
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bringing Hope, Restoring Lives: Experiences of Former Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL)

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ABSTRACT

The high rate of recidivism among juvenile offenders worldwide highlights the need for effective rehabilitation programs. This study explores the experiences of former child in conflict with the law (CICL) in the Philippines who underwent rehabilitation programs. Through comprehensive purposive sampling, six Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) from Leyte, three from Southern Leyte, and one from Biliran were interviewed. Using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological data analysis, it found that structured routines and assigned tasks positively impacted personal growth and development. Discipline, responsibility, and accountability were important for rehabilitation. While social isolation and limitations on freedom were challenges, increased chores as restitution promoted accountability and contributed to the rehabilitation environment. Vocational training programs equipped CICL with marketable skills, and personal growth fostered stronger family relationships. This study improves understanding of factors influencing rehabilitation program success and their positive impact on former CICL.

KEYWORDS

children in conflict with the law, youth rehabilitation program, former child offender, juvenile delinquency, youth rehabilitation center

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1.0. Introduction

Rates of reoffending among juvenile offenders are cause for concern for those involved in criminal justice agencies around the world. In North America, for example, the recidivism rate for young people leaving custody has been reported to be as high as 96 per cent (Lewis et al. 2019). In another study, 88 per cent of British males between 14 and 16 years reoffended within two years of release from custody (Hagell 2022). Re-offending among juveniles following community orders appears to be much lower, but the majority still reoffend. In Australia, a Victorian government study into recidivism among juvenile justice clients (DHS 2019) reported that nearly half (41%) of a sample of more than 1,500 juvenile justice clients reoffended, with this rate rising to 61 per cent for those who had previously been on supervised orders.

Such statistics provide a strong rationale for juvenile justice services to scrutinise their models of service delivery and maximise the effectiveness of their rehabilitation programs. It is encouraging that effective rehabilitation programs are available. The term 'program' refers to treatments designed by social workers to reduce recidivism. This paper does not discuss other types of programs, such as those administered by the police and courts for example, diversionary programs (Bridson et al, 2017). In relation to juvenile justice in particular, the children's department and its officers are obliged to promote the rehabilitation of children so that they can be re-integrated in society as responsible citizens and to ensure that children placed in government institutions are provided with basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter besides general rehabilitation (Cradle, 2020).

In Kenya, borstal institutions are provided for in detail in the Borstal Institutions Act CAP 92. Children in conflict with the law when found guilty of offences may either be committed to approved schools if the child is 15 years old or younger or borstal institutions, if they are over 16 years old. The Borstal Act empowers the Minister to establish or dissolve a Borstal Institution. The rehabilitation process of children in conflict with the law must meet key requirements including an enabling environment for the children's growth, proper sanitary arrangements, water supply, food, clothing and bedding for the inmates thereof the means of giving such inmates educational, industrial or agricultural training; and an infirmary or proper place for the reception of inmates who are ill (Menis, 2020).

The juvenile justice system in India has taken a punitive turn as a result of the creation of gendered concepts for a specific group of male child offenders. On the other hand, juvenile delinquency is dealt with through "barunding in Indonesia's Tembilahan society (Kumar, 2020). Barunding is an effective method for addressing juvenile delinquency in the Tembilahan community because it does not cause trauma to the child or juvenile (Mianita & Rinaldi, 2021). This also linked to the juvenile justice system in Japan which is modelled after the western *parens patriae* system, with a focus on rehabilitation, protection, and the overall well-being of the accused kid (Dawkins & Gibson, 2020).

In the Philippines, there has been a noticeable upsurge in literature dedicated to the exploration of intervention and rehabilitation programs for CICL, including initiatives such as Bahay Pag-Asa. In 2020, Cortel (2020) conducted a study that delved into diversion programs, with a focus on the Bahay Pag-Asa program, serving as a center-based diversion offering "residential and rehabilitation facilities for CICL" (Cortel, 2020). The study revealed that programs promoting more meaningful and active participation yielded more engaging and impactful interventions (Cortel, 2020).

Apparently, studies on juvenile delinquency are usually conducted among youth offenders who are still inside rehabilitation centers while others evaluate the services in rehabilitation centers. Other researches involved only the governments' perspectives on youth rehabilitation programs as well as those first time juvenile offenders. There is no study conducted in rural setting which attempt to describe the unique life circumstances, thought processes, feelings, emotions, and perceptions of former children-in-conflict-with-the-law (CICL) who were subjected to rehabilitation program while their sentence was suspended. As such, this prompting the researchers to conduct this study.

The current study investigates the research objectives, primarily exploring into the life experiences of the former Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) on the rehabilitation programs in Leyte Islands, Philippines. Second, the study investigates how the informants cope with the problems they encountered during their rehabilitation. Finally, the current study focuses on the impacts of the rehabilitation programs to the lives of the informants and their families. The researchers' experience will enable them to conduct this study and make effective use of the findings gleaned from the informants' responses. Exploring the informants' experiences will provide the local government units and other focal agencies with concrete foundations for program creation to address the provinces persistent problem of repetition of offenses among children in conflict with law.

2.0 Methods

The study used a qualitative approach, specifically the transcendental phenomenological method, to investigate the experiences of former Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) in Leyte. This method is suitable because it aims to understand the meaning and essence of their experiences. The study was conducted in the different provinces of Leyte Island, Philippines. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Field Offices 8, responsible for social welfare services in Leyte, Southern Leyte, and Biliran, manages the Regional Rehabilitation Center for Youth (RRCY) in Tanuan, Leyte. This institution houses CICL's who are convicted or have pending cases.

The study interviewed 10 former Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) from Leyte, Southern Leyte, and Biliran. Six were from Leyte, three from Southern Leyte, and one from Biliran. Comprehensive purposive sampling was used, and individual interviews were conducted to maintain confidentiality. Informants had to be former CICL from the provinces, have undergone court proceedings and rehabilitation, be 18 or older, and willingly participate with signed consent.

The researchers used an interview guide with open-ended questions to gather data. The guide followed the research main problem and sub-problems, with 3-4 questions per sub-problem. Interviews were conducted in-depth using audio recorders and diaries. An informed consent form was signed by informants before the interview. The interview guide was reviewed and validated by a panel, and pilot-tested on two children in Sogod, Southern Leyte, to assess its reliability, time allocation, format, and question sequencing. This helped identify areas for clarification and probing.

The researchers obtained permission from the DSWD Field Office VIII to conduct the study. After ethical review approval, they informed potential informants and their parents about the study and obtained their consent. Interviews were scheduled, and informants were informed of the process, privacy, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and there were no rewards. Data

gathering took one month. The researchers analyzed the data using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological data analysis strategy, which involved seven steps to extract and analyze themes.

Afterwards, the researchers shared preliminary findings with participants for feedback to ensure accuracy and completeness. They prioritized participant well-being by mitigating risks such as trauma, discrimination, and confidentiality breaches. They also offered potential benefits like empowerment, hearing their voices, and improved services. The researchers ensured equal opportunity for all eligible CICL to participate, regardless of background or socioeconomic status. They encouraged questions and clarifications to ensure participants fully understood the research process and their role. The informed consent emphasized their right to freely choose to participate or decline at any stage without pressure or coercion. The researcher ensured the study's dependability by providing clear details about the research methods, maintaining detailed records, critically examining data interpretations, and seeking participant feedback. This approach enhances transparency, replicability, and auditability.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The researchers analyzed the data through a rigorous process involving multiple readings, extraction of significant statements, formulation of core meanings, and clustering of themes. This analysis resulted in the identification of six themes that comprehensively describe the key informants' experiences. These themes address the study's objectives and provide a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives.

Empowering discipline and growth through structured routine

The informants had positive experiences with the structured routines and rotational assignments within the Youth Rehabilitation Center. They followed the daily schedule, which included activities like prayer, meals, tasks, leisure time, and rest. This routine helped instill responsibility, discipline, and personal growth among the residents.

For instance,

"Oh, when we wake up at five o'clock, we pray. After that, we clean up, then eat. We also have time to play basketball from eight to ten. Then we eat again. (Laughs) Eating again, we eat around eleven. Then, at one o'clock, we rest and watch TV. Then at three, we work again. At three, we recite the Angelus. At six-thirty, we eat again and then watch TV. That's how it is" (ID16:SS2).

"As I wake up, pray, pray immediately. Then we do our assignments. After that, we eat then we watched TV, then back to our assignment in the afternoon. We do sweeping, cooking, just like that" (ID18:SS1).

"Yes, we have assignment. Like you Nel, you will be in charged in cooking viands. Then you, you will cook for. Just like that. Two persons will help each other. Then it was good, it's was all the same. Since your assignment was in rotation, you will be assigned in plants, and in other areas. Every month there was a rotation. That was what happened, you would be tasked in watering the plants. The management there just want to give us all fair assignments" (ID19:SS2).

Feeling like a wallflower: social isolation in youth rehabilitation

The informants felt isolated and alone during their initial period in the youth rehabilitation center. They experienced challenges in adjusting to the strict rules and regulations, which limited their personal freedom and social interaction. This isolation led to feelings of awkwardness, boredom, and difficulty in upholding personal freedoms.

For example,

"It was hard because for weeks I was subjected to no communication. If you are new, you are not allowed to join in the majority of the kids. During your first week, you just keep on observing the behaviors of the other kids so that you can adjust the environment. You are not allowed yet by the social worker. They just put you there near the house parents' room. You are just staying there, not allowed to join playing basketball for a week, and you are also not allowed to chat with the other kids. Otherwise you will be scolded" (ID12:SS5).

"What they did was, we were placed in co NoCom in which we were not allowed to mingle with others. That is one thing which we considered as challenge because we were not free for what we want to do especially those are new" (ID16:SS24).

"Yes, I was first assigned in the kitchen without company. From the time I came there, it was almost 2 weeks there I wasn't allowed to have contact to other youth" (ID15:SS5).

Restitution through increased chores

The informants were assigned additional chores as a consequence of their mistakes within the rehabilitation center. These chores were designed to make amends and contribute positively to the rehabilitation environment. The severity of the offense determined the type and duration of the additional chores, which could include tasks like cleaning shared spaces, assisting with meals, or undertaking additional cleaning duties. Non-compliance with these additional chores could result in further consequences, such as being tasked to clean the kitchen and comfort rooms.

For instance,

"There, they were really strict. You must abide to their rules all the time. Otherwise you will be punished. Just like the time when I was caught stealing foods, I was tasked to clean the kitchen and comforts rooms aside from my assignment for three days as punishment" (ID11:SS20)

"I will tell you this. Eventually, it seemed like I was bored. Thus, we went out, we went out, we went to the beach. We went to the beach. It was fun, enjoyable too. But we got scolded for that, scolded a lot by our Ma'am, and I was really ashamed of what I've done. I was really misbehaving. Afterwards, I was given a punishment. I was assigned to clean the grounds alone. It was not really easy" (ID16:SS23).

"It was not easy. You will be punished with washing dishes, washing the plates and huge pots" (ID18:SS17).

Orchestrates precision of action through discipline

The informants developed a coping mechanism that emphasized structured and deliberate responses to challenges. This discipline-based approach involved maintaining strict adherence to routines and strategies, which helped them stay committed to recovery goals, overcome obstacles, and build resilience. By prioritizing discipline, the informants were able to manage their daily tasks effectively and avoid punishment, demonstrating a proactive approach to maintaining order and achieving their goals.

During the interview, informants expressed,

"I was afraid to make mistakes. I was afraid to be given punishment. That is why I asked those older youth on what should I do. They said that once you wake up late, possibly you can't be able to take a bath because many will be using it. As a result, you will be punished" (ID16:SS33)

"Once you have not taken a bath, you cannot have your breakfast, so you have to persevere to take a bath before 5:00 am" (ID11:SS33).

"That thing sir, they also gave me an advice. They advised me what you to do and then I followed like being kind, following orders so that I will not incur bad record. Otherwise, you will have to stay longer there" (ID13:SS9)

Planting of learning to harvest a fruitful life journey

The informants gained valuable vocational skills through training programs offered at the youth rehabilitation center. These skills, such as carpentry, auto mechanics, culinary arts, and haircutting, equipped them with practical knowledge and essential workplace skills. Upon release, these vocational skills helped them find sustainable livelihoods and reduce the risk of recidivism.

For example,

"I have many plans because I can finally do what I need to do. Like this I already built my own barber shop. Atleast I used what learned in the center" (ID14:SS11).

"I learned to be a mechanic, sir, and to sew shoes. Now my livelihood, sir, is being a mechanic. Sometimes I sew shoes, sir, to support my family, sir. I have a child, sir, so that's our livelihood, sir" (IDI10:SS13).

"Yes, I was really enhanced there, like my ability in cooking. It is very useful because I am hired now as a cook" (IDI1:SS45)

Personal growth is the compass toward a stronger familial harbor

The informants' personal growth positively impacted their familial relationships. They developed new skills, perspectives, and behaviors, fostering understanding and communication within their families. Personal growth empowered them to take on active roles, contribute financially, provide emotional support, and demonstrate resilience and determination. The unwavering support from their families played a crucial role in their positive progress and continued growth after their release from the rehabilitation center.

Informants stated,

"I was stubborn before. It was even harder back then because I was not mature yet. So now that I am back, it already better since I can bond with my family and my aunts, we are all together" (IDI2:SS12)

"Let's get straight to my mother, to my family because I am newly married. They were surprised because when we were still young, I did not wash dishes. But after my release, I do wash the dishes, cook rice, and do household chores. Not that always doing the household chores but the changes are evident. That is why I feel that I am close to them. I already feel comfortable when I am with them" (IDI1:SS51).

"They are so happy that I am back home because it is not easy. The loneliness and the expenses of going back and forth. They feel more convenient now because I am already here to help them. I am here to help them in planting to earn money. Unlike before that I was always with my friends and drink liquors. I can use now the teachings from my houseparents. I will share this also to my siblings" (IDI6:SS38).

The informants had positive experiences with the structured routines and rotational assignments within the Youth Rehabilitation Center. These schedules instilled discipline, responsibility, and personal growth among the residents. The informants' adherence to these routines demonstrates their willingness to participate in the rehabilitation process and their recognition of the routines' benefits. This aligns with the Mode of Change Theory by Procheska and Declemente (1983), where individuals initially may not realize the benefits of structured routines but later recognize their positive impact on personal growth and rehabilitation.

Moreover, the study highlights that restrictions on individual freedom, such as social isolation for new arrivals, can serve a legitimate societal purpose within youth rehabilitation centers. While these restrictions may be challenging for individuals, they can help create a structured environment conducive to rehabilitation and ensure compliance with rules and regulations. The study also suggests that rules, norms, and laws are upheld through consequences for non-compliance. This deterrence approach promotes accountability and maintains order. Informants testified that additional chores were assigned as consequences for wrongdoing, serving to correct behavior and contribute to the household. This aligns with deterrence theory, which posits that individuals are less likely to commit crimes if they perceive the punishment to be swift, certain, and severe (Williams et al. 2023).

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of discipline in the rehabilitation process. By cultivating discipline, youths can regulate their behaviors, emotions, and impulses, fostering stability and consistency. Discipline empowers them to adhere to therapeutic routines, engage actively in counseling, and participate constructively in group activities. It also encourages accountability and responsibility, guiding youths to take ownership of their actions. Structured practices like mindfulness exercises, goal-setting, and reflection equip youths with coping strategies to manage stress, triggers, and setbacks effectively. Ultimately, discipline supports rehabilitation and empowers youths to cultivate resilience and sustain positive change beyond the rehabilitation center. This aligns with the study of Smith and Johnson (2020) on the impact of structured routines and disciplined approaches in rehabilitation settings for adolescents.

The study highlights that acquiring knowledge, vocational skills, and personal development within the youth rehabilitation center is similar to planting seeds that yield positive outcomes like success, maturity, responsibility, and sustainable livelihood. This

journey of self-growth requires stepping outside one's comfort zone. Vocational skills offer a sense of accomplishment and purpose and directly translate into employability. Mezirow's theory emphasizes that effective learning involves a cyclical process of actively engaging with experiences, reflecting on them, generalizing insights, and applying them in new situations (Cherry 2022).

The informants' personal growth positively impacted their familial relationships. Upon release from rehabilitation, individuals often focus on personal growth to rebuild their lives and strengthen family bonds. Personal growth empowers them to take on active roles within their families, contributing financially, providing emotional support, or taking responsibility for household tasks. Mezirow's theory suggests that personal growth leads to new insights and behaviors that positively influence family dynamics and closeness (Devlin, 2020).

Finally, the study discusses the application of Attachment Theory to understand the relationship between familial closeness and personal growth after release from a youth rehabilitation center. Attachment Theory posits that early attachment experiences influence later relationships and emotional bonds (Abrams et al., 2021). Disruptions in attachment, such as those experienced by youth in rehabilitation centers, can lead to challenges in forming and maintaining close familial ties. However, through intervention and therapeutic support, individuals can progress through the stages of change, from precontemplation to contemplation, preparation, and action, towards reconnecting with family members and rebuilding familial bonds.

Limitations

The study primarily focuses on qualitative research, which provides insights into lived experiences but may not fully capture the quantitative impact of rehabilitation programs. Future research using mixed methods could offer a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the study suggests exploring social worker experiences but lacks specific details about the types of experiences or the depth of the investigation. A more in-depth qualitative study focusing on social worker challenges, successes, and perceived effectiveness could provide valuable insights. Furthermore, the study recommends comparing initiatives from different regions but lacks a framework for comparison. Future research could develop a standardized assessment tool to evaluate the effectiveness of rehabilitation centers across regions. Finally, the study recommends incorporating research findings into educational provider practices but lacks specific strategies or recommendations. Future research could develop practical guidelines or training programs for educators to address the needs of children at risk of or involved in criminal activity.

Implication

The study presents comprehensive findings on the challenges and opportunities faced by Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) in the Philippines. It emphasizes the importance of a multifaceted approach involving government, communities, families, and individuals to ensure effective prevention, rehabilitation, and successful reintegration of CICL.

At the government level, the study recommends increased funding for high-quality rehabilitation programs to support CICL's personal growth and reintegration into society. It also highlights the need for ongoing support systems and structured programs to facilitate access to education, vocational training, and supportive environments for former CICL. The Local Government Unit (LGU) plays a crucial role in fostering safer and more just communities by implementing evidence-based policies and programs focused on prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

The study further suggests that the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) should continue monitoring former CICL after their release into the community to ensure their acceptance and integration. Advocacy campaigns and community awareness initiatives can help dispel stereotypes and prejudices associated with CICL. Additionally, the DSWD should guide CICL towards continuing education opportunities within the community.

The community, including education, religious groups, local officials, and businesses, has a collective responsibility to guide children towards becoming law-abiding citizens. The education sector can integrate lessons about CICL and delinquency into curriculum and extracurricular activities. The religious sector can foster spiritual growth and moral values among children. Local officials can engage children in positive community activities and enforce curfews. The business sector should be more open in accepting former CICL into their businesses to help them sustain themselves as they reintegrate into the community.

The study also reveals the crucial role families play in the reintegration of former CICL. By providing unconditional acceptance, love, and support, families can create a nurturing environment where former CICL feel valued and understood. Open communication, realistic expectations, stability in routines, and emotional support are essential during their transition back into community life. Families should also facilitate access to support services and encourage participation in positive activities.

Finally, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by CICL and offers recommendations for effective interventions. A collaborative effort involving government, communities, families, and individuals is essential to ensure the successful prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration of CICL, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive society.

4.0 Conclusion

The study provides valuable insights into the experiences of former CICL who underwent rehabilitation programs. It highlights the positive impact of structured routines and assignments on personal growth and development, as well as the importance of discipline, responsibility, and accountability in the rehabilitation process. While social isolation and challenges related to personal freedoms were encountered, the study also reveals the positive role of restitution through increased chores in promoting accountability and contributing to the rehabilitation environment. Additionally, the study underscores the significance of personal growth in fostering stronger familial relationships and the importance of vocational training programs in equipping CICL with marketable skills for sustainable employment. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the factors influencing the success of rehabilitation programs and their positive impact on the lives of former CICL.

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