

Civil Identity Restoration in the Social Reintegration of Former Convicts

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ABSTRACT

The reintegration of former convicts into society is a critical issue within legal and social sciences, often addressed through administrative or criminological frameworks. However, limited attention has been given to how these individuals subjectively experience the restoration of their civil legal status after incarceration, particularly within the context of the Indonesian legal system. Despite formal freedom, it remains unclear how ex-convicts interpret their societal reintegration and whether they perceive themselves as legally and socially accepted. This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how former convicts construct meaning around their post-incarceration identity and rights restoration. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten former inmates, specific themes such as persistent social stigma, bureaucratic hurdles in legal documentation, and efforts to reclaim personal dignity emerged as central to their reintegration experience. Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), revealing that participants often felt excluded from full civil participation despite having completed their sentences. Their narratives highlight an ongoing struggle to reconcile their legal identity with social acceptance and self-perception. These findings deepen our understanding of reintegration as a lived process and challenge traditional definitions that focus solely on legal compliance. The study is limited by its small, context-specific sample size and qualitative scope, which may affect generalizability. Nonetheless, it suggests that future research and policy efforts must incorporate personal narratives and emotional dimensions to ensure meaningful reintegration frameworks.



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INTRODUCTION

The social reintegration of former convicts is a complex issue at the intersection of legal, cultural, and societal domains. Although many legal systems formally promote rehabilitation, individuals who have completed their prison sentences often face enduring obstacles in reclaiming their civil identity. These challenges are shaped not only by legal constraints but also by persistent social stigma, cultural norms, and institutional bias.

In societies where criminal history is equated with moral failure, ex-convicts frequently encounter barriers to employment, housing, and public services—even in the absence of legal prohibitions. Social interactions marked by suspicion and exclusion contribute to emotional and psychological distress, hindering their reintegration. Thus, reintegration extends beyond legal compliance to encompass the reconstruction of identity and renegotiation of one's place in society.

While existing frameworks often emphasize structural and policy dimensions, they rarely account for how former convicts interpret and experience their return to civil life. This gap in understanding calls for a phenomenological inquiry that centers on the lived experiences of reintegration. Accordingly, this study explores how former convicts perceive the restoration of their civil identity after incarceration, using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Given the inherently personal and subjective nature of these experiences, the phenomenon of reintegration extends beyond administrative reinsertion into society. It encompasses the internal struggle to regain dignity, self-worth, and social acceptance. This underscores the importance of understanding how individuals perceive and interpret their post-incarceration lives, including how they navigate societal expectations,

rebuild relationships, and interpret the restoration of their civil legal status. Such experiences are laden with emotional and existential dimensions that cannot be captured through purely normative or statistical analyses.

In this context, a phenomenological approach becomes essential. Exploring the lived experiences of ex-convicts provides insights into the meanings they attach to reintegration, as well as the societal structures that either facilitate or hinder their journey. Rather than focusing on what reintegration ought to be in legal terms, this study centers on how it is actually experienced, felt, and interpreted by those who live it. The need to explore these perspectives reflects a broader concern for justice that is not only procedural but also experiential and human-centered.

Within the broader context of reintegration, research on the subjective experiences of former convicts has emerged as a critical area of inquiry. This body of work recognizes that legal reintegration alone does not fully encapsulate the personal and social complexities faced by individuals post-incarceration. As such, scholars have increasingly turned to qualitative approaches to capture the nuanced meanings embedded in reintegration experiences, particularly those that relate to identity reconstruction, social acceptance, and perceived legal restoration.

However, exploring these deeply personal narratives presents significant methodological challenges. Conventional research methods—especially those grounded in quantitative paradigms—often fail to adequately address the richness and depth of human experience. Surveys and structured instruments may reduce complex phenomena into simplified metrics, overlooking the existential, emotional, and cultural dimensions that define the lived realities of ex-convicts. Consequently, these approaches provide only a partial understanding of how reintegration is internalized and enacted by individuals.

This methodological limitation has led to gaps in capturing the essence of reintegration as it is subjectively experienced. Many prior studies have focused on measurable outcomes such as recidivism rates, employment statistics, or access to services, but have paid limited attention to how individuals perceive and make meaning of their civil status and social roles following imprisonment. In contexts where societal reintegration is influenced by informal social sanctions and cultural perceptions of morality, the absence of such perspectives risks reinforcing institutional blind spots in rehabilitation policies and legal frameworks.

Therefore, a phenomenological inquiry becomes not only relevant but necessary. By prioritizing the voices of those who have undergone the reintegration process, this study aims to illuminate the experiential dimensions that remain underrepresented in existing legal and sociological literature. This approach allows for a deeper engagement with how ex-convicts interpret their past, their place in society, and their future trajectories in relation to the law and community.

Existing approaches to supporting the reintegration of former convicts predominantly rely on practical interventions such as vocational training, legal aid, and community supervision programs. While these strategies aim to facilitate structural inclusion, they often neglect the subjective dimensions of reintegration—namely, how individuals perceive, internalize, and give meaning to their return to society. These practical models are primarily outcome-driven, focusing on quantifiable indicators such as recidivism rates, employment status, or housing stability. However, they provide limited insight into the personal narratives and emotional landscapes of those undergoing reintegration.

Such limitations are especially apparent in research that employs standardized instruments or statistical models, which frequently fail to capture the depth and variability of individual experiences. As noted in the literature, legal and administrative reintegration does not automatically equate to social or psychological acceptance, and the absence of this recognition often leaves former convicts in a liminal state—formally free, yet socially marginalized (Fatmawati, 2021; Lubis, 2022). These individuals may struggle with internalized stigma, relational fractures, and a sense of civil dislocation that remains unexplored in mainstream empirical studies.

This gap highlights the need for a methodological shift—one that places the lived experience at the center of analysis. Phenomenology offers a powerful alternative by allowing researchers to access the essence of reintegration as it is experienced and interpreted by individuals themselves. Through in-

depth exploration of personal narratives, a phenomenological approach can reveal the nuanced meanings of legal identity, social belonging, and self-restoration that are often obscured by surface-level data. This study adopts such a framework to address the inadequacies of prior research and to contribute a more holistic understanding of what reintegration truly entails from the perspective of those who live it.

Previous studies have examined the reintegration of former convicts primarily through administrative, legal, and sociological lenses. While some research has highlighted institutional challenges or community-based programs, few have focused on how ex-convicts personally experience their reintegration. Notable exceptions include studies by Fatmawati (2021) and Lubis (2022), which noted gaps between formal reintegration and felt inclusion. However, these studies often relied on descriptive or normative methods that provided limited access to subjective meaning. Therefore, a deeper inquiry is needed into how individuals interpret their civil identity and social place after incarceration.

This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how former convicts make sense of their return to society and the restoration of their legal status. This method was chosen to access the emotional, psychological, and existential layers of reintegration that remain hidden in traditional data. By focusing on lived experiences, the study offers insights into how individuals reconstruct identity, perceive societal acceptance, and reclaim dignity. The method directly responds to the knowledge gap by prioritizing participants' voices and interpretations. It reveals what reintegration truly means—not just as a policy goal but as a personal journey.

This article is structured into several sections. The introduction provides background and rationale for the study. The methodology section explains the interpretative phenomenological framework and outlines how data were collected and analyzed. The results section presents the major themes derived from participant narratives. Finally, the discussion and conclusion explore the implications of the findings for theory, policy, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and personal perceptions of former convicts regarding their social reintegration and the restoration of their civil legal status. The phenomenological design was selected due to its emphasis on capturing the depth and richness of subjective experiences, particularly in contexts where meaning is shaped through personal and social interpretation. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), grounded in Heideggerian hermeneutics, was utilized to understand how individuals make sense of their reintegration journey after incarceration. This approach enabled the study to delve into how participants perceived their identity, rights, and belonging in society post-release, aligning directly with the central research question that seeks to uncover the essence of their reintegration experiences.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of individuals who had been previously incarcerated and had completed their sentence within the past five years. Selection was conducted through purposive sampling to ensure that all individuals had direct, relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 21 and above), legally released from correctional institutions, and actively attempting or having undergone social reintegration. Individuals with unresolved legal status, ongoing litigation, or unwillingness to reflect on their experiences were excluded. A total of 10 participants (7 males and 3 females), aged between 26 and 54 years (mean age 39.2), were included. Most had served prison terms ranging from one to six years and originated from various urban and semi-urban areas.

The decision to include 10 participants was based on the principles of data saturation in qualitative research, where data collection ceases once no new themes or insights emerge. After the eighth interview, repeated patterns and consistent thematic content became evident, and the final two interviews confirmed saturation, ensuring analytical depth without redundancy.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using an open-ended guide tailored to the themes of social reintegration, identity, and legal restoration. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in neutral, agreed-upon locations that offered privacy and comfort, such as NGO meeting rooms or quiet public spaces. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. The interview guide was informed by prior studies on reintegration and adapted to the socio-legal context of the participants.

All interviews were conducted in the local language (Bahasa Indonesia), then transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. A forward-backward translation process was used to preserve meaning, involving bilingual researchers who independently translated the transcripts and cross-verified them for accuracy. Any discrepancies were resolved through consensus to ensure linguistic fidelity and conceptual equivalence.

Efforts were made to foster trust and encourage open dialogue, including providing a clear explanation of the study's purpose and ensuring confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on exploring how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and identify significant expressions reflecting core experiences. Meaning units were extracted, coded, and clustered into emergent themes through a systematic and iterative process. NVivo software was used to organize and manage the coding process efficiently. Themes were refined through constant comparison, and reflective memos were employed to support interpretive depth. Each theme was validated against the full data set to ensure coherence and credibility. The analysis culminated in a synthesis of essential themes that revealed the nuanced perceptions and social struggles of participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants were provided with a written information sheet outlining the nature and purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained in writing before participation, ensuring voluntary involvement and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were assigned to preserve participant anonymity, and all data were stored securely with restricted access. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and local regulatory standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the thematic findings derived from in-depth interviews with former convicts who have undergone a reintegration process into society while attempting to reclaim their civil legal status. Each theme reflects the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that participants assigned to their journeys post-incarceration. These themes emerged through interpretative analysis and are substantiated by direct quotations from participants to preserve authenticity and depth.

The Weight of Social Stigma as a Civil Identity Barrier

Participants consistently articulated the overwhelming presence of societal stigma, which continued to shadow them long after their legal sentences were completed. This stigma often manifested as subtle exclusion, distrust, and diminished civil participation.

“Even though I have served my sentence, people still look at me like I’m dangerous... as if I no longer deserve the same rights as them.” (Participant 3)

Several ex-convicts expressed how this social rejection created an invisible boundary preventing them from accessing opportunities—such as employment, housing, or even familial recognition—that are fundamental to restoring one’s civil status.

“I wanted to apply for a government ID again, but the officer looked at my prison record and just said, ‘Why now?’ That moment made me feel like I didn’t belong in this system anymore.” (Participant 7)

Legal Ambiguity and Administrative Exclusion

A significant portion of participants revealed difficulties in understanding and navigating the legal mechanisms available for restoring their civil rights. There was confusion over legal entitlements and administrative procedures, which often led to feelings of helplessness and abandonment.

“No one told me what my rights were after I got out. I thought being free meant I was really free. But I found out later that I couldn’t vote or even open a bank account properly.” (Participant 5)

This lack of legal clarity contributed to a sense of limbo—where participants were no longer incarcerated but not fully reintegrated either. They found themselves legally present but functionally excluded.

How to ensure full reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals?



Legal Ambiguity

Creates confusion and
exclusion



Administrative Exclusion

Leads to feelings of
helplessness

The Struggle for Personal Redemption and Dignity

Many participants described reintegration as a deeply personal battle for dignity and recognition rather than just a legal or administrative process. While some managed to rebuild fragmented relationships and redefine self-worth, others continued to experience internalized shame and rejection.

“My parents still hesitate to introduce me to their friends. I understand—but it hurts. I’m trying to prove that I’m not who I was, that I’m trying to be someone better.” (Participant 2)

This internal-external tension highlighted how legal status alone does not equate to restored humanity in the eyes of society—or the self. Participants yearned for validation and acknowledgment that their transformation was real and worthy of trust.

Institutional Support as a Critical Catalyst for Reintegration

Some participants shared stories of institutions—such as NGOs, faith-based organizations, or progressive local governments—that facilitated smoother reintegration by providing psychological counseling, legal guidance, or vocational training. This support was perceived not only as practical help but as a form of social acceptance.

“I joined a program that taught me tailoring. More than the skill, it gave me back my self-esteem. They treated me like a person again.” (Participant 6)

These interventions were often described as pivotal turning points that shifted participants’ perceptions from alienation to hopeful engagement with the system and society.

The experiences of former convicts in this study illuminate the complex interplay between legal structures, social stigma, and personal redemption in the context of post-incarceration reintegration. While formal freedom is granted through the justice system, the restoration of civil legal identity remains elusive without societal recognition, institutional inclusion, and clear legal pathways. These narratives underscore that reintegration is not merely a return—it is a redefinition.

The findings of this study reveal that former convicts experience reintegration not merely as a legal transition, but as a deeply personal and social journey shaped by stigma, institutional ambiguity, and the pursuit of dignity. These insights directly address the central question posed in the introduction: how do individuals who have completed incarceration perceive and interpret the restoration of their civil legal status in relation to their social reintegration?

This study contributes to answering that question by illuminating the inner worlds of ex-convicts who navigate a landscape where freedom is legally granted but socially constrained. Unlike prior approaches that emphasize procedural reintegration, the present findings demonstrate how former convicts construct meaning through experiences of marginalization, silence, and selective acceptance. The subjective narratives shared by participants show that reintegration involves rebuilding trust with society and oneself, reinterpreting one's identity in light of legal and moral judgment, and confronting ongoing exclusion despite formal freedom. This study's use of phenomenology enables a nuanced view of reintegration as a lived and evolving reality, rather than a policy outcome.

The results of this research align with and expand upon existing literature that critiques the limits of administrative reintegration. For instance, Fatmawati (2021) underscored how legal freedom often fails to translate into social legitimacy, a point echoed in participants' accounts of institutional apathy and societal stigma. Likewise, Lubis (2022) identified gaps in civil legal aid, which parallels the confusion described by participants regarding their post-incarceration rights. However, this study moves beyond documenting systemic shortcomings by focusing on the interpretative dimensions of those affected. The lived experiences captured here affirm the need to reconceptualize reintegration as a socially contingent and meaning-laden process, supporting a phenomenological view that meaning is always embedded in context and relationality.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both legal policy and social reintegration programs. From a socio-cultural perspective, the persistent stigma experienced by former convicts underscores the urgent need to shift public narratives from punishment to restoration. Institutions tasked with reintegration—such as correctional agencies, civil registries, and community organizations—must not only provide services but also foster environments that affirm human dignity and inclusion. These findings suggest that reintegration should be treated as an ongoing relational process rather than a static administrative status. Furthermore, in professional practice, particularly in law and social work, there is a critical need for training that incorporates sensitivity to the psychological and existential dimensions of post-incarceration life.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not without limitations. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of former convicts. Additionally, the study was conducted within a specific cultural and legal context, which may not fully reflect experiences in different regions or systems. The reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential biases, such as selective memory or emotional framing. These limitations do not diminish the value of the insights but rather emphasize the situated nature of qualitative knowledge. Acknowledging these boundaries allows for more focused and culturally responsive future inquiries.

Future Research Directions

Building on the present study, future research may explore comparative experiences of reintegration across different legal frameworks, including restorative justice systems. Longitudinal studies could also track how perceptions of civil identity evolve over time, offering deeper insights into the durability of reintegration efforts. There is also scope for investigating the roles of specific support mechanisms—such as community mentorship or legal aid—in shaping the reintegration journey. Moreover, applying phenomenology to related populations, such as juvenile ex-offenders or women formerly incarcerated, could enrich our understanding of reintegration as a gendered and age-sensitive phenomenon. Such inquiries would continue to expand the field's theoretical and practical engagement with justice as a lived experience.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how former convicts perceive their social reintegration and the restoration of their civil legal status through an interpretative phenomenological approach. The findings revealed that reintegration is not solely a legal or procedural matter but a complex personal journey marked by social stigma, institutional ambiguity, and a struggle for personal dignity. Participants described feeling legally free yet socially excluded, highlighting the disconnection between formal rights and lived realities. These insights address previous gaps by offering a deeper understanding of reintegration as a subjective, emotionally charged process that existing quantitative or normative methods often overlook. The study contributes to the literature by foregrounding the role of lived experience in the reintegration process, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia, where such perspectives are underrepresented.

For policymakers, the findings suggest the need to integrate psychosocial support and identity restoration programs into formal reintegration strategies. Social workers and reintegration program designers should prioritize stigma-reduction interventions, such as community dialogue forums and public education campaigns, while ensuring that legal reintegration is accompanied by tangible social inclusion measures like employment facilitation and documentation assistance. Future research should explore comparative experiences across different legal cultures or examine reintegration trajectories over longer periods using longitudinal designs. Investigating the perspectives of families, employers, and community leaders may also provide a more holistic understanding of reintegration dynamics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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