



Exploring the Lived Experience of Social Reintegration Among Paroled Ex-Convicts in the Indonesian Context

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 28-05-2025

Revised 07-07-2025

Accepted 17-07-2025

Keyword:

Lived Experience; Social Reintegration; Ex-Convicts; Parole; Criminal Justice Reform; Indonesia.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates social reintegration after incarceration, a critical area in criminal justice research—particularly in cultural contexts like Southeast Asia where stigma and systemic barriers complicate the post-prison experience. While prior research has examined reintegration from institutional and policy perspectives, fewer studies have explored the lived experiences of ex-convicts. The main objective of this study is to understand how individuals on parole interpret and navigate their reintegration journey within a society that often marginalizes them. Specifically, the study asks: How do ex-convicts make sense of their post-incarceration lives in Indonesia? Methodologically, this study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight parolees. Data were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to uncover the subjective meanings participants assign to their reintegration process. The findings indicate that reintegration is experienced as a process of reconstructing identity, enduring stigma, and negotiating conditional acceptance. Key themes include persistent social exclusion, emotional dislocation, and institutional neglect, all of which deeply influence how participants experience reintegration. These results suggest that reintegration is not merely a legal or procedural transition but an existential and relational struggle. The study highlights the necessity of empathy-based support systems and calls for culturally responsive reintegration policies. By offering participant-centered insights grounded in the Indonesian context, this research contributes to the expanding discourse on post-incarceration experiences and underscores the value of phenomenological methods in criminal justice studies.



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INTRODUCTION

The process of reintegrating former prisoners into society has emerged as a critical concern in contemporary criminal justice systems worldwide. As societies grapple with issues of recidivism, public safety, and human rights, the focus has increasingly shifted toward not only punishment but also rehabilitation and societal restoration. Parole, as a conditional release mechanism, plays a pivotal role in facilitating this transition. However, successful reintegration involves more than legal status; it requires navigating the complex interplay of personal transformation, societal perception, and structural support systems.

In many cultural contexts, including Indonesia, individuals released on parole continue to face enduring societal stigma and limited access to employment, education, and social networks. These barriers are not only structural but also profoundly affect self-perception, social participation, and identity reconstruction. The social construction of criminality, as discussed by Jones et al. (2020), continues to influence how former prisoners are labeled, treated, and excluded, regardless of their rehabilitative efforts. As a result, reintegration becomes a contested and emotionally fraught process, shaped by dynamic and often painful lived experiences.

To grasp this complexity, research must prioritize the subjective perspectives of individuals directly impacted. Phenomenology, both as a philosophical foundation and methodological approach, provides a robust framework for uncovering the meaning individuals assign to their post-incarceration journeys (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Rather than reiterating the insufficiencies of quantitative approaches, this study emphasizes the unique strengths of phenomenological inquiry—namely, its ability to reveal the textures of stigma, identity reconstruction, and conditional belonging experienced by ex-convicts. This qualitative orientation thus offers essential insights beyond institutional metrics or policy analyses, capturing the lived and layered realities of reintegration in culturally specific contexts.

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward understanding the lived experiences of individuals navigating post-incarceration life. This shift reflects a growing recognition that reintegration is not solely a legal or administrative process, but a deeply personal journey marked by emotional, social, and existential dimensions. Studies have attempted to document how former prisoners reintegrate into society; however, much of the existing literature remains anchored in normative frameworks or outcome-based evaluations, often emphasizing rates of recidivism or institutional program effectiveness. While informative, these approaches offer limited insight into the subjective realities and internal struggles of individuals undergoing reintegration.

One of the central methodological challenges in this area lies in capturing the meaning structures and interpretive processes that shape individuals' post-carceral identities and social interactions. Quantitative surveys or structured interviews may overlook subtle nuances of lived experience particularly the sense of marginalization, identity disorientation, or the emotional toll of stigma. Additionally, studies relying on predetermined variables often fail to account for the fluidity and complexity of personal narratives that do not conform to linear models of reintegration.

These methodological limitations have hindered a more holistic understanding of the reintegration phenomenon. The prevailing focus on external indicators has led to a gap in research that meaningfully engages with the voices of former inmates voices that are crucial in contextualizing their reintegration not only as a procedural shift but as a profound transformation in self-perception, relationships, and place in society. A phenomenological approach, particularly interpretative in nature, is therefore essential to reveal the essence of these experiences and to articulate the human meanings behind institutional transitions.

Despite growing awareness of the challenges faced by former prisoners, responses to post-incarceration reintegration have largely centered on practical solutions such as employment programs, legal aid, and psychological counseling. While these interventions are important, they are often implemented within standardized frameworks that treat reintegration as a linear and measurable outcome. Consequently, these approaches tend to prioritize policy compliance and service delivery over the subjective experiences of those undergoing reintegration. The result is a body of knowledge that remains surface-level, lacking the depth and richness necessary to grasp the personal meanings and emotional complexities that define this life transition.

Traditional research in this area has predominantly relied on quantitative or policy-oriented methods, which, while valuable for tracking broad trends, are limited in their ability to capture the lived realities of individuals reentering society. Such methodologies often overlook the intricate process of identity reconstruction, the impact of social stigma, and the negotiation of belonging that former inmates must navigate. Without engaging directly with the voices of ex-convicts, existing studies risk producing overly simplified understandings of reintegration that fail to reflect its multifaceted nature.

A more insightful and holistic understanding can be achieved through the application of phenomenological methods specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which allow for the exploration of how individuals make sense of their reintegration experiences. This approach emphasizes depth over breadth, enabling the discovery of layered meanings and existential concerns embedded in personal narratives. By addressing this methodological and conceptual gap, phenomenology offers the potential to enrich current understandings of reintegration and inform more empathetic and human-centered reform in criminal justice systems.

Previous studies on prisoner reintegration have primarily focused on institutional programs, legal frameworks, and recidivism rates. While some research has acknowledged the emotional and social struggles of former inmates, few have explored these experiences in depth through the participants' own perspectives. Studies by Jones et al. (2020) and Ramirez (2024) highlighted the role of stigma and identity reconstruction but did not fully capture the complexity of reintegration in culturally diverse settings like Indonesia. Additionally, much of the existing literature has utilized descriptive or policy-oriented methods that fall short in revealing the essence of post-incarceration experiences. This gap underscores the need for research that centers the voices of former prisoners and their subjective interpretations of social reintegration.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to understand how ex-convicts in Indonesia experience life after parole. This method allows for deep engagement with the meanings participants assign to their reintegration journey. It responds directly to the limitations of prior research by exploring emotional, social, and existential dimensions that traditional approaches often overlook. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen because it emphasizes idiographic exploration and contextual meaning. By using this method, the study uncovers themes that reflect personal narratives, rather than institutional expectations.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the social and theoretical background of reintegration. The methodology section presents the philosophical foundation of IPA, the sampling strategy, and data collection process. The results section highlights key themes based on participant narratives, supported by direct quotations. This is followed by a discussion that connects the findings to existing literature and explores their implications. The paper concludes with reflections on the meaning of reintegration and recommendations for future practice and research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of ex-convicts during their social reintegration after parole. Phenomenology, particularly the Heideggerian interpretative tradition, focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within a specific context. This approach was deemed suitable for examining the complex and deeply personal perceptions of individuals navigating post-incarceration life, where meaning-making is central. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted due to its emphasis on idiographic, in-depth exploration and the co-construction of meaning between participant narratives and interpretive reflection. This design enabled a comprehensive exploration of identity reconstruction, stigma, and institutional encounters as experienced and interpreted by the participants themselves.

Participants

Participants consisted of former inmates who had been granted parole within the last three years and had attempted social reintegration in urban and semi-urban communities in Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify individuals with firsthand, rich experiences relevant to the research focus. Inclusion criteria comprised adults aged 21 and above who had served a minimum sentence of one year and were currently living outside correctional facilities. Individuals who were under ongoing legal supervision or had reoffended post-parole were excluded to maintain focus on reintegration after formal release.

A total of eight participants (6 males and 2 females) were involved in the study, with an age range of 27 to 52 years (mean age: 39.5). Participants represented various backgrounds, including prior convictions related to theft, narcotics, and violent offenses. All participants had been released within the last 6 to 36 months and resided in communities where reintegration support services were either limited or inconsistently available.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in private settings that ensured participant comfort and confidentiality. Each interview was guided by a flexible question protocol designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives, covering topics such as community reintegration, personal identity, social perception, and institutional support. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in neutral community centers or private residences, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. All data were collected over a six-week period. The interview setting and scheduling were arranged to accommodate participants' preferences, ensuring an environment conducive to open and honest sharing. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations that supplemented the verbal data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover emergent themes grounded in participants' lived experiences. The process involved multiple readings of each transcript to achieve immersion and familiarity. Initial noting was performed to highlight descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Meaning units were then coded and organized into emergent themes, which were clustered into superordinate categories through a process of abstraction and integration.

The analytic process was iterative and interpretative, involving constant comparison within and across transcripts. NVivo software was used to assist in data management and organization, but analytic decisions were driven by conceptual engagement with the data rather than software coding functions. The final themes reflected both convergence and divergence in participants' experiences and were refined through peer debriefing and member reflection strategies to enhance analytical rigor.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including consent for audio recording and anonymous quotation of responses. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of data. All procedures adhered to international ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants, including voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and the assurance of non-coercion and respect for participant dignity.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of ex-convicts in their social reintegration after parole. Through in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), several central themes emerged that reflect the complex, nuanced, and deeply personal journeys of participants. The themes are presented below with rich narrative descriptions supported by direct quotations to illuminate the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences.

Enduring Stigma and Social Rejection

A dominant theme across participants' narratives was the persistent stigma encountered post-release. Participants reported feelings of social alienation, being labeled, and often being seen not as individuals seeking redemption, but as perpetual offenders. This perception hindered their reintegration into their communities.

“When I walk through the neighborhood, I see the way they look at me like I am a danger, like I haven't changed. It's like serving a life sentence outside prison.” (P4)

The social labeling extended beyond neighbors to include former friends, local leaders, and even extended family members. Such rejection created a barrier not only to emotional recovery but also to accessing opportunities for employment and support.

“I tried to apply for a job at a small warehouse. Once they saw my record, they didn’t even let me finish the interview.” (P2)

This experience of stigma reinforced a sense of marginalization and a diminished sense of self-worth, suggesting that institutional release does not equate to societal acceptance.

Loss and Reconstruction of Identity

The experience of incarceration and release significantly altered participants’ sense of identity. Many described a sense of dislocation and ambiguity in defining who they were after prison. For some, the identity of a "former prisoner" overshadowed all other roles they once held father, husband, employee.

“I’m no longer the person I used to be. I can’t even recognize myself when I look in the mirror... prison changes you, and society keeps reminding you of who you were, not who you are trying to be.” (P1)

This identity crisis was frequently accompanied by emotional distress, and in some cases, a loss of purpose. However, a few participants also described intentional efforts to reconstruct a new self, rooted in self-reflection, faith, or community service.

“Now I go to the mosque more often. It helps me feel human again like I still have something good in me.” (P5)

Fragmented Family Relations and Conditional Acceptance

Family support played a complex role in participants’ reintegration. While some found encouragement from close family members, others faced strained relationships or conditional acceptance that depended on financial stability or behavioral proof.

“My mother took me in, but she said one mistake and I’m out. I feel like I’m on parole at home too.” (P6)

In contrast, a few participants spoke of family as their only source of strength, providing emotional and material support without judgment.

“If it weren’t for my sister, I would be homeless. She didn’t ask questions, just gave me a key and said, ‘start again.’” (P3)

These varied responses illustrate that familial reintegration is not uniform and often reflects broader social and cultural expectations about shame, reputation, and forgiveness.

Institutional Failure and Distrust in the System

Participants voiced disappointment with post-release institutional support systems, citing a lack of guidance, follow-up, and genuine rehabilitation planning.

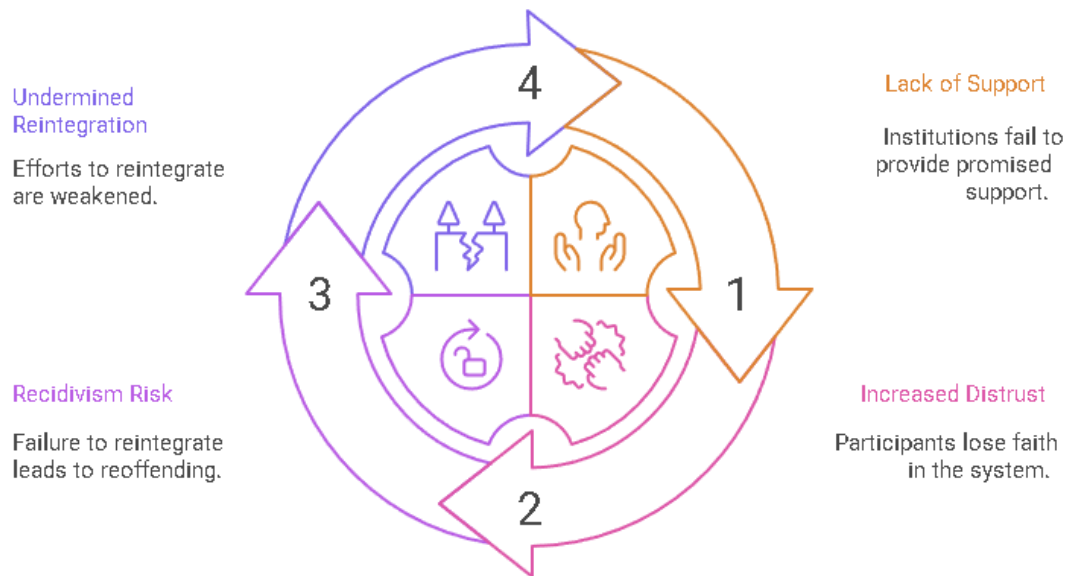
“They told me there would be a program to help me get skills or work. I signed papers, but no one ever followed up.” (P7)

This gap between policy and practice generated a sense of abandonment and deepened participants’ distrust in the justice and correctional systems.

“It’s like they just wanted to tick a box and say I’m reformed. But outside, you’re on your own.” (P2)

Such sentiments indicate that institutional failures may inadvertently contribute to recidivism, undermining efforts to promote successful reintegration.

Cycle of Institutional Failure and Distrust



The findings of this study illuminate the profound challenges faced by ex-convicts after parole, including the burden of social stigma, the struggle for identity reconstruction, inconsistent family support, and institutional neglect. These experiences are embedded in broader social structures that often fail to facilitate genuine reintegration. The voices of participants emphasize the need for a more humane, empathetic, and context-sensitive approach to post-carceral rehabilitation in Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the reintegration of ex-convicts is experienced as a deeply emotional and complex journey shaped by social stigma, identity disorientation, and fragmented support systems. These themes respond directly to the central research question, offering insight into how individuals make sense of their post-incarceration lives within a society that remains hesitant to fully accept them.

This study contributes to answering the guiding research question by uncovering how former prisoners interpret and navigate their reintegration experiences. Rather than viewing reintegration as a linear or policy-driven process, participants described it as a fragile and ongoing negotiation between internal transformation and external resistance. The study adds a nuanced layer to the existing body of knowledge by showing that reintegration is not only institutional but also existential, involving deep struggles with belonging, identity, and acceptance. The participants' voices reveal that successful reintegration is contingent upon more than programmatic support it demands societal empathy and the rebuilding of self-worth.

The findings align with and extend prior research on post-carceral experiences. For example, Jones et al. (2020) identified social stigma as a barrier to reintegration, and Ahmad & Yusuf (2021) discussed the psychological toll of incarceration on identity. This study affirms such findings while extending them by incorporating the Indonesian sociocultural context, where family honor, communal perceptions, and religious grounding significantly influence reintegration outcomes. Moreover, the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for the extraction of rich, idiographic insights often missed in prior descriptive or quantitative studies. The results also echo Heideggerian concepts of "being-in-the-world," where identity is not constructed in isolation but within social and relational matrices. In doing so, the study affirms the importance of understanding reintegration not merely as a return to society, but as a redefinition of existence.

The implications of these findings are both academically significant and socially relevant. From a scholarly perspective, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of reintegration not as a procedural outcome but as a lived, evolving negotiation of identity and belonging. Culturally, the

findings illuminate how social norms, religious values, and communal perceptions in Indonesia shape the reintegration experience, often reinforcing marginalization despite formal release. Professionally, this calls for a shift in post-incarceration services from compliance-driven models to those rooted in empathy, narrative inclusion, and psychosocial support. For practitioners and policymakers, the study highlights the importance of listening to ex-convicts' voices and addressing not only material needs but also emotional and relational aspects of reintegration. These insights are especially relevant for societies where reintegration intersects with moral judgment and collective memory.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study's sample was small and purposively selected, which aligns with phenomenological methodology but limits broader generalization. Participants were all based in urban and semi-urban areas of Indonesia, where access to basic services, religious communities, or social support might differ from rural settings. Additionally, because the study prioritized depth over breadth, it did not account for gender-specific or crime-specific differences in reintegration experiences. The use of a single data collection method interviews might also have restricted access to non-verbal or behavioral aspects of experience. These limitations are not viewed as weaknesses, but rather as boundaries that define the depth of understanding achieved within the study's context.

Future research could build on these findings by examining reintegration experiences across more diverse geographic, gender, or cultural populations to uncover variations and convergences in meaning-making. Longitudinal studies could trace the evolving identities of ex-convicts over time, offering insight into whether and how social belonging is eventually restored. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate legal, psychological, and cultural frameworks could enrich the understanding of reintegration as both an individual journey and a collective responsibility. Such inquiries may inform more nuanced, human-centered policies and further elevate the voices of those who have historically been silenced.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of ex-convicts in navigating social reintegration after parole within the Indonesian context. The findings revealed that reintegration is a complex process shaped by persistent stigma, identity reconstruction, conditional family support, and institutional shortcomings. By applying interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study captured the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their post-incarceration journey. These insights fill critical gaps in previous research that often overlooked the emotional and existential dimensions of reintegration.

The study highlights the need for more empathetic and culturally informed approaches to post-prison support. Specifically, criminal justice practitioners should integrate psychosocial counseling and reintegration planning into parole procedures to address the emotional and identity-related challenges faced by ex-convicts. Community stakeholders—including local leaders, NGOs, and religious organizations—are encouraged to facilitate reintegration through stigma reduction campaigns, vocational training, and peer support groups tailored to the local cultural context. Future research could extend this work by including diverse participant profiles and longitudinal perspectives to better understand how reintegration evolves over time, and how sustained support mechanisms influence outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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