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HOW I MANAGED TO INTEGRATE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN DETERMINING GOOD LIFE EVENTS AND TURNING POINTS OF THREE FORMER PRISONERS IN MALAYSIA

Mohd Alif Jasni[1,2*], Siti Hajar Abu Bakar Ah[3] and Norruzeyati Che Mohd Nasir[1]

[1]School of Applied Psychology, Social Work and Policy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, MALAYSIA
[2]Institute for Psychotherapy, Correctional and Rehabilitation (iPSYCORE), Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, MALAYSIA
[3]Department of Social Administration and Justice, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

[*]Corresponding author: mohd.alif.jasni@uum.edu.my/alevmikail@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Imprisonment impacts the life events and turning points of former prisoners upon release. The challenges faced during societal re-integration are contributing factors that shape the life events of former prisoners upon release and subsequently determine their turning point. This study aims to prove that positive life events will cause former prisoners to shape positive turning points after release. Criminal justice studies have since strived to understand the factors that cause former prisoners to repeat their crimes after being released from prison. However, in Malaysia, not many works have explored the factors that cause former prisoners to cease committing a crime. Besides, the successful re-integration of these prisoners is still understudied. The researchers conducted a qualitative study in Kuala Lumpur with 19 former prisoners. The results revealed that 16 informants had repeatedly committed crimes, while only three managed to desist. This study will describe the views and experiences of the three former prisoners (desisters) on how they desist from crime during re-integration. Only three desisters were

considered and did not include 16 other recidivist informants since the objective of this study was to identify the success factors for re-integration and to understand the protective factors of former prisoners during re-integration into society. The crucial findings were also discussed, including family acceptance, the presence of a supportive spouse, employment, avoiding negative peers, no drug addiction and being healthy. These factors managed to prevent the former prisoners from committing crimes again.

Keywords: prisoner, former prisoners, re-integration, protective factors, turning points, life events, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Nearly two decades ago, little was heard or known about the term "desistance" in academic studies (Maruna 2017). Even the criminologists who constructed the concept behind the term find it challenging to spell it (Laub and Sampson 2001). More recently, discussion of the idea has become more common in the criminal justice system of many countries (Maruna 2017). However, according to Jump and McMahon (2017), limited studies in this context explored how and why people ceased or desisted from repeating the crime. This is because, nowadays, much of the focus in literary studies only address the factors that cause the recurrence of crime and not the factors associated with the cessation of crime. Jump and McMahon (2017) contend that prisoners can stop committing a crime when the factors that cause the recurrence no longer exist in themselves or are no longer dominant in their lives. However, there is limited research or evidence to substantiate this matter (Barry 2006).

This study proves that a former prisoner's criminal behaviour upon release from prison can be predicted by assessing his turning points and life events after re-joining the community. The behaviour of a former prisoner will change gradually throughout his life after release—either more positive or more negative, depending on his turning point. A positive life event can shape social bonds that prevent the former prisoner from committing a crime again. In contrast, life events fraught with challenges and inconveniences could lead to weak social bonds—eventually forcing the former prisoner to repeat the crime (Tharshini and Fauziah 2018; Soyer 2014). The turning point that happens at each life event differs from one former prisoner to another. The former prisoner's time spent in a community is the only determinant of his turning point. This scenario enables researchers to learn about the factors contributing to former prisoners' success and discover why other former prisoners become recidivists or repeat prisoners.

While many studies have attempted to identify and understand many of the mechanisms or attributes that contribute towards making it easier for individuals to refrain from committing to a life of crime (Bersani and Doherty 2018; Rodermond et al. 2016), the real need is to help former prisoners to escape from this lifestyle and successfully re-integrate back into society. To this end, desistance theorists have sought to understand how and to what extent prisoners do not re-engage in crime (Phillips 2017). One of the most profound sources depicting these turning points that distinguish those who resign from or continue to commit a life of crime appears to be a transitional factor (Martin, Padron and Redondo 2019). This position led Weaver (2019) to suggest that studies on desistance tend to explain why people resign from re-offending, rather than why they re-engage in criminal activities in the first instance. Accordingly, this situation contributes to this study's importance, given that desistance among former prisoners is relatively new in the criminal justice system in Malaysia.

The re-integration process is effortless and uncomplicated for some former prisoners, as their families can accept them for who they are (Hochstetler, DeLisi and Pratt 2010). This group is usually employed and therefore financially supported (Mears and Mestre 2012). In the process, they also gain social support networks (Cochran 2014). On the other hand, the re-integration of other former prisoners becomes exhausting and strenuous if their families do not acknowledge them (Morash et al. 2017) and if they fail to secure employment (Harris and Keller 2005). Besides, if they surround themselves with bad influences such as negative and anti-social peers, they can be influenced to commit crime again (Taylor and Becker 2015).

Studies on recidivism have garnered recent attention among Malaysian researchers (Mohd Alif, Siti Hajar and Norruzeyati 2020; Tharshini et al. 2021). However, to date, only two studies focus on protective factors in the local context. These studies conducted by Tharshini and Fauziah (2018) are systematic reviews underlying four main factors which contribute towards the successful re-integration of prisoners, namely, motivation to change, social support, religious beliefs and employment. Their findings also found that these protective factors reduce recidivism rates and prevent the re-involvement of criminal activities among ex-prisoners. Besides, Sathoo et al. (2021) discussed the social support provided to prisoners who were participants of a parole programme that facilitates re-integration. The study results reported four dimensions of social support identified to facilitate integration, namely, parole officer's support, peer support, family support and employer support.

In addition to these findings, several other protective factors remain underexplored and would need to be identified. Factors such as housing, stable employment, marriage, substance abuse issues and health can be further discussed as a successful re-integration of former prisoners into society involves a complex set of protective factors. The current study is a primary study exploring the lives of ex-prisoners who have been successful in receiving and utilising these protective factors to prevent reinvolvement in crime and foster positive life events.

This study focused on the success of former prisoners in the re-integration process. In this study, the researchers highlight the success stories of a former prisoner who managed to re-integrate into the community. This study explored the aspects that led to their successful re-integration. The group's success might be due to the protective factors surrounding them, which, in turn, assisted them in transforming into productive individuals. It is hoped that the real-life data collected in this study will be a reference for determining the success factors of former prisoner re-integration. Therefore, significantly, it is important to record this achievement academically from the perspective of the Malaysian criminal justice system. Such a study could guide formulating intervention steps, besides providing a systematic approach for future cases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Age-graded Theory of Informal Social Control

In the criminal justice system, releasing prisoners into society is a much-debated topic, especially when former prisoners return to their old habits of committing crimes after release. Crime repetition raises the question of why some former prisoners repeat their crimes while others do not. This issue has triggered many academic discussions on the importance of understanding the life events of former prisoners during the process of re-integrating. These events are believed to influence the former prisoners to either repeat the same criminal activities or vice versa. Criminologists have used many theories and perspectives to explain this social phenomenon. The scope of this study is on the protectives factor in determining the life events and turning points of former prisoners that caused them to desist. The researchers analysed the social phenomenon from the Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control introduced by Sampson and Laub (1993). This theory delves into the life events of former prisoners and attempts to understand why some former prisoners successfully avoid committing a crime.

Scholars adopt the Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control to identify an individual's involvement pattern in criminal behaviour or activity, based on each life cycle phase—from toddler, teenager, adult, to senior citizen. These patterns are then utilised as markers for determining why individuals commit certain crimes and why others diminish or totally avoid committing them at a given age grade. This theory focuses on individual development and recognises certain social events (for example, marriage, having a family, career, health) in every life stage that influences behavioural development.

Protective Factors That Manage to Prevent Former Prisoners from Committing Crime

Depending on the situation, several former prisoners can manage to re-integrate into the community and prevent themselves from committing crimes again. The process of avoiding crimes is referred to as the cessation of crime. Apart from the encouraging factors, which induce former prisoners to commit crime again, the cessation of crime has also been a significant focus in criminology. It provides insight into protective factors that could avert this group from re-committing crime (Farrall 2002; Maruna 2001). Meanwhile, one of the objectives in criminology studies related to the cessation of crime includes exploring the protective factors associated with crime desistance and the reasoning for how and why former prisoners restrain themselves from crime.

In reality, former prisoners indeed often do aspire to refrain from doing crime again and to successfully re-integrate into the community. Regrettably, only a few succeed at this goal. A piece of evidence was also found indicating former prisoners who have unconsciously managed to stop committing a crime, i.e., they refrained from the offense without having the intention of doing so (Laub and Sampson 2003). Similar to the risk factors for recidivism, crime desistance factors are also varied, particularly those explaining why former prisoners can prevent themselves from becoming involved in criminal activities again (Soyer 2014).

There are two groups of factors that influence the cessation of crime. These factors, namely external and internal, involve the outer influences existing in an individual's life and the factors that stem from the individual, respectively (Kazemian and Maruna 2009). Some examples of external factors associated with the cessation of crime include the attainment of lawful employment, family acceptance, and the influence of a conducive and positive social network. Furthermore, it is unanimously agreed that stable employment encourages the cessation of crime among former prisoners (Maruna and Farrall 2004). Employment is indeed a critical protective

factor that helps former prisoners stay away from criminal activities (Mears and Mestre 2012).

Apart from employment, the relationship between former prisoners and their families is also vital in rebuilding their lives (Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). The bond of family is an important social institution, as it serves as an informal social regulator. Finally, the last external factor that leads to crime desistance is the former prisoners' surrounding community, such as peers and society. Former prisoners who live in a positive surrounding or environment and those who socialise with peers that are not involved in crime will potentially leave crime altogether (Farrall 2002; Maruna 2001; McNeill and Maruna 2007).

Aside from the external factors discussed above, internal factors also contribute to the cessation of crime among former prisoners. The main internal factors are maturity and age (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). The more mature the former prisoner, the more likely he will avoid crime (Maruna 2001). As former prisoners age, they begin to pay more attention to their families and social relationships. Therefore, older former prisoners tend not to repeat their former crimes.

Empirical evidence and academic literature have indicated that former prisoners who managed to quit crime have unique features. This study is to examine the protective factors that prevent former prisoners from committing crimes again during re-integration. This study also identifies the issues that helped former prisoners restrain themselves from repeating the crime.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case approach was used to investigate crime amongst former prisoners (Creswell 2014). The main aim of this study was to identify the protective factors in determining the good life events and turning points of former prisoners after they had been released from prison. The snowball sampling technique was applied to select the informants. All informants had to meet the inclusion criteria in this study, such as having a prison record and is 21 years of age or older. This study involved 19 informants (17 males and two females), who had voluntarily agreed to participate. All the informants were thoroughly interviewed by the researchers based on a structured interview protocol containing several questions related to the study objectives. This study results from the first author's doctoral study, which involved two primary samples of recidivists and desisters. The researchers expound the reasons for recidivism and desistance among ex-prisoners. Nevertheless, the

current research focuses solely on desistance and the results related to the sample of informants who managed to quit crime entirely.

As a response to the given codes of ethics, all informants' names and personal information are not disclosed. Sixteen informants in this study had committed crimes again, and only three managed to cease from crime. Hence, there were significantly more criminal repeater informants than non-criminal repeaters. The selection of three former prisoners who desisted from crime was not intentional. Instead, it was related to the difficulty of securing informants who were willing to share their success. Although the study only involved three informants, it did produce various findings in understanding the lives of former prisoners. Multiple codes were used to classify and analyse the data from the interview results, which helped separate the recidivists from desisters.

Based on previous research, it was also found that former prisoners who have successfully re-engaged back into society, instead of re-offending, prefer to remain silent and not engage in research studies and are reluctant to share information about their success. They believe that participating in research will reinvent the past, which they have tried to keep hidden from society. They were difficult to approach and refused to reveal their past, probably because they felt embarrassed by their history.

The recruitment of desister informants is based on a report by the first author, a volunteer in a non-governmental organization (NGO) and has experience working with ex-prisoners around Kuala Lumpur. A rapport has been established between the author and former prisoners as various kinds of assistance such as food, clothing and medical treatment was provided through the NGO. Former prisoners who are desisters were more challenging to identify and were eventually recruited from those who also served as volunteers or outreach workers in NGOs. These informants were selected from among those who understood the importance and goals of the study, thus ensuring their enthusiastic participation in the interview process.

With only three desisters identified, and given the lack of discovering any new information, the researcher could still achieve saturation, even after transcribing the information received from the three informants. Furthermore, given that the study had reached saturation in collecting data, the researcher decided to discontinue further searching. As such, the results of this study have successfully described the success of the three desisters, as former prisoners, in integrating back into society.

The interview protocol was designed based on previous literature and the objectives of the current study and was validated by two experts in the field. Before conducting the research, the researcher explained the study's objectives and necessary information to the informants. The researcher also reassured the informants of their confidentiality and rights as informants throughout the study. The study was conducted in a living room of an NGO known as IKHLAS. IKHLAS is an NGO that provides health assistance to drug addicts around the Chow Kit area in Kuala Lumpur. Thus, IKHLAS as a place of NGO operation provided a familiar context to both the researchers and the informants. The interview process was audio recorded to ensure all essential details were captured and allow the researcher to focus throughout the process.

The accumulated verbatim was then processed using Atlas.ti software. The data were presented thematically. In this study, the researcher presents the three former prisoners' experiences in quitting crime during re-integration. Their experience is taken as the factors that led to their success.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is vital to identify the protective factors that are determining the life events, turning points and caused former prisoners to cease committing a crime. In short, protective factors are defined as factors that reduce an individual's inclination towards unlawful behaviour and misconduct by removing, weakening, minimising, or neutralising the effects of individual exposure to risk factors (Bersani and Doherty 2018; Martinez and Abrams 2013; Maruna 2017; Tharshini and Fauziah 2018). These factors could reduce or prevent former prisoners from engaging in social behaviour problems throughout their re-integration into the community. To facilitate this investigation, the researcher divided this section into two:

1. The social demographic profile of the informants who managed to quit crime; and
2. The protective factors existing in the informants' social environment that prevented them from re-engaging in crime.

Social Demographic Profile of the Informants Who Managed to Quit Crime

As stated before, out of the 19 former prisoners (informants), only three managed to cease repeating crimes and met the characteristics for crime desistance. They are Muiz, Syafiq and Rizal. The social demographic profiles of each are shown in Table 1.

Protective Factors in Determining Life Events, Turning Points and Causing Crime Desistance Amongst Former Prisoners

This study found that the life events that took place throughout the former prisoners' re-integration with society critically influenced them to quit and, in turn, prevented them from engaging in criminal activities. The effectiveness of the protective factors in curbing anti-social behaviour depends on the risk exposure. It must be noted that these factors already exist in a person's social environment. Suppose the protective factor is more dominant at influencing an individual compared to the risk factor. In that case, the probability of the individual abiding by norms and social expectations will be considerably higher. On the other hand, if the risk factor is more dominant than the protective factor, the person will be more inclined towards developing anti-social behaviour. In summary, protective factors are defined as factors that reduce an individual's inclination towards unlawful behaviour and misconduct by removing, weakening, minimising or neutralising the effects of individual exposure to risk factors.

Referring to Table 1, it can be concluded that the former prisoners managed to quit crime during re-integration because they participated in social events, which served as protective factors that barred them from recidivism risk factors. In addition, their social experience served as protective factors to the cessation of crime, as further described comprehensively in the subsequent sections.

Table 1: Social demographic profile of the informants who managed to quit crime

Informant	Age	Education status	Duration of imprisonment	Marital status	Residency	Family relationship	Employment status	Acquaintances relationship	Social relationship	Drug addiction	Health problem
Muiz	50	SPM	1 time	Married	Stays with family	Well-accepted and informant's wife accepts his presence too	Employed	Avoids mixing with negative peers	Neighbours have no negative perception	Stopped taking drugs	Nil
Syafiq	40	SRP	1 time	Married	Stays with wife	Well-accepted	Employed	Avoids mixing with negative peers	Neighbours do not label informant although they are aware of his criminal record	Has never taken drugs	Nil
Rizal	58	Diploma	1 time	Single	Stays with family	Well-accepted	Employed	Avoids mixing	Sometimes discriminated, especially when crime occurs	Has never taken drugs	Nil

Having a place to reside after release

Research has revealed that former prisoners' first challenge upon release is searching for a place to stay. The researcher viewed the process of searching for or finding a place to stay as an important life event for former prisoners. It was a significant turning point. Some former prisoners successfully secured a place to stay, while others do not. The predominant feature of the Asian lifestyle, particularly in Malaysia, is that family is an important institution. One can stay with one's parents regardless of age. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that most former prisoners are more inclined to choose to return and live with their family members, even if it is only temporary or if the family members are not too welcoming. A place to stay can determine the kind of environment the former prisoner will be exposed to. A residential area that is free from crime prevents former prisoners from returning to such a life and vice versa. Therefore, a crime-free place of residence could be a turning point for former prisoners on their pathway to desistance.

In line with this idea, the researcher found that the three informants who had desisted had no residency issues. Meanwhile, those who were married would most likely return to their wives and children. Additionally, the study found that former prisoners surrounded by family members had substantial social control that prevented them from re-engaging in criminal acts.

Rizal's statement supports this point. Rizal chose to stay with his family once he was released. His family members accepted him. They also showed him endless support by frequently visiting him during his imprisonment:

> I had good support from my family and I feel fortunate to have them, as they are willing to help and support me although I am a former prisoner. My family also often visited me when I was in jail. They were willing to travel a distance to pick me up at Bandar Hilir Melaka Prison from Petaling Jaya right after my release.

The following is the statement quoted from Rizal, when he was asked about his decision to return to his family members, "I am comfortable returning to my family since they can still accept me and, in fact, they still accept me even with what I did. So, returning to them was a non-issue."

Likewise, Muiz also opted to return to his family. He realised that having grown up in the family, it is a must for him to return, "As our life started from family and home, the first thing in our mind should be our family too because home is the starting place of our growth; thus, we need family."

Certain advantages were also noted for married prisoners, in terms of living arrangements. Most had no problems finding a place to stay, as they would return to their wives. Syafiq, for example, returned to his wife and children in Johor. This case was surely an advantage for him, as he did not need to worry about acquiring shelter, "As for me, I am married, so I returned to my wife after my release. My wife knew of my return and accepted me well."

From this result, it is concluded that former prisoners who are married and those who have family members who are able to accept them possess higher chances of obtaining residence. This finding illustrates the importance of having support from family, especially for shelter—either permanently or temporarily—upon release.

Family's full support

Family is vital in helping prevent crime among former prisoners (Martinez and Abrams 2013). Family support and assistance lead to greater motivation among former prisoners; it makes them want to be better and to quit committing a crime (Taylor 2012). This study describes the protective factors that prevented former prisoners, namely the social support of family members in providing care, commitment and affection. Tharshini et al. (2020) denoted that a good relationship with family members can induce ongoing familial support and encouragement, simultaneously constructing a positive self-image among ex-prisoners. This is in line with Sathoo et al.'s (2021) findings which discovered that smooth integration is attributed to good social support from family members.

This study also found the main reason that helped former prisoners quit crime is family acceptance. The three informants (Muiz, Syafiq and Rizal) mentioned that the acceptance they received from their families further encouraged them to avoid engaging in any crime-related activities.

Furthermore, this study observed that all informants who ceased committing the crime had good relationships with their family members. A good family relationship is indeed a significant influence that helps establish social control within former prisoners. Besides, this self-control certainly made the former prisoners extra cautious about thinking of re-engaging in crime, as they feared it would destroy their families' hope. Rizal, for example, said his family members accepted him because he was a first-time prisoner. This scenario could differ if he were charged more than once.

Additionally, financial aids that families give because of their acceptance eventually help ease the burden of former prisoners. Muiz, Syafiq and Rizal further stated that

their family members' financial aid helped them live and rebuild their lives after their release. Syafiq said that his family helped him financially, as they hoped he would change, seeing that criminals often repeat their crime due to life and financial pressures. In short, the researcher noted that financial assistance from family crucially assisted former prisoners to re-integrate into society; and, in turn, positively deterred them from committing crime again.

A strong marriage relationship

Similarly, marriage could be a turning point in the life of an individual. Like marriage, the couple could work together and directly take charge of their social circle, structure and meaning of life and exchange social and emotional support, deterring the former prisoners from re-engaging in crime. A former prisoner who relies on his partner would more likely have access to a more extensive support system, encouraging them to maintain their marital relationship. Sometimes, the spouse could also lend financial support. This condition will hinder the former prisoners from returning to crime just to get more money.

Marriage is one of the critical elements leading to a turning point in anti-social behaviour (Laub and Sampson 2001). A good marriage provides various benefits, such as regulating and curbing anti-social behaviours among former prisoners (Tripodi 2010). The Age Classification Theory states that marital institutions are among the most important social institutions for individuals in the adult phase (Maruna 2001). According to this theory, marriages can lead to the cessation of crime, as it leads to significant changes to the routines and lifestyles of married individuals. Compared to the unmarried, most married individuals will be worried about taking any form of criminal risk.

From the three informants who quit crime, only one remained single. It could be because former prisoners find it difficult to enter into a marriage or maintain a marital relationship. The wife, in particular, serves as an unofficial regulator that assists the former prisoner (husband) to re-integrate into society. Muiz stated that his wife's consistent support increased his determination to improve and succeed in life. He believed that most ex-offenders, particularly those who had used narcotics, had weak control systems and were more vulnerable to criminal temptation.

The dependency on drugs also influences the ease by which former prisoners repeat drug habits and re-engage in criminal activities. For example, Muiz felt blessed to have such a kind and supportive wife who continually helps him avoid possible crimes. As a husband, he has to think deeply before committing to anything that could hurt his wife and children:

> My wife is always there for me, supporting me. Our kin will always need continuous support, particularly moral support. I am one of those people who can easily get exposed to dangerous and risky activities. To this day, I think first before exposing myself to many dangerous activities but I know I am not strong. I could easily get into drugs again and other criminal activities.

In a follow-up interview with Muiz, the researcher also asked his views on the importance of marital institutions in helping former prisoners avoid crime. Muiz mentioned that marriage had undoubtedly caused him to be more responsible, even more so when God blessed him with children. The presence of his children further motivated him to become more accountable for his family. In turn, he became more determined to turn a new leaf.

> When I got married, there was a conscience in my inner self to start being responsible, especially when my children were born, I felt more accountable. I do not want them to be embarrassed because of my wrongdoings. That prompted me to quit crime.

This fact is further reinforced by Syafiq's response, where he said that his wife's patience, advice, and support helped him stop committing a crime, eventually motivating him to change.

> My wife had indeed given me a lot of support. She also advises me as well. When I was arrested, my family members were shocked. Maybe they just could not accept the news of me being caught. As far as I am concerned, they never knew I took drugs, although I did look like someone who was using. Suddenly, they had to hear the story of my drug trafficking. So, after I was released, I wanted to change. I did not want them to be sad and embarrassed by my actions.

Syafiq further noted that, due to his age, his decision-making skills had improved. As such, he would think carefully before conducting any crime-related activity. Syafiq further added that he often thought about his family members before doing anything, as any actions could subsequently affect his family. He is also afraid that such conduct could lead to sadness and embarrassment among his family.

> Even if I wanted to go to the market, I would think twice. My maturity level has increased as I aged. Compared to when I was young, I would more easily get involved in crime, and, at that time, I did not think about the consequences. I did not care about the effect of my actions. But as I am getting older, with a wife and children, I always think more than once when doing any action; whether or not it will affect my family.

Apart from moral support, partners also play an essential role in providing financial support to former prisoners. The married informants in this study said they had an advantage, as their wives worked and possessed stable financial resources. Hence, this factor also led to their success in re-integrating after being released from prison. Syafiq, for example, said that because his wife was working, he no longer needed to worry about financial problems. His wife often gave him money and even helped him start a business to get back on his feet and successfully re-integrate.

> My wife has a permanent job, so she has a fixed earning. You know…so financial burden is not an issue. My wife gives me money to buy things, and I have never felt any scarcity because of this. My wife hopes that I change and I cease past activities (i.e., past criminal activities).

Obviously, for married former prisoners, their companions serve as unofficial regulators that prevent them from engaging in criminal activities and repeating crimes, besides providing them with a sense of purpose and motivating them to be better people.

Stable employment

The relationship between employment and criminal behaviour is one of the hot topics discussed in criminal justice (Bushway 2011). This study focuses on the role of employment in contributing to desistance amongst former prisoners. Stable employment can promote changes in social relationships or establish a strong bond through social control, which, in turn, may lead to increased self-control to prevent individuals from committing a crime. Having a stable job is included as a protective that can determine the life events and turning points of former prisoners. Jobs are the most significant factor that influences the decisions of former prisoners. Jobs can cause them to become more responsible. Social control and the desire to maintain employment may cause former prisoners to avoid crime. It is, therefore, posited that former prisoners with stable employment have a higher probability of preventing crime than unemployed ones. The ability to earn a living is part of former prisoners' re-integration (Mears and Mestre, 2012). Crime desistance among former prisoners is seen as an unintentional response towards changing one's life purpose. Such desistance is also associated with the ability to obtain a job and earn money lawfully (Wright and Cullen 2004). Additionally, Tharshini and Fauziah (2018) also reported that employment is a significant protective factor in ensuring that ex-prisoners avoid crime, preventing them from relapsing. Therefore, employment does not only provide financial stability but serves as a medium for former prisoners to productively utilise their time and build personal responsibilities (Sathoo et al. 2021).

In general, the three informants who managed to avoid re-offending crimes were also active participants of the IKHLAS Association. For example, although Rizal has opted not to work, he still serves as a volunteer to assist homeless former prisoners around Kuala Lumpur. Rizal is interested in joining social work, as it is close to his heart and gives his life meaning. Additionally, his past mistakes have steered him towards contributing his services via social work to assist newly released former prisoners. For example, he helps them get access to treatment and substance abuse problems. Based on the above finding, the researcher observed that Rizal's education level, a diploma, also contributed to much of his conscientious point of view and maturity during the interview.

> I chose to become an activist and to get involved in an NGO. I also do a lot of community services, as I owe a social responsibility to my community. I make use of my past experiences to help others, friends, and especially those facing the same problem I met, so I choose to help them by becoming an activist.

Additionally, Rizal's age was also one of the factors contributing to his way of thinking. In short, it enabled the researcher to understand why Rizal chose to do social work. Rizal also mentioned that he was aware of his record as a former prisoner, which would hinder him from obtaining proper employment. Therefore, he was more comfortable doing social work because he could still assist other former prisoners.

Muiz had also worked in a private company for 11 years. He declined to share about his workplace and only expressed his current work as a form of social activism. However, he indicated he had once been dismissed from his former job when his employer found out about his criminal record.

> I worked in a company for three months, but after discovering my criminal record, my employer terminated me right away. But I cannot blame him 100% because he is just thinking about his company's safety. Nevertheless, he should have given a former prisoner like me a chance. Without a job, how can I live?

This scenario influenced Muiz to dabble in business, selling drinks at the local night market to survive. Muiz is continually working to generate lawful income. His efforts can also be seen as a result of his past experiences of being imprisoned. Imprisonment is considered a painful experience that forces him to quit any wrongdoings. Muiz explains his decision to sell drinks at the night market as being due to the difficulty of getting employment, "This made me decide to do business, mainly selling drinks at the night market. I sell drinks like cordial water and juice. I try to cope with life by doing business like this".

Similarly, he also occupied his time by working as a construction worker around Chow Kit and as a volunteer for IKHLAS Association. This case shows that former prisoners who have stable employment and meaningful lives can fill their time with work and other vital activities, which indirectly prevent them from engaging in criminal activities. Besides, employment gives the former prisoners a sense of responsibility. Employment also provides them with income to survive during re-integration. Similarly, a job makes it easy for them to get away from negative influences, especially peers that could instigate them to commit past crimes again.

Supportive community and surroundings

The return of former prisoners into neighbourhoods that receive them well and do not stigmatise them is a good turning point for them. An accepting environment is a strong social control that prevents the former prisoners from committing crimes again. This factor came through in interviews as a positive life event for former prisoners who have been released. Positive communities and surroundings are also vital to ensure former prisoners live a positive life (Phillips and Lindsay 2011) and are a significant protective factor leading to crime desistance. Former prisoners who return to their family members will feel more welcomed in a surrounding where the community is also accepting. It is advantageous for the former prisoners to re-integrate and mingle into such communities that are conducive, supportive,and respectful. Such neighbourhoods will make them feel more comfortable living in and reuniting with society. Tharshini et al. (2020) state that individuals who receive ongoing social support from their environment and community can construct positively better self-images. The study also mentioned the relationship between community awareness and community support where Teplin et al. (2006) claimed that the element of community awareness among prisoners can be enhanced if community members demonstrate care, provide ongoing social support and are accepting towards former prisoners.

Rizal, for example, said his neighbours did not call him negative names. He also viewed labelling and calling others bad names as unethical. Rizal said his neighbours did not dare call him bad names, probably because they knew he was a prisoner and how he tried his best to fit in with the neighbourhood community. This situation led him to feel respected, "Most of my neighbours do not dare call me bad names. It is unethical and rude. They are afraid to talk bad about me, mainly when they know that I am a former prisoner."

Additionally, this study found the influence of neighbourhood communities was a two-way process. Muiz, for example, stated he succeeded in changing and re-integrating with society because he showed indifference to neighbours who treated

him poorly. Muiz said, "I am simply indifferent when the neighbours look cynically at me. For me, there will come a time when they will stop talking. Until then, I will just live as if nothing had happened."

The second attitude that needs to be instilled amongst former prisoners is a boldness to mingle with society. The three informants stated they had successfully re-integrated because of their perspective—they often joined various community programmes or activities organised by their neighbourhood. They deemed this involvement as the best medium to get closer with their neighbours.

Although Syafiq mentioned that he managed to re-integrate into community life, he did not deny being rejected and discriminated at the time of his release. He revealed the community had discriminated against him and cast him aside initially:

> For example, when I sat in a coffee shop at the beginning of my release from prison, my neighbours would get up and leave. Similarly, when I went to the mosque, the mosque members would not talk to me. Even when I went to work, it was difficult because the neighbours already knew my history. But, Alhamdulillah, they do not treat my children differently; they did nothing. They only discriminated against me upon my release.

Over time, Syafiq still attempted to mingle with the community, regardless of their views, which finally caused them to accept him. He also said that he now frequently joins neighbourhood community activities such as religious activities in mosques and gatherings (i.e., wedding feasts, engagement, circumcision).

Avoidance of peers' negative influence

Former prisoners that select their peer relationships could also gain a turning point in life. Some former prisoners choose to avoid friends involved in past crimes while others choose the opposite. This factor also contributes to the formation of social control within the former prisoners. Avoidance of negative peer influence is one of the protective factors that prevents former prisoners from re-engaging in crime. Intermingling with criminal peers often leads to long-term anti-social behaviour, stemming from a conversation, invitation, and so forth (Taylor and Becker 2015). Besides, this study found that maturity level could also lead to the cessation of crime among the informants. The three informants who quit crime revealed a high degree of maturity and regret when giving their opinions on past criminal activities. They further added that they refused to mix with their old-time friends, as they feared being influenced.

All three experienced better life events throughout re-integration, including owning a residence, family acceptance, being employed, and having a life purpose. They also reported that they did not have time to associate with peers because of their jobs. Additionally, they did not want to be associated with negative peers, as they were aware of the destructive influence that could force them to re-engage in activities which, in turn, could lead to imprisonment (Warr 2002).

The three informants managed to evade a return to drug use because they took the initiative to avoid mixing with their old friends who were still on drugs. Muiz stated that if he associated with such friends again, there would be a high possibility that he would get caught up in substance addiction again. Syafiq even refused to hang out at night because drug-related activities are usually rife during this time. By avoiding nights out, he will not have to meet friends who are still using drugs.

Free from drug abuse

Similarly, the problem of addiction that former prisoners face could decide their turning point in life. Being free from drug addiction is one of the critical components of crime desistance amongst former prisoners who have substance problems. This is because, amongst former prisoners, drug addiction is one of the most burdensome illnesses to recover from. This study found that all three informants had no addiction problems; two had never taken any drugs while another had previously experienced drugs but managed to stop upon release.

> I once had drug addiction problems. After being released, I successfully eliminated my addiction. Now, I do not have any drug addiction problems. (Muiz)
>
> I do not have any drug addiction, and I have never used drugs. The same goes for alcohol. (Syafiq)
>
> I have never taken drugs and I am free from any addiction. (Rizal)

Health and well-being amongst former prisoners

Former prisoners' physical health and well-being affect the success of their social integration into community life (Malik-Kane and Visher 2008). However, in-depth studies have shown that the relationship between good health and crime prevention is still not proven. Most studies focused on former prisoners' health problems such as HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C, tuberculosis and liver disease. Still, not many studies have investigated the well-being and health of former prisoners. This study

found that the three successful informants had good health and were free from any infectious or chronic disease.

The answers given by the three informants caused the researchers to seek out their view on the advantages of living in a community while being healthy and free from disease. The researchers also wanted to find out more about their thoughts on the interaction between health and a better life.

> Since I don't have any illnesses, I am at a very good health phase. I can do my daily routines. I even have no problems doing my work as a construction labourer. I can see the benefits of being free from disease.
>
> When I have good health, I can do anything. I can go anywhere, without any impediments. Because I'm healthy, I can move freely. For me, well-being and health are closely related. If we are free from illness, our lives become more organised and happier. My body will be healthy, and so too my mental state.

Therefore, good health and being free from any disease allow the former prisoners to realise their ambitions, survive their surroundings, and lead a long and productive life (Barry and Jenkins 2007).

CONCLUSION

This study explored the interaction between life events and self-control to explain the criminal behaviour of former prisoners. It predicts that if the former prisoners' life events are positive, their social control will increase, and thus their level of criminal behaviour will reduce over time. Some turning points can influence the criminal behaviour of former prisoners upon release from prison. This study confirms that the behaviour of the former prisoner often resulted from a lack of social control and usually developed because of changes in life events.

The factors that lead to crime desistance among former prisoners provide a clearer picture of the real reason for their successful integration. This study found that the former prisoners' return to their families secured a place to stay. Besides, the positive acceptance from their family also caused them to feel comfortable living together. Meanwhile, married former prisoners had partners who gave endless support and motivation to ensure their successful re-integration into society.

Being employed also lent a sense of purpose to the former prisoners' life and helped them cope. Most of the informants in this study had people around them

that could accept them and did not discriminate. All chose to avoid mingling with bad company, as they are aware of the destructive influence that could resulting. Therefore, most would refuse an invitation from such friends, who could drag them back into crime. This analysis also revealed that two of the three successful informants had no substance issues and all were free from illness. Hence, healthy well-being throughout the integration process led to a positive outcome.

Limitation and Further Study

This study uses qualitative methods and only involved three informants. However, the study's findings may shed an insight into the integrated life and factors that lead to the success of these prisoners in not repeating the crime. Future studies need to seek assistance and cooperation from the Malaysian Prisons Department to identify former inmate informants who have successfully integrated into the community, and policy direction.

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