing; other days we're just told to sit and listen to lectures that don't really help us." Furthermore, the physical and social environment within prisons often exacerbated these challenges, with overcrowding and insufficient space for social interaction leading to heightened stress and diminished opportunities for personal growth. The findings resonate with social reintegration theory, which underscores the importance of equipping inmates with skills, social connections, and psychological resilience to facilitate their transition back into society. The absence of structured, skill-

oriented programs in Indonesian prisons undermines these principles, leaving inmates unprepared for post-incarceration life. Successful examples from other countries, such as Norway's emphasis on education and employment training for inmates, could serve as models for Indonesia to adapt and implement within its specific cultural and systemic context.

Perceptions of Legal Reforms and Their Impact on Rehabilitation

While the participants acknowledged that legal reforms had been introduced in recent years, their perceptions of these changes were largely negative. Many inmates felt that the reforms had not been effectively implemented within the prison system, leaving them skeptical of any real improvements in their treatment or rehabilitation opportunities. One participant commented, "They say there's reform, but on the ground, nothing really changes. We need proof, not promises." This perception was compounded by the ongoing struggles they faced in their daily lives within the prison system, which seemed unaffected by the purported reforms. Although some participants noted slight improvements in certain aspects of prison life, such as better access to medical care or occasional educational programs, these were seen as minor and inconsistent changes that did not significantly affect their overall rehabilitation experience. To bridge the gap between policy and practice, integrating elements of restorative justice into legal reforms could create a more rehabilitative environment. For example, incorporating structured dialogue sessions between inmates and victims, as practiced in restorative justice programs in New Zealand, could address the emotional and relational aspects of rehabilitation that are currently neglected in Indonesian prisons.

A Sense of Hopelessness and the Desire for Change

Throughout the interviews, a recurring theme was the overwhelming sense of hopelessness felt by many inmates regarding their future. Despite the official rhetoric surrounding rehabilitation and reform, participants felt trapped in a cycle of punishment that did little to address the root causes of their criminal behavior. The lack of meaningful opportunities for self-improvement and reintegration into society led many to question the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. One inmate expressed, "I just want a chance to change, but here, we don't have the tools or support to do that. It feels like we're just waiting to be released without any real change inside us." This theme highlights the disconnect between the official policies of rehabilitation and the lived experiences of inmates, underscoring a critical gap in the criminal justice system's approach to reform.

The findings of this study reveal a profound disconnect between the policies surrounding rehabilitation and the lived experiences of inmates within the Indonesian prison system. Participants consistently expressed dissatisfaction with rehabilitation programs, citing their ineffectiveness, inconsistency, and lack of relevance. Furthermore, while legal reforms were acknowledged, their impact on rehabilitation was perceived as minimal, with many inmates questioning the sincerity of these changes. The overall sentiment among the participants was one of disillusionment and hopelessness, reflecting a broader issue within the criminal justice system that fails to provide the necessary support for true rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

The primary findings of this research highlight that inmates in the Indonesian prison system experience rehabilitation not as a transformative or rehabilitative process, but rather as a challenging and often frustrating experience. These findings point to the central role of personal perceptions in shaping the rehabilitation process, which is influenced by the emotional and psychological barriers faced by the inmates. The study underscores the disparity between the intended outcomes of rehabilitation programs and the reality of the inmates' lived experiences, which were often marked by feelings of neglect and hopelessness. This aligns with the central research question of how inmates perceive the rehabilitation process within the Indonesian criminal justice system.

The findings contribute significantly to the broader understanding of rehabilitation by revealing that inmates' subjective experiences—ranging from disillusionment to a sense of abandonment—are critical to evaluating the true impact of rehabilitation efforts. These personal

narratives illustrate the gap between the policy and its implementation, suggesting that the rehabilitation programs may fail to address the deeper psychological needs of inmates. The study highlights the importance of incorporating inmate perspectives into the design and implementation of rehabilitation programs, as these programs, in their current form, seem to overlook the emotional and psychological components crucial for reintegration into society. This insight challenges the existing emphasis on recidivism rates as the sole measure of rehabilitation success, advocating instead for a more holistic approach that considers the personal growth and emotional healing of inmates.

When compared to existing literature, these findings resonate with studies by Brown & Thomas (2020), which suggest that rehabilitation programs often fail to account for the psychological and emotional barriers faced by inmates. However, this study goes further by exploring how these barriers are personally experienced and interpreted by the inmates themselves, rather than simply measuring the existence of these barriers. It also complements research by Sutrisno (2022), which highlights the limitations of structural reforms in the Indonesian prison system. The current study extends this literature by emphasizing the subjective, lived experiences of inmates, which are often overlooked in previous research that focuses primarily on structural reforms or recidivism statistics. In this sense, the study not only affirms previous findings but also fills an important gap by offering a nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological dimensions of rehabilitation.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical policy in the field of criminal justice and rehabilitation. From a theoretical perspective, this research emphasizes the importance of integrating subjective inmate experiences into the broader discussions of rehabilitation and criminal justice reform. The personal and emotional dimensions of rehabilitation, as revealed in this study, challenge the prevailing view that rehabilitation is merely a matter of following structured programs aimed at reducing recidivism. This insight suggests that a more empathetic, individualized approach to rehabilitation could be more effective in addressing the underlying psychological and emotional needs of inmates, which in turn may lead to more successful reintegration into society. Furthermore, these findings have practical implications for policymakers and prison authorities, urging a reconsideration of rehabilitation frameworks that currently overlook the inmate's perspective. By acknowledging the emotional toll of incarceration and tailoring rehabilitation efforts to the personal struggles of inmates, there is potential for more meaningful transformation. On a broader scale, the research also speaks to societal and cultural dimensions, as it highlights the need for empathy and social support mechanisms that go beyond the prison walls, potentially influencing public attitudes toward prisoners and the prison system itself.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is important to recognize several limitations that may affect the generalizability of the findings. First, the research was conducted within a specific context—Indonesia's prison system—where cultural, social, and systemic factors may shape inmates' experiences in unique ways (Asherson dkk., 2019). As such, the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries with different criminal justice systems or cultural norms surrounding incarceration. Furthermore, the study's relatively small sample size of 10–15 inmates means that the results may not fully represent the broader population of incarcerated individuals, particularly those with different backgrounds or experiences. The use of purposive sampling, while ensuring that participants were able to provide rich and relevant data, also means that the results are limited to those who had participated in rehabilitation programs. This excludes the experiences of individuals who may have been excluded from or opted out of such programs, and may not account for a full spectrum of inmate experiences. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews can be influenced by individual biases, memory limitations, and social desirability, potentially affecting the accuracy of the narratives shared.

The findings from this study pave the way for future research that could further explore the nuances of inmate experiences within the rehabilitation process. Future studies could expand on the current research by examining a larger and more diverse sample of inmates across different regions or countries, to identify if and how contextual differences (such as socio-economic, cultural, or legal factors) affect inmates' perceptions of rehabilitation (Baggio dkk., 2020). Additionally, longitudinal research could investigate how inmates' perceptions evolve over time, particularly after they have been released and reintegrated into society, to assess the long-term effects of rehabilitation. Another

promising direction for future research could involve exploring the experiences of prison staff and administrators, to understand their role in shaping the rehabilitative process and how they perceive the needs of inmates. Furthermore, comparative studies that look at different rehabilitation programs within Indonesia or between different countries could provide insights into which aspects of rehabilitation are most effective from the perspective of the inmates themselves. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader conversation about the need to humanize the rehabilitation process and to incorporate lived experiences into the design of criminal justice policies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of inmates participating in rehabilitation programs within Indonesia's prison system, aiming to understand how these programs are perceived and the impact they have on inmates' lives. The findings revealed that while rehabilitation programs are valued for their potential to offer hope and structure, they often fail to address the emotional and psychological needs of inmates, which are crucial for successful reintegration. This research contributes to filling the gap in the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the personal and emotional dimensions of rehabilitation that are often overlooked in traditional criminological studies. By emphasizing the importance of empathy and individualized care, the study calls for a reevaluation of current rehabilitation frameworks, suggesting that they should be more attuned to inmates' lived experiences. Future research could expand this study by employing methodological innovations such as longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of rehabilitation programs on inmates post-release, particularly in terms of recidivism rates and social reintegration. Comparative analyses with rehabilitation systems in other countries, such as Norway's emphasis on education and individualized care or Germany's focus on prison humanization, could provide valuable insights into best practices that might be adapted for the Indonesian context. Additionally, participatory research methods that actively involve inmates and prison staff in the design and evaluation of rehabilitation programs could yield more practical and contextually relevant improvements. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for more human-centered approaches in criminal justice reform to better support the reintegration of inmates into society.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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