



Employability Challenges Among Recidivists: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Crime is a social phenomenon in almost every country. The increasing of crime incidents now and then could instigate the recurrence of crimes. The integration of prison inmates into society after release is a challenging phase to start with a new life outside the prison. Therefore, this study aims to explore recidivism perspectives on the Human Rehabilitation Program (PPI) toward career goals and recidivism factors. The design of this study is a narrative design using a qualitative approach where a semi-structured interview protocol was used to facilitate the data collection processes. A total of five recidivists from a prison in the southern zone were selected as study participants. The interview data obtained from a one-to-one interview session were analysed using thematic analysis. The results of this study found that four factors might influence the repetitive entrance of recidivists to prison namely, difficulty in finding a job, unwillingness to change, family and community stigma, and the relaxation of conditions for participating in the PPI programs. In conclusion, apart from these difficulties, securing employment is another reason which has caused recidivism to occur. Therefore, this study suggests that an intervention should be made to the PPI programs provided by the prison to ensure its relevance in line with the needs of recidivists in terms of physical, personality, skills, and societal integrations.

Keywords: Recidivism, employability, human rehabilitation program, prison

1. Introduction

Crime is a core concept and concern in most societies, although what constitutes crime can vary across time and place (Gartner, 2015). In the criminal justice system, releasing prisoners into the community is often debated, especially when ex-prisoners repeat criminal behaviour after release. Recidivism raises the question of why some ex-prisoners repeat their crimes while others do not (Jasni et. al 2022). According to Che Mohd Nasir et.al. (2020), failure to secure employment is the major challenge faced by ex-prisoners increases the risk of recidivism or habitual relapse into crime.

Recidivism is an act of a convicted criminal who has previously served a prison sentence to relapse into criminal behaviours (Alob et. al 2021). Globally, according to data from the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were 67.8% of prisoners re-offend within three years while 76.7% were rearrested within five years (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). Meanwhile in Malaysia, according to the data released by the Malaysia Department of Prisons, from 2017 to 2019, there was an increasing trend of recidivists. In 2017 there were 11,520 ex-prison inmates (9.25%) involved

in recidivism. The number grew to, a total of 13,896 recidivists or 10.3% in 2018, and in 2019 recidivist cases involved 15,410 or 10.9% of ex-prison inmates (Department of Prisons Malaysia, 2020).

Globally, state and federal prisons have provided correctional programs to inmates while in prison, including various services, substance abuse treatment, and education to improve their behaviour, before and after leaving prison (Duwe, 2017). This would not only improve public safety by reducing recidivism but also reduce misconduct. In Malaysia, the program provided by the prison department was the Human Development Programme (PPI) to aid in shaping the morals of prison inmates through a phased system meant to produce productive individuals once they return to society (Hashim et. al, 2018). However, the problem of recidivists re-entering prison ensuing PPI increased and implicated the implementation of rehabilitation programs in prison (Samad, 2013). The release of ex-prisoners did not stop there. It also brought about a record of life imprisonment which resulted in difficulties for them succeeding in the reintegration process (Jasni et. al, 2018). This showed that incarceration has a negative effect on ex-prisoners especially in employability and life after being released from prison.

1.1 Literature

Recidivism among adult ex-prisoners in New South Wales (NSW) has been increasing in recent times (Ooi, 2021). A convict exempted from parole and bail would be highly exposed to the risk of recidivism rates in the current world (Singh et. al 2023). In addition, recidivism or repetition of criminal cases is a common phenomenon among ex-convicts, especially drug addicts. The issue of drugs and substance abuse in Malaysia is quite complicated. The number of new addicts and cases of relapse addiction was constantly increasing (Ismail et. al 2017). It was undeniable that the process of rehabilitating an addict was demanding and timeless. This is because they would because at any time there would be cases of relapse among them in the absence of moral support and employment. According to Alob et. al (2021), prison inmates who failed to complete their treatment were at higher risk of reoffending than those who completed their treatment. This resulted in the rate of recidivism persisting over time.

Next, former prison inmates often face daunting obstacles, such as difficulties in finding accommodation, reconnecting with family, and avoiding substance abuse during the integration process (Valentine et. al 2015). According to him, many experts believed that the cause of the high recidivism rate was the result of the weak labour market experienced by ex-convicts. According to Malek (2022), former prison inmates faced several major obstacles in the process of seeking employment. There were cases where ex-addicts were laid off from work simply because the employer knew that he was a former drug addict (Ismail et. al 2017). Therefore, employment is considered significant and the key to helping ex-prisoners make a successful transition back into society without recidivism.

According to Yu (2018), ex-prisoners faced great difficulties in getting job opportunities after being released due to various reasons. Among them was the lack of job skills required for certain positions. This prevented them from securing more stable jobs with higher pay, even though apart from treatment, skills and vocational training with various facilities provided by the prison officials in ensuring their survival, independence and make good use of the skills gained (Hidayat et. al 2018) many employers were reluctant to hire them because of the stigma attached to their previous criminal records or it could also be due to the low impact of programs carried out in prisons because the issue of recidivism is yet to be eradicated.

2. Methodology

This study is an exploratory study that applies narrative design. Narrative research aims to unravel the story or experience of an individual's life (Ntida, 2019). The design of the narrative study changed based on the context presented by the study participants. Interviews using a narrative research design allow researchers to explore the meaning of telling individual experiences (Mc Kibben et. al 2023).

2.1 Participants

The study informant consisted of five recidivists from a prison in the southern zone who were purposefully selected based on the study criteria i.e., must be a recidivist who has committed a crime more than once, multiple entry to prison and has undergone one of the PPI programs provided by the prison. The sample size of five informants is considered sufficient for the narrative study design. According to Ibrahim et. al (2023), qualitative research does not emphasize the sample size but the richness and depth of data on the topic being studied. Opinions from various sources suggest that study participants from 5 to 50 are adequate (Dworkin, 2012).

2.2 Study Procedures

The researcher began to develop an interview protocol before conducting the study. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol in this study and the protocol has been reviewed by three experts to confirm the validity and ensure the credibility of the questions. The researcher obtained field research permission from the Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education to conduct the study. Next, the researcher contacted the Malaysian Prison Department Headquarters in Semenyih. After obtaining permission from the Malaysian Prison Department, the researcher continued to contact the

Kluang prison to request permission to conduct interviews with the five recidivists. After securing the date and permission from the Kluang prison, the researcher continued to conduct interview sessions with the recidivists. The interview session could not be recorded due to very strict prison surveillance. The researcher only recorded all the narrations told by recidivists.

2.3 Data Analysis

At the end of the interview, the researcher constructed a transcript from the notes taken during the interview. Next, the researcher analysed the data using manual thematic analysis started with read and coded text, create potential themes, review, and evaluate themes (Braun, Virginia & Clark, 2006). After determining a theme, the researcher began to make a report on the discussion chapter, recommendations, and conclusions for this study.

3. Result

The findings of the study showed that four themes explain the causes of recidivism behaviours and career goals among recidivists.

3.1 Difficulties in Securing Jobs, Post-Detention

The interviews conducted found that the first theme that causes repeated behaviour among recidivists was due to unemployability. Study participants stated that it was difficult for them to get a job after being released as stated by four participants:

“When the employer discovered our status, we got fired and it was stressful. When I am stressed, I choose to take that thing again to relieve stress. Take and sell xxx has been my main source of income. This halal and haram thing is not important anymore. Yes, you can't steal because you can't work. It's hard when the employer searches, gets to know that we are ex-convicts, and gets fired instantly.” (PK3)

“A job where I could do security but got fired after a month of work because I am an ex-convict. For me, it's hard to get a job. People are still skeptical about us as ex-prisoners. So, if we can't get a job, we have no source of income. So, we will be stressed and if it gets worse, we will get stuck again.” (PK4)

“I plan to go outside, find a job, and settle down in any other hometown to avoid meeting my old friends. Doing Foodpanda may be an option if I can't find any other job so that I can minimize contact with people and earn my income.” (PK2)

“I'm always afraid of perception from other people. Maybe hard for them to accept me. So, I just worked with my father doing the construction work and because of that I met again with my past friend and that was where I started again the habit.” (PK5)

3.2 Self-Willingness to Change

Despite various efforts given to prison inmates, especially in the Human Development Program (PPI), recidivists still did not have the strength to change. This is because, the second theme that causes recidivism among recidivists is due to their weak willingness to change as explained by PK1, PK2, PK3, and PK4:

“But it's something that has to change starts from oneself.” (PK1)

“I hope to be strong and change because everything is from myself. My parents and siblings were very supportive- felt the need to change. I will go to a new place with the hope of building a new life.” (PK2)

“I decided to change. Every time I go out or be free, I want to change.” (PK3)

“That's why you need to change. No one knows how addictive it is. Only addicts know. Until when do you want to enter here, you are already 40 years old.” (PK4)

3.3 Family and Community Stigma

The third theme, which is family and community stigma against recidivists also caused them to repeat criminal behaviour as stated by PK1, PK2, and PK5.

“My mother used to tell me; my relatives used to say bad things about me.” (PK1)

“I was not liked and did not get support from my family like my uncle. Parents and siblings’ support. It is quite difficult to gain trust from the community, therefore working with my brother.” (PK2)

“Society’s acceptance is normal; this prisoner has no future. But my mother and father are ok, my younger siblings can also accept it again.” (PK5)

3.4 Relaxation of Conditions to Participate in the Human Rehabilitation Program (PPI)

The fourth theme found from this study showed that the relaxation of conditions for participating in PPI was also a cause of recidivism among recidivists as stated by PK2 and PK5.

“My view is that it’s a good exercise, but I don’t follow it because I’m comfortable in phase 2 which was more in the form of programs such as talks and motivation and visits. The PPI program has no advantage on my career direction, after this, I aim to join back with my father’s company to do the construction work. I have discussed this with my mother, and she highly supported my decision” (PK2)

“After I finished Phase 1, I continued to Phase 2 until now, it’s been 2 years. I decided not to go to Phase 3 because now I am waiting for parole. I feel comfortable and more in need of spiritual filling now that there are many seminars and group counselling. I don’t think it’s a loss to not be involved in Phase 3 because the skills I have are not very suitable for me. There are too many masters (old people). After all, when you enter phase 4, you won’t even use those skills.” (PK5)

4. Discussion

The results of the study showed that there are four factors of recidivism among recidivists towards employability, which are recidivists having difficulty in securing employment, their willingness to change, negative stigma from family and society as well and the relaxation of conditions for participating in PPI.

The finding of this study on the difficulties of recidivists in securing employment is in line with Malek's (2022) study which showed that former prison inmates faced several major obstacles in the process of finding a job after being released. According to Mat Husin (2020), prison inmates face problems in choosing a job after being released from prison because some jobs require a clean criminal record. According to Tripodi (2010), the difficulties in securing employment were because a long prison sentence had caused prison inmates to lose the opportunity to gain work experience and connections to potential employers or be cut off from job networks. Likewise, the results of the study of Valentine et. al (2015) stated that ex-prisoners occupied a very disadvantaged position in the labour market because of the characteristics they had before imprisonment and partly because of their criminal history which further damaged their job prospects. According to Che Mohd Nasir (2020), prison inmates who were released without savings and limited work skills would have difficulties in getting a job after release. This causes ex-prisoners to tend to repeat the same crimes.

In addition, the second factor is that one's willingness to change is also the cause of recidivism repeating criminal behaviour. According to Indrayani (2022), recidivists repeat criminal behaviour due to a consumptive lifestyle, which means losing awareness of doing right or wrong actions. According to Jasni et. al (2020), prison inmates who lack self-confidence and no social support for social integration are the main factors for prisoners to fail and return to crime.

The third factor is that family and community stigma is also a contributor to the issue of repeated behaviour among recidivists. Family not only plays a role in providing moral support but could also provide shelter, food, and financial assistance once released. Most ex-convicts were not well received by family members, causing them to repeat criminal behaviour (Jasni et. al 2020). The negative perception thrown by society made it difficult for them to start a new life (Zailani 2022). Furthermore, according to Che Mohd Nasir (2020), society tends to give a negative perception even though ex-prisoners have shown good behaviour. According to Andegoke (2014), unemployment and the public's negative attitude towards ex-convicts are among the factors that lead to the repetition of crimes. This is supported by Dako et. al (2016) who stated that society has a negative perception of recidivism, with stigma and discrimination, especially in areas such as employment. This caused former prison inmates to resort not to change and repeat criminal behaviour.

The fourth factor that causes recidivists to repeat criminal behaviour is the relaxation of the conditions for participating in PPI. According to Hashim et. al (2018), PPI was built based on a phase system to shape the character of prison inmates so that they return to society as responsible and productive individuals based on the formation of attitudes, skills, and knowledge in prison. However, it was proven that the problem of recidivist prisoners being readmitted to prison ensuing PPI increased and implicated the implementation of rehabilitation programs in prison (Samad, 2013). However, this program has also been shown to produce mixed results of positive and negative impacts on recidivism (Yu, 2018). The effectiveness of rehabilitation has not been well measured because many prisoners did not get a good life after leaving prison (Zailani, 2022). Therefore, improvements to the program need to be implemented so that it would bring about more effective implications in reducing the rate of criminal recidivism in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, four themes emerged from the process of analysing the findings of the study which are the causes of recidivism among recidivists towards employability. The implications of this study are expected to aid recidivists in identifying self-weaknesses and strengths so that they do not repeat any criminal offenses. In addition, the Malaysian Prisons Department could also improve its programs to assist prison inmates such as expanding opportunities in the employment sector, especially when the inmates are in the pre-release phase. This is to help them to have a guaranteed job after being released from prison. However, reducing the issue of recidivism does not rely on the efforts of the prison department and recidivism alone. Families and communities also have a role to play in removing stigma from ex-prisoners and giving them opportunities to start anew after release. Future studies are proposed to use more respondents.

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