Societal Perception of Ex-Convicts and their reintegration: Social psychological informed approach

By

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Abstract

The reintegration of ex-convicts remains a significant social challenge in Nigeria largely due to persistent negative societal perceptions. This study examined public attitudes toward ex-convicts and their implications for reintegration in Abeokuta, Ogun State, drawing on Labelling Theory and Social Identity Theory. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted, involving 25 purposively selected participants (n = 25) comprising employers, landlords, house agents, parents and single adults. Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed three dominant domains of perception: employment, intimate relationships and housing. Across these domains, the majority of participants expressed negative attitudes toward ex-convicts, characterized by distrust, fear of reputational damage and perceived social risk. In the employment domain, most participants were unwilling to hire ex-convicts with limited acceptance conditional on factors such as the nature of the offence and the provision of guarantors. In the context of marriage, there was near-unanimous rejection, particularly among parents driven by concerns about family honour and social identity. Similarly, most landlords were unwilling to accommodate ex-convicts, citing safety concerns, although a few housing agents indicated willingness under conditions of non-disclosure. Overall, acceptance was largely conditional, fragile and often dependent on financial status or concealment of criminal history. The study concludes that societal perceptions act as informal extensions of punishment, limiting access to employment, housing and social relationships and thereby undermining reintegration efforts. Practically, the findings highlight the need for targeted public sensitization campaigns, employer incentive schemes, community-based reintegration programmes and anti-discrimination measures in housing to reduce stigma and support successful reintegration.

Keywords: Ex-convicts, Reintegration, Societal perception, Labelling Theory, Social Identity Theory, Nigeria

Introduction

Societal perception of ex-convicts remains a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of criminal justice systems and the success of post-incarceration reintegration. While incarceration is intended to correct deviant behaviour and protect society, negative public attitudes towards ex-convicts often undermine these objectives. Individuals who have completed their sentences frequently encounter stigma, discrimination and social exclusion which limit their access to employment, housing and meaningful social relationships. These challenges not only hinder successful reintegration but also increase the likelihood of recidivism, thereby posing broader social and governance concerns. Despite growing recognition of rehabilitation as a central goal of modern correctional systems, reintegration effort tend to focus predominantly on the individual offender, with comparatively less attention given to the role of societal acceptance in shaping reintegration outcomes. Existing studies have highlighted the structural and psychological challenges faced by ex-convicts; however, there remains insufficient empirical attention to how societal perceptions actively influence their reintegration experiences, particularly within the Nigerian context. This gap limits the development of comprehensive, evidence-based policies that address both individual and societal dimensions of reintegration.

Reintegration is a multifaceted process through which ex-convicts transition back into society and assume lawful, socially acceptable roles. Ideally, it encompasses access to employment, stable housing, social acceptance and active participation in community life. However, persistent negative perception often result in what can be described as a form of 'secondary punishment' where ex-convicts continue to face informal sanctions through societal attitudes and institutional barriers even after serving their formal sentences (Schneider & Weber, 2020). Effective reintegration, therefore, requires not only the preparation of ex-convicts but also the readiness of families and communities to accept and support those (Raboloko & Maripe, 2019).

From a social psychological perspective, societal perceptions are socially constructed through shared beliefs, stereotypes, cultural values and media representations. These perceptions shape behavioural responses toward ex-convicts and can either facilitate or obstruct their

reintegration. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that promote social inclusion and long-term public safety. In Nigeria, the correctional system has increasingly incorporated rehabilitation and reintegration programmes aimed at equipping inmates with vocational and educational skills. For instance, inmates participate in skill acquisition programmes and have access to formal education through initiatives such as the National Examination Council (NECO) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Non- governmental organisations also provide post-release support including start-up resources for self-employment. These efforts reflect a commitment to preparing inmates for productive societal reintegration. However, despite these institutional efforts, many ex-convicts continue to face significant post-release challenges due to unfavourable societal perceptions. The absence of adequate social support systems, combined with stigma and discrimination, contributes to adverse psychological outcomes including social isolation, instability and reduced self-worth. (Baffour et al, 2021; Bebbington et al, 2021). These challenges complicate the reintegration process and may lead to negative outcomes such as unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse and recidivism.

Current Study

The central problem addressed in this study is the persistent negative societal perception of ex-convicts and its implications for their successful reintegration into society. This study seeks to examine how these perceptions influence reintegration outcomes and to identify pathways for fostering more supportive societal attitudes that enhances rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.

Conceptualizing Ex-convicts

Collins (2021) simply defines an ex-convict as a former prisoner. Osayi (2013) described ex-convicts as released prisoners for onward successful life in the society. As good as it sounds, many factors often obstruct the essence of the release and makes it difficult to fit into the society smoothly. An ex-convict is an individual who has been found guilty of a crime, formally convicted in a court of law, sentenced, served their sentence in prison and has been released.

The concept of Reintegration

The concept of re-integration of an ex-convict refers to the process of returning to the society and the acceptance by the stakeholders in the society (Idowu & Odivwri, 2019). Re-integration is the coming back of the prisoner into the community to continue normal life which includes gainful employment after the prisoner has being discharged from incarceration. (Idowu & Odivwri, 2019) Reintegration was also conceived as the vehicle through which ex-convicts may embrace and be embraced into the communities to which they return after incarceration (Andrews, 2015).

Research Objectives

To examine societal perceptions of ex-convicts and how these perceptions influence their reintegration into society in Nigeria. The following are the Specific Objectives: (1) To examine societal attitudes toward employing ex-convicts (2) To explore societal perceptions regarding intimate relationships (dating and marriage) with ex-convicts (3) To assess societal attitudes toward accommodating ex-convicts in residential settings and lastly (4)To analyse how these societal perceptions affect the reintegration process of ex-convicts.

Research Propositions

- Societal perceptions of ex-convicts are predominantly negative across employment, family and housing contexts
- Stigma associated with ex-convict status significantly limits opportunities for social and economic reintegration
- Family and cultural values play a critical role in reinforcing negative perceptions of ex-convicts, particularly in marriage-related decisions
- Negative societal perceptions function as informal mechanisms of continued punishment beyond incarceration

Theoretical Background

This study is anchored on Labelling Theory and Social Identity Theory, both of which provide a useful framework for understanding how societal perceptions influence the reintegration of ex-convicts

Labelling theory

Labelling theory underlines social responses to crime and deviance. In its narrowest version, it asks what happens to criminals after labelling and suggests that crime may be heightened by criminal sanctions. Sending an offender to prison may actually work further to criminalize him or her. Stigmatizing a young offender for a minor offence at a very young age may lead into a criminal career. In its broadest version, labelling theory suggests that criminology has given too much attention to criminals as a category of people and less attention to the array of social control responses (Plummer, 2011). Labelling theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for arguing that society itself plays a very significant role in either facilitating reintegration or perpetuating recidivism through the labels it assigns. Becker (1963) labelling theory argues that deviance is not inherent in an act, but rather created through social reactions. When society labels an individual as "deviant", that label can become a dominant identity shaping how others see the person and how the person see themselves. People become deviant not merely because of what they did but because of how society labels and treats them afterwards. In the case of ex-convicts, labelling theory helps explain why reintegration is often difficult. The reluctance of employers, landlords and potential partners to associate with ex-convicts reflects the enduring power of societal labels which override evidence of rehabilitation.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a powerful concept in social psychology that describes how our sense of self is shaped by the groups we belong to. The theory was developed in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. The theory posits that people categorize themselves and others into in-groups (groups they identify with) and out-groups (groups they don't identify with). This categorization influences behaviour, attitudes and perceptions often leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. (Hogg, 2018). Key components of the theory are: (1) **Social Categorization:** People classify themselves and others into groups based on shared characteristics e.g nationality, religion, gender or hobbies. This simplifies the social world but can cause stereotyping. Once someone is labelled as part of an out-group, we may assume that they are all the same thereby ignoring individual differences. (2) **Social Identification:** Individuals adopt the identity of the group they belong to which

shapes their self-concept and behaviour. The stronger the identity, the more they will align with the group criteria. (3) **Social Comparison:** People compare their group to out-groups to promote self-esteem, they often see their group as better. This can promote bias or competition. Social identity theory emphasizes that individuals derive a sense of self from their group membership. Society often categorize ex-convicts as an out-group distinct from law-abiding citizens. Ex-convicts may struggle to achieve positive social identities due to exclusion from valued social groups such as professional organizations or community associations.

Literature Review

Studies have shown that the reintegration of ex-convicts into the community remains a relatively underexplored issue despite itd importance for social stability and crime reduction (Pertersilia, 2003; Visher & Travis,2011) Nobody seemed to care about what happened to prisoners that were released into the community: how they were treated and whether they would be able to rebuild their lives. The respondents believed that while prisoners had very little chance to learn useful skills in prison, they had ample opportunity to acquire and reinforce negative behaviors. The study painted a predictable and distressing picture of prisoners leaving prison with many bad habits and few new positive or marketable skills. They have no supervision and find it difficult to get a job including their inability to vote and drive. All of these could be frustrating to them and drive them back to crime. Ex-convicts usually respond to the obvious sociocultural implications of their new status which invariably attracts limited social and economic prospects, by placing themselves in tight-knit dependence on family and close friends for both material and non-material benefits that are essential to daily life (Osayi, 2013). He argued that successful reintegration of ex-convicts require help from organizations and individuals that have the capacity to provide necessary assistance and/or employment opportunities. Igbo and Ugwuoke (2003) were of the opinion that poor environmental conditions of many Nigerian prisons and the negative attitude of the society towards ex-convicts influence their perception of them. These bring about discrimination in socialisation and outright avoidance by many people. There is the wide attitude of not given most of the ex-convicts recognition in social functions and thereby making their reintegration difficult, if not impossible. Ugwuoke (2010) posits that the

uncooperative and antagonistic attitude of the society together with the social stigma attached to ex-convicts makes it nearly impossible for them to reintegrate and therefore crime becomes their only source of solace and livelihood.

Ex-convict participants in a study by Chikadzi (2017) noted that ex-convicts were rejected and ostracised by their family members and people from their community after prison, which made it difficult for them to readjust to life after imprisonment. They attributed the rejection to wrong notion that they were not changed persons. In a study by Wiafe (2021) which was carried out in Ghana he disclosed that there was a high level of un-willingness among SME business owners to employ ex-convicts. This is attributable to negative inclination toward ex-convicts. This suggests that the employability chance of ex-convicts is relatively slim. Those whose disposition seems to employ ex-convicts hinged their possible reasons on level of education, nature of offence and age of ex-convicts. Employer's unwillingness to employ ex-convicts was based on factors like personal experience, public perception of an ex-convict (stigmatization) and bad publicity to the organization. This tells of how societal perception of ex-convicts usually shapes their world and especially career. Based on this, it is clear that many employers still perceive ex-convicts as criminals and distinguish job applicants with a criminal background from job applicants without a criminal background, hence, ex-convicts are discriminated against in the labour market.

Idowu and Odivwri (2019) in their study in Ondo State, Nigeria, revealed that criminal recidivism in Nigeria was being influenced by ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the nation's correctional centres due to its poor conditions. It again showed that released offenders lack the social assistance in order to withdraw from criminal recidivism and public negative reactions made things worse for them. In Botswana, Raboloko and Maripe (2019) observed that after release of ex-convicts, they faced an enormous mountain which was difficult to climb without adequate assistance. They further established that preparation for release and integration process in the country was inadequate. They argued that communities in the area had no interventions in place to receive, integrate and support ex-convicts thus leaving them to face stigmatisation. Further still, Osayi (2013) made an effort to identify socio-cultural factors affecting the rehabilitation and reintegration of discharged prisoners in Anambra

State, Nigeria and the study argues that ex-prisoners find it difficult to reintegrate into the society because of some social and cultural factors.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for in-depth exploration of attitudes, beliefs and subjective interpretations held by different members of the public regarding ex-convicts. It is particularly suitable for understanding socially constructed perceptions and meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods.

Study Area: The study was conducted in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. This area provides a suitable context for this study due to its mix of urban and semi-urban populations, diverse socio-economic groups and active interaction among community members, making it appropriate for examining societal perceptions.

Population of the study: The population consisted of selected members of the public across different social categories whose roles may influence reintegration outcomes. These included: employees, landlords, house agents, single ladies, single men and parents. These groups were deliberately identified because they represent key social actors who directly or indirectly shape opportunities for employment, housing, relationships and social acceptance of ex-convicts.

Sample size and Sampling Technique: A total of 25 participants were involved in the study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who were considered information-rich and capable of providing relevant insights into societal perceptions of ex-convicts. The use of purposive sampling is justified by the exploratory nature of the study which seeks to obtain depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Participants were selected based on their social roles and their potential to influence or reflect societal attitudes toward ex-convicts. For instance, employers were selected for their role in hiring decisions, landlords and agents for housing access and parents and singles for their influence on family and relationship acceptance. Furthermore, the selection of multiple

participant categories ensured maximum variation sampling, allowing the study to capture diverse perspectives across key domains of reintegration (employment, housing and social relationships). This diversity enhances the richness and credibility of the findings. Although the sample size relatively small, it is consistent with qualitative research standards where emphasis is placed on depth rather than breadth. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached that is, when no new significant themes were emerging from the interviews.

Addressing Representativeness: It is important to note that this study does not aim for statistical representativeness but rather analytical or theoretical generalization. The findings are intended to provide insights into societal perceptions that may be transferable to similar socio-cultural contexts within Nigeria. By including participants from different social roles, the study enhances the transferability of the findings, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the results to other settings.

Instrument for Data Collection: Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs regarding ex-convicts and their reintegration into society. This format allowed flexibility for probing and deeper exploration of responses.

Method of Data Collection: Interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted 10-15 minutes. With the informed consent of the participants, responses were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis: The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcribed interviews were carefully read, coded and categorized into meaningful units. Emerging patterns and recurring ideas were grouped into themes reflecting common perceptions, stereotypes, fears and levels of acceptance towards ex-convicts. The themes were then interpreted in line with relevant social psychological theories, particularly labelling theory.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by omitting identifying information especially given the sensitivity of the topic. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Result

A total of twenty-five participants voluntarily participated in the face-to-face interviews. Participants' age ranged from 22-65 years old. From the responses of the participants, there were five emergent themes which are: (1) Fear of stigma and social reputation (2) Distrust and perceived risk/safety concerns (3) Conditional acceptance (4) Moral judgement and family value (5) Protection of family and future generation

Fear of Stigma and Social Reputation

"I cannot employ an ex-convict in my school as a teacher because parents will not be comfortable if they get to know. I am still looking for more students I don't want to lose the ones I have"- School owner

"Once you are an ex-convict in Nigeria your name is spoilt already…"-Parent

"I don't want my name and reputation spoilt"-Parent

"In this country people don't forget things…"- Single man

"The landlord will stop working with me. My commission is important and I cannot lose it over one tenant"-House agent

"If nobody knows about it, maybe. But once it comes out, the embarrassment will be too much."-Single lady

So respondents expressed strong concern about how association with an ex-convict could damage their public image, business or social standing. Decisions were largely influenced by anticipated judgment from others, suggesting that societal stigma plays a major role in exclusion.

Distrust and Perceived Risk / Safety Concerns

"I will rather not have a sales rep than employ an ex-convict. I know what I went through before I could get money to start my business"- Phone seller

"What if he still has connections from prison? I don't want trouble."-Single lady

"They learn a lot of bad things in the prison and come out worse. Marrying them is taking a big risk"- Single lady

"I don't want police problem…"- Landlord

"After all the sacrifices I made, my daughter cannot bring shame to this family by marrying an ex-convict. She dare not bring him to me."-Parent

"I have children and I must protect the environment they grow up in. It is just being careful not discrimination"- Landlord

This reflects a generalized distrust and the belief that incarceration may reinforce rather than reform criminal behavior. Respondents viewed ex-convicts as potential threats, associating them with crime, danger or negative influences.

Conditional Acceptance (Cautious Willingness)

"I'll first find out the gravity of his offense if it's something that can be overlooked then we are good to go"-

"I will employ an ex-convict if there is a guarantor"- Boutique owner

"I'd like to know what his offence was, how long he stayed in the prison, why he chose my company and lastly listen to my spirit. I'll also make sure his offense does not align with the role he is applying for"

"I can accommodate him if he is married and he has a job he is doing and also have a guarantor"-Landlord

The above responses showed openness to engaging with ex-convicts, but only under strict conditions such as knowing the nature of the offense, having a guarantor or ensuring role compatibility. This indicates a guarded form of acceptance rather than full trust.

Moral Judgment and Family Values

"After all the sacrifices I made, my daughter cannot bring shame to this family by marrying an ex-convict. She dare not bring him to me."-Parent

"Marriage is not only about love. It is about family background. Prison is not a background I can accept"-Parent

"Our family name has never entered police station. It cannot start now. I don't want my name and reputation spoilt"-Parent

"My parents will curse me. Even if she's a pastor I can't. My parents mean so much to me and I must not disappoint them"- Single man

"My family will reject her immediately. They will think she used charm for me to like her"- Single man

Responses in this theme were rooted in cultural norms, moral beliefs and the importance of family reputation. Ex-convicts were perceived as incompatible with acceptable family standards particularly in relation to marriage.

Protection of Family and Future Generations

"I don't want my children to grow up hearing that their father was once in prison."-Single lady

"I have children and I must protect the environment they grow up in. It is just being careful not discrimination"

"Once you are an ex-convict in Nigeria your name is spoilt already. The stigma is the problem here. People will be looking at him as a criminal and it will definitely rob off on my child too"-Parent

Concerns about the well-being and socialization of children and family members were thus prominent. Respondents feared that association with an ex-convict could negatively affect their family's safety, upbringing or social identity

Summary of key findings

The findings reveal five major patterns. The findings reveal that attitudes towards ex-convicts are largely shaped by stigma, fear and social expectations. A dominant concern is the fear of

social reputation damage, with many respondents prioritizing how others such as clients, family members and the wider community would perceive their association with an ex-convict. Closely linked to this is a strong sense of distrust and perceived risk, as ex-convicts are often viewed as potential threats to safety and stability. Although a minority of participants expressed some level of openness, this was mostly in the form of conditional acceptance, where trust depended on factors such as the nature of the offense, evidence of reform or external guarantees. Additionally, moral and family values played a significant role, particularly in decisions about marriage where ex-convict status was seen as incompatible with acceptable family background and social norms. Finally, many responses highlighted the importance of protecting family and future generations with concerns that association with an ex-convict could negatively affect children's upbringing, family reputation and overall well-being.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that societal perceptions of ex-convicts in Nigeria are deeply negative and extend across key domains of social life, including employment, intimate relationships and housing. More importantly, these perceptions actively shape behaviours that restrict reintegration, indicating that reintegration is not solely an individual responsibility but a socially mediated process influenced by collective attitudes and cultural expectations.

In relation to Objective 1, which examined societal attitudes toward employing ex-convicts, the findings indicate a strong reluctance among employers to engage ex-convicts in formal employment. This reluctance reflects a broader issue of institutional distrust, where ex-convicts are perceived as inherently risky regardless of their rehabilitation or acquired skills. The frequent demand for guarantors suggests that responsibility for trust is transferred to third parties, reinforcing the perception of ex-convicts as unreliable. Interpreted through labelling theory, this demonstrates how the "deviant" label persists beyond incarceration and continues to shape economic opportunities. Consequently, ex-convicts are denied the opportunity to be assessed on competence, which undermines both their autonomy and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes.

With respect to Objective 2, which explored societal perceptions of ex-convicts in intimate relationships, the findings reveal a deeply rooted stigma reinforced by family structures and cultural expectations. The strong opposition from parents and the conditional acceptance among potential partners suggest that marriage is viewed not only as a personal decision but as a reflection of family identity and social reputation. This indicates that societal perception operates at both individual and collective levels, where fear of social judgment significantly influences personal choices. Even in cases where acceptance is considered, it is often conditional upon financial stability or the concealment of criminal history, suggesting that stigma is managed rather than eliminated. This dynamic highlights the persistence of social exclusion in highly personal aspects of life.

In relation to Objective 3, which assessed societal attitudes toward accommodating ex-convicts, the findings point to significant structural barriers within the housing sector. Landlords' refusal to accommodate ex-convicts reflects fear-driven perceptions associated with safety, reputation and potential legal risks. However, the willingness of some housing agents to facilitate accommodation through non-disclosure reveals a contradiction in societal responses. This suggests that stigma is attached more to the known identity of being an ex-convict than to actual behaviour. As such, acceptance becomes conditional upon secrecy, which undermines transparency and reflects the depth of societal distrust.

Finally, in relation to Objective 4, which examined how societal perceptions affect reintegration, the findings demonstrate that negative perceptions function as an informal system of continued punishment beyond incarceration. Ex-convicts experience what can be described as "secondary punishment," where stigma and exclusion persist despite the completion of formal legal sanctions. This ongoing marginalization weakens social bonds, limits access to opportunities and increases vulnerability to adverse outcomes such as unemployment, homelessness and recidivism. The normalization of concealment as a survival strategy further complicates reintegration by introducing psychological strain and undermining trust within social systems.

Overall, these findings reveal a deeply entrenched pattern of negative societal perceptions toward ex-convicts in Nigeria cutting across economic, residential and social domains. The

result align with labelling theory which posits that societal reactions to deviance can perpetuate marginalization and hinder reintegration. Across all respondent categories, disclosure of ex-convict status consistently resulted in rejection, conditional acceptance or concealment highlighting the social risks associated with honesty and transparency during reintegration. In the Nigerian context, negative perceptions appear to function as informal social controls that extend punishment beyond prison sentences. This continued exclusion increases vulnerability, weakens social bonds and may inadvertently heighten the risk of recidivism thereby defeating the rehabilitative objectives of the correctional system.

Intervention

Looking at the perception of ex-convicts from the studies conducted by some researchers and the perception from the interview conducted, it is important to find ways to reduce negative perception and reintegrate ex-convicts in the society. I hereby suggest the following intervention.

Employment focused intervention

Employment is one of the most critical factors influencing the successful reintegration of ex-convicts. Stable and meaningful work does not only provide financial independence, but it also enhances self-esteem, social inclusion and law abiding. Regardless of their offense, ex-offenders require jobs to survive in their new domain of liberty. Studies have reported that employment reduces recidivism tendencies and facilitates ex-convicts' adjustment to civilian life in several ways (Chikadzi et al, 2022; Obatusin & Ritter-Williams, 2019; English, 2018). According to Obatusin and Ritter-Williams (2019), “the likelihood of criminal behavior decreases significantly when ex-convicts are employed”. Employment allows ex-convicts to earn money to help take care of transportation, food and other daily expenses and rebuild lost relationships with their children and family. Employment also promotes socialization among co-workers and provides the structured activity. Thirdly, employment improves social status and it allows ex-convicts to prove to the public that they have learned their lessons (Chen & Rine-Reesha, 2022; Riley, 2022). Vocational training and job placement programs offered during incarceration program should be encouraged. From the perspective of labelling theory (Becker, 1963) criminal records function as enduring negative labels that restrict access to

legitimate employment and reinforce deviant identities. Policies that disrupt automatic labelling processes at the point of labour-market entry should be embraced.

Housing support policies

Access to stable housing is fundamental to reintegration as homelessness and unstable accommodation increases vulnerability to crime, substance abuse and social exclusion. Mental-health professionals stress that stigma makes housing searches long and difficult, requiring active negotiation with housing providers (Seaward et al., 2023) Removing or easing discriminatory housing and legal barriers and expanding supportive housing are therefore recommended, especially for older returning citizens and those with mental illness (Stone et al., 2025).

Psychosocial and community interventions

This addresses the emotional, psychological and social challenges faced by ex-convicts particularly stigma, trauma and social rejection.

Individualized case management, mental-health care, and coping skills training are emphasized as central to successful reintegration (Mohamad et al., 2024). Counselling and stigma-reduction programmes help ex-convicts cope with shame, anxiety and rejection. Strong family ties, mediation to repair relationships, and community volunteers will reduce isolation and stigma and support long-term change (Cardoso et al., 2025).

Peer support and mentorship: especially from successfully integrated ex-convicts. Provide role models, guidance and encouragement, enhancing motivation and resilience. Ex-convicts can be advised to use the lives of people who have served jailed terms and are doing well as role models (Matias et al., 2025). Example of such is Kayode Williams. After serving his sentence, he converted to Christian ministry and became a prison reform activist in Nigeria.

Restorative justice programmes create platforms for dialogue between ex-convicts, victims and communities promoting accountability, healing and social acceptance which are essential for long term reintegration.

Policy and legal reforms

Policy and legal reforms play a crucial role in removing structural barriers that hinder the reintegration of ex-convicts. Policy reforms should expand employment and housing support, simplify legal obstacles, and embed restorative justice approaches (Mohamad et al., 2024). The fundamental human rights of ex-convicts should be restored. They should be allowed to drive if they are mentally fit to drive, they should be allowed to vote during elections and make their Nigeria standard passport if they want to.

Psychologists as active agents of Reintegration (practice-based intervention)

The Nigerian Correctional Service and the Nigeria Psychological Association (NPA) have a partnership, but psychologists are not fully involved in correctional rehabilitation programs. Psychological support and intervention are perceived as essential, as evidenced by qualitative research (Almeida et al. 2025). The work of psychologists requires the establishment of structures.' In order to strengthen this partnership, the government should grant psychologists formal roles and offices in prisons. Psychologists are capable of conducting regular psychological evaluations, identifying prisoners with low self-esteem, depression or emotional distress, and offering counseling/therapy. By rebuilding their confidence and psychological strength, prisoners can better prepare for social integration after release.

Additionally, ex-convicts should receive structured aftercare services upon their release.' To help former prisoners rebuild their confidence, become more resilient and adjust to societal norms through follow-up counselling/monitoring/psychological support, psychologists should continue to provide such services. Following their release, they will receive ongoing psychological support to improve their stigma and increase their chances of reintegration into society.

Social contact theory

Ex-convicts' reintegration into the community can be facilitated by social contact theory. This theory explains how the direct engagement between members of different social groups can help to reduce prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination (Kjellstrand et al., 2021). Based on the idea that socially and culturally different individuals can interact under positive circumstances, the theory suggests that this fosters a greater degree of mutual understanding

among people who may not have negative attitudes. Ex-convicts who engage in meaningful dialogue with the general public can reduce stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, which can assist them in reintegration into society (Bales & Mears, 2008). Former convicts are frequently labeled as untrustworthy, perilous or ineffective. Due to the fact that many individuals in society have limited or no direct interaction with reformed ex-convicts, stereotype associations tend to endure. In social contact theory, negative beliefs are challenged by means of structured and positive interaction. Anyone who was incarcerated should be given another chance.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Targeted Public Sensitization campaigns should be formulated by government and civil society organizations to target individuals with misconceptions about former prisoners. Reintegration campaigns should be promoted through the use of real-life reintegrations success stories and dissemination through media, community meetings, and religious institutions to challenge stereotypes and promote acceptance.

2. The Government Should Introduce Incentive and Support Schemes: In order to tackle discrimination in employment, it may be beneficial to introduce incentives like tax reductions or grants for groups that employ former prisoners. In addition, formal guarantor frameworks or certification of rehabilitation can help employers reduce their perception of risk by providing structured systems.

3. Reintegration efforts should be carried out outside of correctional facilities through community-based reintegrations programs that involve social workers and psychologists. It is important for these programmes to prioritize community engagement, mediation, and building trust between ex-convicts and local residents.

4. The development of policies to reduce discrimination against ex-convicts in housing should be a focus of housing support and policy regulation. The options for working with landlords' associations, implementing transitional housing schemes and overseeing discriminatory rental practices are possible.

5. Family-centered counselling and reintegration workshops are necessary to prepare families for support and attitude changes in returning ex-convicts, given the significant influence of family on acceptance decisions.

6. The implementation of structured post-release follow-up measures such as job placement assistance, mentorship programmes, and access to mental health services is necessary to address the psychological effects of stigma or social exclusion.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, societal attitudes towards former criminals in Nigeria are not exclusively unfavorable but also vary depending on their location and context. The study reveals that former prisoners are consistently excluded from employment due to distrust, rejected in marriage and family settings due to concerns about their reputation and social status, and denied housing on the basis of fear and risk avoidance. The acceptance process is largely conditional, with financial status, guarantorship or the concealment of criminal history being the primary factors that influence it. These patterns suggest that Nigeria's reintegration is not solely hindered by individual limitations but also affected by deeply ingrained social attitudes that extend punishment beyond prison. Labelling theory is based on the idea that ex-offenders are defined by their past experiences, not their current skills or behaviors, which is reinforced across different fields. The promotion of secrecy as a way to survive suggests that social acceptance is delicate and often superficial. Educational and vocational programmes have been implemented by the Nigerian Correctional Service to aid in rehabilitation, but their effectiveness is severely compromised by societal disapproval. The social context in which ex-inmates are released plays a crucial role in achieving their rehabilitation.

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