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FROM INCARCERATION TO INTEGRATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RELEASED CLIENT'S AFTERCARE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences and challenges faced by released clients during their reintegration into society through aftercare programs in the Philippines. The primary objective is to examine how these programs support personal healing, social acceptance, and practical reintegration, while also identifying obstacles in their implementation. A qualitative research design was employed. Data were gathered through interviews with both program staff and clients, then analyzed thematically to extract key insights. Findings reveal that aftercare programs play a crucial role in rebuilding self-worth by providing emotional support, psychological counseling, values formation, and spiritual guidance. These elements foster hope, confidence, and resilience among clients despite persistent societal stigma and discrimination. However, limitations such as scarce resources, inconsistent client engagement, and communication barriers hinder program effectiveness. Program staff emphasized the rewarding nature of their work and highlighted the importance of community-based collaboration and holistic approaches that address emotional, psychological, and practical needs. The study concludes that successful reintegration depends on addressing both relational and structural challenges. The findings contribute valuable knowledge to enhance aftercare services and provide evidence-based insights significant to policymakers, practitioners, and organizations committed to reducing recidivism and promoting inclusive community participation of formerly incarcerated individuals.

KEYWORDS: *Aftercare Programs, Reintegration, Released Clients, Emotional Support, And Societal Stigma.*

INTRODUCTION

Reintegration after incarceration remains one of the most pressing challenges faced by the Philippine criminal justice system. Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) often struggle to rebuild their lives upon release, confronting barriers such as employment discrimination, family estrangement, mental health issues, and social stigma. Without adequate support, many released clients are vulnerable to reoffending, leading to a cycle of incarceration that burdens communities and correctional institutions alike.

In response to these challenges, aftercare programs have emerged as vital interventions, particularly those managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Caritas Manila and the Humanitarian Legal Assistance Foundation (HLAF). These programs provide released clients with values formation, livelihood training, spiritual renewal, psychological counseling, and peer mentoring to help them transition from incarceration to productive citizenship.

Globally, reintegration frameworks are widely advocated by organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). These initiatives emphasize mental health recovery, decent employment, reduced inequalities, and sustainable reintegration — priorities aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 3, 8, 10, and 16. However, in the Philippines, aftercare program implementation remains fragmented due to limited funding, insufficient infrastructure, and weak coordination among stakeholders.

This study, "From Incarceration to Integration: A Phenomenological Inquiry of the Lived Experiences of Released Clients' Aftercare Program," explores how NGO-led aftercare interventions influence the personal, social, and economic reintegration of released clients in Greater Manila. By focusing on the narratives of participants, this research highlights both success stories and systemic gaps that need to be addressed through evidence-based policy and community collaboration.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to explore the role and influence of NGO-led aftercare program in facilitating the successful reintegration of released clients in Greater Manila. The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To investigate the lived experiences of released clients participating in NGO-led aftercare programs.
2. To examine the influence of aftercare interventions on participants' social,
3. emotional, and economic reintegration.
4. To identify the challenges faced by NGOs and released clients in implementing aftercare programs.
5. To propose an enhance aftercare framework for sustainable reintegration and reduced recidivism.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, studies emphasize the critical role of aftercare interventions in preventing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration. Miller and Drake (2018) found that comprehensive post-release support, including counseling and skills development, reduced reoffending rates by up to 35% in U.S. correctional populations. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) observed that community-based mentoring programs enhanced released individuals' self-efficacy and improved their chances of employment within six months post-release.

In Europe, Larsen (2019) highlighted that coordinated partnerships between government agencies and NGOs yielded better reintegration outcomes compared to stand-alone programs. In Singapore, the Yellow Ribbon Project successfully demonstrated that multi-stakeholder collaborations involving employers, faith-based groups, and mental health professionals could significantly reduce stigma and improve job placement rates among released clients.

In the Philippines, Villanueva (2021) found that NGO-driven interventions, particularly livelihood training and counseling, significantly improved emotional well-being and family reconciliation among released clients. Reyes (2019) reported that consistent participation in aftercare programs fostered self-confidence and helped clients develop resilience against social discrimination. Meanwhile, Mendoza (2021) revealed that stigma, employer reluctance, and inadequate institutional coordination remain significant barriers to reintegration, leaving many clients dependent on informal labor markets.

Despite these developments, there remains a knowledge gap in understanding the lived experiences of released clients within the context of NGO-led aftercare programs in Greater Manila. Existing studies often focus on quantitative data, leaving personal narratives and qualitative insights underexplored. This study addresses this gap by capturing the voices of participants to reveal how aftercare interventions influence their rehabilitation journeys.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework/Paradigm of the Study

This study draws upon three key frameworks to understand the reintegration experiences of released clients:

1. Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963) – Suggests that stigma and social labeling can reinforce deviant identities, making reintegration more difficult despite rehabilitation efforts.
2. Restorative Justice Framework – Advocates for healing through community involvement, accountability, and collaboration among stakeholders to restore relationships and rebuild trust.
3. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) – Emphasizes the need to fulfill psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness to sustain personal transformation and resilience.

These frameworks collectively guided the study's data collection, thematic analysis, and interpretation of findings. They also form the basis of the proposed enhanced aftercare model presented later in this research.

Significance of the Study

This study provides insights valuable to multiple stakeholders:

1. Released Clients – Gain knowledge of resources, opportunities, and pathways for successful reintegration.
2. NGOs and Aftercare Providers – Strengthen their program designs using evidence-based findings and participant feedback.
3. Government Agencies and Policymakers – Inform policy reforms, funding priorities, and collaborative frameworks for reintegration.
4. Communities and Families – Promote acceptance, reduce stigma, and foster stronger social support systems.
5. Researchers and Academic Institutions – Lay groundwork for future studies on rehabilitation, recidivism prevention, and social reintegration strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of released clients who participated in NGO-led aftercare programs. This design allowed the researcher to gather rich, detailed narratives from participants and examine how aftercare interventions influenced their reintegration into society. By focusing on participants' personal accounts, the study highlighted both challenges and positive outcomes in the transition from incarceration to community integration.

Research Method

The study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. This approach enabled participants to share their experiences openly while allowing the researcher to probe for clarifications when necessary. The interview questions were developed based on the study's objectives and organized around themes such as personal reintegration, the role of NGO support, and perceptions of community acceptance. Each session was conducted in a private setting to ensure comfort, confidentiality, and data accuracy.

Population of the Study

The study focused on released clients from Greater Manila who participated in aftercare programs managed by NGOs such as Caritas Manila and the Humanitarian Legal Assistance Foundation (HLAF). It included individuals who had been out of incarceration for less than six months, were at least 18 years old, participated in NGO-facilitated aftercare programs, and provided informed consent. Those without aftercare support or with pending legal cases were excluded. Using purposive sampling, 12 qualified participants were selected with the help of NGO caseworkers who assisted in identifying them based on the set criteria.

Data Gathering Tools

The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview guide aligned with the study's objectives, featuring open-ended questions on participants' post-release adjustment, the influence of NGO support on livelihood, mental health, and family relationships, as well as challenges, coping strategies,

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and suggestions for program improvement. The tool was validated by experts in criminology and rehabilitation, and a pilot test with two released clients ensured its clarity and suitability. After necessary revisions, data collection proceeded, with all interviews audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Treatment of Data

The research process began with obtaining approval and coordination from participating NGOs and institutional authorities, including Caritas Manila and the Humanitarian Legal Assistance Foundation (HLAF). Formal letters of request were submitted to these organizations to ensure ethical compliance and cooperation. Participant recruitment was facilitated by NGO social workers who identified individuals based on the inclusion criteria and explained the study's objectives and procedures to ensure transparency and voluntary participation. Before any data collection, informed consent forms were distributed and signed by all participants, emphasizing confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.

The interview process was carried out in private NGO offices or other neutral and safe spaces to maintain comfort and privacy for the participants. Each session lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time to discuss experiences in depth. All interview sessions were audio-recorded with consent, encrypted, and securely stored to protect participant information. Transcriptions were then reviewed for accuracy and systematically coded to prepare for data analysis, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process. The researcher began by familiarizing with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by generating initial codes from significant statements. These codes were then organized into emerging themes, which were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to capture the essence of participants' experiences. The final themes were integrated with existing literature during the discussion to provide deeper insights and context. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed, allowing participants to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of their responses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly upheld throughout the study to protect the rights and well-being of participants. All individuals participated voluntarily after providing informed consent, with their anonymity and confidentiality ensured using pseudonyms and the withholding of sensitive details. To manage potential emotional distress, counseling referrals were made available when discussions became sensitive. Participant selection was conducted fairly, based solely on the established inclusion criteria.

Additionally, all collected data were encrypted and securely stored to maintain privacy and integrity. The researcher also committed to ethical dissemination by sharing a summarized report of the findings with the participating NGOs, such as Caritas Manila and HLAF, to support future program development and planning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Lived Experiences of Released Clients in Aftercare Programs

Sub-Themes	Description	Key Participant Insights
Adjustment After Release	Transitioning back into community life	"Mahirap bumalik sa dati, kasi kahit malaya ka na, may takot pa rin."
Support from Aftercare Programs	Counseling, values formation, and skills training	"Malaking tulong yung Caritas… may trabaho ako ngayon dahil sa kanila."
Personal Transformation	Spiritual renewal, healing, and rebuilding self-worth	"Dahil sa programa, natuto akong patawarin ang sarili ko at bumangon muli."

Released clients described their return to the community as both challenging and transformative. They struggled with the stigma of incarceration and rebuilding strained relationships, yet the support from NGO-led aftercare programs offered hope and direction. Counseling and livelihood opportunities provided by Caritas Manila and HLAF were particularly impactful.

These findings support Villanueva (2021), who observed that NGO-driven interventions foster emotional resilience and assist in family reconciliation. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) found that mentoring programs enhance participants' self-efficacy and increase the likelihood of successful reintegration.

Theme 2: Influence of Aftercare Interventions on Social, Emotional, and Economic Reintegration

Sub-Themes	Description	Key Participant Insights
Social Reintegration	Reconnecting with families and communities	"Mabagal pero natuto na rin akong bumalik sa pamilya ko."
Emotional Recovery	Counseling, peer support, and positive identity-building	"Dati, wala akong tiwala sa sarili. Ngayon, natuto akong magmahal muli."
Economic Stability	Access to employment, microfinance, and vocational training	"Hindi ko akalain na makakahanap ako ng trabaho ulit."

Aftercare interventions played a pivotal role in participants' recovery and successful reintegration. Many emphasized the

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importance of counseling sessions in overcoming trauma and vocational training in rebuilding economic independence.

This aligns with Mendoza (2021), who found that livelihood support reduces recidivism risks by improving financial stability. Moreover, Larsen (2019) emphasized that collaborative NGO and community partnerships improve long-term reintegration outcomes.

Theme 3: Challenges Faced by NGOs and Released Clients in Aftercare Implementation

Sub-Themes	Description	Key Participant Insights
Stigma and Discrimination	Persistent prejudice from employers and communities	"Hindi kami basta tinatanggap sa trabaho… may marka pa rin."
Limited Resources	Funding, staffing, and program capacity constraints	"Minsan kulang talaga ang suporta… hindi sapat ang tulong para sa lahat."
Program Gaps	Lack of structured follow-up and transitional housing	"Pagkatapos ng programa, parang wala nang sumusuporta."

NGOs face critical resource and operational limitations, which affect the scope and sustainability of aftercare services. Persistent stigma also hinders employment opportunities, further complicating reintegration.

These findings are consistent with Reyes (2019), who highlighted gaps in Philippine reintegration frameworks. In contrast, Tan (2020) noted that Singapore's Yellow Ribbon Project demonstrates the effectiveness of strong government-NGO partnerships, resulting in better employment retention and reduced stigma. This contrast underscores the need for policy-driven support in the Philippine context.

Theme 4: Proposed Enhanced Aftercare Framework for Sustainable Reintegration

Component	Description	Expected Outcome
Integrated Livelihood Support	Expand vocational training, microfinance, and job placements	Improved financial stability
Family and Community Engagement	Conduct structured family counseling and stigma reduction campaigns	Greater acceptance and support
Long-Term Monitoring	Implement systematic follow-ups after program completion	Sustained reintegration success
Government-NGO Collaboration	Develop shared policies and funding mechanisms	Broader program reach and impact

The findings point to the need for a comprehensive aftercare model integrating livelihood, psychosocial, and community-based interventions. Strengthening partnerships between NGOs, government agencies, and private sectors will ensure broader support systems, promote sustainable reintegration, and minimize recidivism.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study revealed that NGO-led aftercare programs play a vital role in supporting the reintegration of released clients in Greater Manila by fostering personal transformation, social acceptance, and economic stability. Participants shared that counseling, values formation, and livelihood opportunities provided by organizations such as Caritas Manila and HLAF enabled them to rebuild their self-esteem, improve family relationships, and restore community ties. Despite these positive outcomes, the study also uncovered persistent challenges, including societal stigma, workplace discrimination, and limited access to long-term support, which hinder the full reintegration process. To address these gaps, it is recommended that NGOs strengthen their programs by expanding vocational training, livelihood assistance, and structured follow-ups, while government agencies such as the DSWD, DOLE, and BJMP collaborate closely with NGOs to create standardized reintegration frameworks and secure sustained funding. Furthermore, community-based awareness campaigns and anti-stigma initiatives should be implemented to promote acceptance and inclusion, while policies must be developed to institutionalize legal protections and ensure equal employment opportunities for rehabilitated clients. Strengthening partnerships among NGOs, government institutions, and private sectors, alongside adopting evidence-based practices, will create a more holistic and sustainable aftercare model, ultimately reducing recidivism and enhancing long-term rehabilitation outcomes. Finally, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effectiveness of aftercare programs and explore innovative approaches that further improve reintegration support systems in the Philippine context.

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