
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond Troubled Childhood: Lived Experiences of Former Children in Conflict with the Law

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| ABSTRACT

Crime does not discriminate, and criminals are not solely represented by a single set of characteristics. It is delicate while at the same time inevitably controversial to shed light on the circumstances of young people being entangled in the justice system for having committed an offense. It is the responsibility of the criminal justice system to safeguard their interests and encourage their reintegration into society. This study explored the lived experiences of Former Children in Conflict with the Law using transcendental phenomenology. The informants of this study were ten (10) Former CICL's throughout the Province of Negros Occidental who were subjected to individual in-depth interview and focused group discussion. Four (4) emergent themes described the positive and negative experiences of the informants as CICLs during their rehabilitation. For the positive experiences, two (2) themes were developed, namely: The Prodigal Son is Home: Former CICLs' Change of Heart and The Reformation of a Lost Soul: The Rehabilitation Programs in the Center. For the negative experiences, two (2) themes were formulated, namely: Disheartening Encounters with the Juvenile Justice and Welfare System in the Philippines and A Long Road Home: Challenges of the Former CICLs. As to the Coping of the Informants with the Challenges during Rehabilitation two (2) themes were created, namely: Entertainment, Companionship and Prayer, and Heaven Sent: The Kindness of a Rescuer. For the impact of the rehabilitation process, three (3) themes were formulated, to wit: Liberation: Reintegration to into the Community, Agent for Change to Fellow CICLs, and Padayon: Leaving Behind the Troubled with the Fruits of Transformation.

| KEYWORDS

Former Children in Conflict with the Law, Juvenile Justice and Welfare System, Rehabilitation, Reformation and Republic Act No. 9344

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1. Introduction

Crime does not discriminate, and criminals are not solely represented by a single set of characteristics. It is delicate while at the same time inevitably controversial to shed light on the circumstances of young people being entangled in the justice system for having committed an offense. It is the responsibility of the criminal justice system to safeguard their interests and encourage their reintegration into society if they are unavoidably involved in legal processes. The United Nations has recognized this problem and, through its convention, guiding principles, norms, and directives, developed a benchmark model of juvenile criminal justice. The Philippines as a member country of the United Nations signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Child, resulting to Republic Act No. 9344 or the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act, This was later amended by Republic Act No. 10630. The latter has built an extensive restorative juvenile justice and welfare system with the goal of progressively bolstering the Philippine's juvenile justice and welfare system for the youth (Abot, 2018). In essence, Republic Act No. 9344 states that the State shall safeguard children's and youth's interests by taking steps to ensure adherence of international child protection standards. This is done in recognition of the important role that children and youth play in nation- building. In the case of CICL, the State must incorporate restorative justice principles into all its laws, policies, and initiatives (Palomares, 2018).

The Philippines had 15,896 CICL from January to December of 2020, according to data from the PNP Crime Information Reporting and Analysis System as of January 15, 2021. This number was then increased by 4,138 CICL from January to April of 2021. Approximately 93% of the violations were perpetrated by male children, and 97% of those who violated the law were between the ages of 12 and 17. Most of these kids have engaged in theft, violations of the 2002 Dangerous Drugs Acts, and even the heinous crimes of rape and murder.

The exposure of a young mind in the complexities and harshness of the criminal justice system is a poignant encounter that has a rippling effect on the child development and who the child will be as an individual and adult. Depending upon the quality of the encounter, it can either result to the reformation of the child or his devastation. The multi-faceted programs offered in the justice system is geared in bringing about a positive change to the child, it is a must to evaluate the impact of such measure. There are several studies conducted on children in conflict with the law which looked mainly at their profile and how it relates to the crimes they have committed and their experiences while undergoing the juvenile justice system. However, there is a dearth on research conducted on the lives and outcome of the CICL after they have undergone the rehabilitation program under the Department of Social Welfare and Development or *barangay*. The experiences of former children in conflict with the law mirror the quality of the juvenile justice and welfare system of the Philippines, magnifying the stories of the former CICL will give an understanding of the quality of program offered in the juvenile justice and welfare system.

The findings of this study may serve as reference and basis for the creation of an Enhancement Plan. Thus, a system that responds to the needs of its client not only while they are undergoing the program but even after they have successfully fulfilled such, and most importantly a system with a lifetime positive impact on the lives of once Children in Conflict with the Law. This is crucial since that their experiences in the JJWS have a big impact on the quality of life an individual will lead after the whole proceeding concludes.

2. Literature Review

The Theory of Criminal Desistance by Sampson and Laub (1993) explains how and why people stop committing crimes as they grow older. This theory focuses on life events and relationships that help individuals move away from a criminal lifestyle. Sampson and Laub believe that people can change, especially when they experience positive turning points in life, such as getting a stable job, getting married, or joining the military. These events help build stronger social bonds, which lead to more responsible behavior and less involvement in crime.

According to the theory, not all people who commit crimes continue doing so forever. Many individuals age out of crime because of changes in their life circumstances. As people grow older, they often develop stronger ties to family, work, or community. These ties encourage them to follow rules and avoid risky behavior. In other words, changes in a person's social life play a big role in whether or not they continue breaking the law (Sampson & Laub, 2002).

Sampson and Laub (2002) also talk about the importance of human agency. This means that people are not just controlled by their past or their environment, they can make choices. Even if someone had a troubled childhood or criminal past, they can still choose to live a better life if given the right opportunities and support. Desistance from crime is seen as a process, not something that happens overnight. It often takes time and several positive experiences before a person fully turns away from crime.

In summary, the Theory of Criminal Desistance highlights how personal growth, positive relationships, and major life changes can help people stop committing crimes. It shows that with support and chances to improve, people can change their paths. This theory gives hope that rehabilitation is possible and that people should not be judged only by their past mistakes (Sampson & Laub, 2002).

Cognitive Transformation Theory by Giordano et al. (2002) explains how people who once committed crimes can change their behavior and choose to live a law-abiding life. This theory focuses on how people's thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes play a big role in changing their actions. It doesn't just look at outside factors like family or environment, but also looks closely at how a person's thinking must shift before they truly change their behavior.

The theory suggests that there are four main steps in this transformation. First, the person must become open to change. Without this openness, no other step can happen. Second, they start to see a new, better version of themselves and begin to imagine what life would be like if they changed. Third, they start to think differently about their past behavior, especially criminal acts. They begin to see these actions as harmful or no longer acceptable. Finally, they create and accept a new identity that fits with a non-criminal lifestyle (Giordano et al., 2002).

A key idea in this theory is that change doesn't happen just because someone is punished or forced to do something. Instead, real and lasting change happens when a person makes a personal decision to think and act differently. Friends, family, or even new life

events (like becoming a parent or getting a job) can help push this change, but the person still needs to decide for themselves that they want to change (Giordano et al., 2002).

In simple terms, Cognitive Transformation Theory shows that the way a person thinks is very important when it comes to stopping criminal behavior (Giordano et al., 2002). It helps us understand that even if someone has done bad things in the past, they can still change if they shift their mindset and truly believe in a better future for themselves.

Lastly, Reformatory Theory by Sarma (2019) is a theory of punishment that focuses on changing or improving the behavior of a criminal instead of just punishing them. It believes that people commit crimes for many reasons, such as poor upbringing, lack of education, or bad influences. Instead of treating criminals as hopeless, this theory sees them as individuals who can still become better if given the right help. The main goal is to fix the root causes of criminal behavior and help the person become a better member of society.

This theory supports the use of rehabilitation programs inside prisons. These programs may include counseling, education, job training, and other support services. The idea is that when a person understands their mistakes and gains new skills, they are less likely to break the law again. Reformatory Theory believes that a second chance and proper guidance can reduce repeat crimes and make communities safer (Sarma, 2019).

Supporters of this theory also believe that harsh punishment, like long prison terms or the death penalty, does not always solve the problem. Instead, such punishments can make a person even more angry or hopeless. Reformatory Theory encourages a more humane approach, where the focus is on helping the offender rather than hurting them. This approach respects human dignity and promotes positive change (Sarma, 2019).

In many countries today, the justice system is starting to use more reformatory methods, especially for young offenders and first-time criminals (Sarma, 2019). Rehabilitation centers, community service, and restorative justice programs are examples of how Reformatory Theory is used in real life. Society can help reduce crime in the long run by giving offenders a chance to change.

A Child in Conflict with the Law is put in a rehabilitation center and not in a correctional institution, the purpose is to reform him. The object is to bring about the moral reform of the child. He must be educated and taught some art or industry during this period so that he may be able to start his life again after his release from jail. Here the emphasis is placed not on the crime itself, the harm caused or the deterrence effect which punishment may have, but on the person and the personality of the offender. Thus, it is expected that upon conclusion of their sentence Child in Conflict with the Law will be able to lead a law-abiding life and be successfully integrated into the community.

In the Philippines, all children who have broken the law are provided with the necessary safeguards, such as made possible by the United Nations Convention on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and other pertinent international agreements on juvenile justice that will promote their worth and dignity as people and encourage them to take an active role in social change. The primary law enforcing such policies and governing the processing of Juvenile Offenders or Children in Conflict with the Law in the country is the Republic Act No. 9344 (2006). The said law defines Juvenile Justice and Welfare System as a system dealing with children at risk and children in conflict with the law, which provides child-appropriate proceedings, including programs and services for prevention, diversion, rehabilitation, re- integration and aftercare to ensure their normal growth and development. A Filipino juvenile offender is legally address as Children in Conflict with the Law, a child who is alleged as, accused of, or adjudged as, having committed an offense under Philippine laws (Republic Act No. 9344, 2006).

Additionally, the Juvenile Justice System in the Philippines was strengthened by Republic Act No. 10630 (2013), which also maintained children under the age of fifteen (15) years' immunity from criminal responsibility. However, a child who is over 12 and under 15 years old who commits significant crimes that carry sentences of more than 12 years must be involuntarily admitted to an Intensive Juvenile Intervention and Support Center. Children who have broken the law more than three times are also deemed repeat offenders and must participate in intervention programs under the supervision of the neighborhood social welfare and development officers.

At its core, Republic Act No. 9344 (2006) mandates that the State, in recognition of the importance of youth and children in forming a nation, and the need to safeguard their steps that guarantee the observance of their interests worldwide guidelines for protecting children. The State must incorporate restorative justice ideas into all of its laws, policies, and programs in the case of Children in Conflict with the Law. The victim and the perpetrator must both agree to participate in a community mediation process together in order to comply with the restorative justice system's requirements.

These records maybe attributed to the lack of access to quality schooling, social exclusion, poor living conditions and the absence of social programs that prevent risk behaviors, furthermore that the adolescents' life stories were related to events that happened during childhood, such as the emotional context and family functioning, the impact of witnessing family violence (in two of the

cases), and the way they learned to express their masculinity by using psychoactive substances and transgressing the law (Toiber-Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Abram and Terry (2017) emphasized in their book that, formerly incarcerated youth enter adulthood with significantly fewer economic and social capital resources than other young people their age, even compared to those from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Uggen & Wakefield, 2005).

This is partially because of time spent in institutional settings that are far removed from real-world circumstances and developmental opportunities. For example, institutionalized young people have far less control over their daily routines and fewer opportunities to learn from their mistakes or to take natural risks than those who remain at home (Chung et al., 2005).

Yet paradoxically, formerly incarcerated young adults also find themselves navigating major responsibilities at younger ages, as they are more likely to live on their own, work full-time, and become parents than their same-aged peers (Foster & Gifford, 2005). In this sense, the transition to adulthood for formerly incarcerated youth can be viewed as expedited in a context in which many middle-class young people are delaying the adoption of adult roles and responsibilities.

Another study highlighting the challenges of formerly incarcerated youths is that of Fulgham (2020). He conducted the study on the youth in Cuyahoga County juvenile drug court who lack the resources to successfully graduate from the program. Data shows that participants who fail to graduate from the program often recidivate. Findings of the study present that participants from suburban areas had a higher graduation rate than their urban counterparts. Also, it is noted that parental support is a key component to participants success in the program.

Furthermore, Fulgham (2020) cited the findings of Long & Sullivan, (2017), which states that "Although juvenile drug programs are considered successful in modifying adolescent behavior and drug use many minority juveniles and adolescents from low-income communities may not be privy to these specialized programs. In addition, minority juveniles and juveniles from low-income neighborhoods may not possess the resources necessary to graduate successfully from the program. Participants from low-income residents may be reared in a single parent household, lack community resources, socioeconomic status, and lack the transportation necessary to complete the drug court program successfully.

A similar study was conducted by Pinanzu (2017) identified in the manuscript as Juvenile ex-offenders, now adults or JOENAs. It utilized a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis. There were fifteen (15) participants who join the study, all share their personal experiences to achieve the threefold objectives which are as follows, (a) exploring the experiences of successful reintegration as a JEONA after incarceration that enhanced participants' sustainable reintegration and successful reentry into the community; (b) understanding what these experiences meant to the participants; and (c) understanding the experiences of successful JEONAs in terms of their developmental, emotional, mental, psychological, and social coping mechanisms that promoted sustainable reintegration and successful reentry in the community. The study concentrated on the whole phenomenon of effective JEONAs' reentry experiences in terms of their developmental, emotional, mental, psychological, and social coping strategies that improved long-term reintegration into society.

Another one was Tudtud, et al. (2017) who conducted a phenomenological study that utilizes Heideggerian philosophy to expound on the experiences of seven (7) informants who were once CICLs rehabilitated through a child rescue center in Cebu. Data collection was done through interviews. Transcription and analysis were done after each session. The series of interviews were conducted until data saturation was obtained and themes were formed. The vanManen's framework for data analysis was used to illuminate the experiences of CICLs. The study yielded four (4) essential themes to depict the lived experiences of individuals who were once Children in Conflict with the Law. The first theme, "Same Feather, Flocks Together", depicts the influence of social relationships which ultimately spurs one to be engaged in unlawful activities. The second theme, "Survival of the Fittest" reflects the informants' desperation to satisfy their basic needs in a society not fitting for their kind. These needs triggered their primal instinct to survive at all costs. "The Broken Glass" is the third essential theme which deals with the realization that damage has been done and nothing else can fix the bad outcomes of their behavior.

The last essential theme is "Rainbow after the Rain" which signifies the bittersweet experience of CICLs who went passed the struggles in life and lived to see another day, with new dreams and aspirations. The study showed the vulnerability of this population group as they are exposed to bad influences and poor circumstances in life. These urged them to do unlawful behaviors and reach a point of no return where they have to be forced to give up or live with remorse throughout their lives. The researchers recognized the need to enhance decision-making skills to prevent the recurrence of legal conflicts once the CICLs are brought back to mainstream society.

Nakama (2020) utilized a qualitative narrative inquiry which is meant to contribute to the literature by helping to reduce the gap by exploring and examining formerly detained youths' experiences throughout their childhood and in detention in a juvenile hall. Formerly detained youth were asked to report on their childhood, the factors that they believe led to their detention in a juvenile hall, and their experiences in a juvenile detention facility. This study sought to humanize participants' identities through qualitative narrative inquiry. The study hoped to discover alternative approaches in how to successfully support and motivate youthful offenders' reintegration into their community and reduce their rates of recidivism. The study also examined how detained youths' challenges and the conditions of confinement in juvenile detention facilities impacted their identities. Through purposeful sampling, three participants who were detained in a California juvenile hall in the late 1980s and the late 1990s participated in individual interviews and a focus group to provide the data for the study. After data was collected and analyzed, several themes emerged that were then categorized by the researcher.

The exposure of a youth in the system brings about many challenges to the young lives of these subjects, thus it is crucial to provide an effective program for their reintegration instead of recidivism. Thus, Safira et al. (2021) conducted a study emphasized that in handling children in conflict with the law, it is necessary to have good coordination from law enforcement officials, and formal and non-formal institutions. The aim is to prevent children from committing crimes again that will harm themselves.

A lens on the effectivity of the system is used in the study of Palomares (2018) where she acknowledged that a person is viewed as a product of the surroundings, and his/her shortcomings indicate failure of the system of socialization, the socialization agents and the socio-cultural institutions that shape behavior. For this reason, criminal justice, for the Children in Conflict with the Law, has shifted from a purely punitive stance to restorative justice. This shift considers the welfare of the youth offenders and the interest and protection of the victim and the community (Zajac et al., 2015).

In contrast various studies also presents the adverse effects of the system mentally and emotionally to the exposed children or eventually adults, of the two million youth who encounter the juvenile justice system each year, about one-fifth (20–25%) had a serious emotional problem and 65–70% were thought to have an undiagnosed mental health issue (Jaggers et al., 2018).

Youth who have been maltreated are more likely to have juvenile justice involvement than other youth (Snyder & Smith, 2015). This population is also more likely to have had traumatic experiences, to have been neglected or involved with child welfare services, to have struggled academically, and to need mental health services and substance abuse treatment. Given the effects of both maltreatment and justice system contact, youth appear to experience a "double dose" of trauma impacting the severity of mental health issues.

As the Juvenile Justice System is set up to benefit CICL, difficulties along the way are inevitable, as the previously reviewed findings suggests (Ryan & Testa, 2005). Examining the lived experiences of former Children in Conflict with the Law will give an in depth understanding on how such adversities can be processed to shift for the better. We should never undervalue how much the state values children, yet despite the rules being in place to safeguard them, difficulties are still encountered on occasion. The success of an intervention program for CICLs that addresses these issues is worth looking into to see whether it can turn them into contributing members of society (Pace, 2018).

Over time, the juvenile justice system has experienced reform and examined ways to provide services to juvenile offenders to reintegrate them into society and avoid recidivism. The goal of these efforts is to keep juveniles from becoming adult offenders. The reintegration of former CICL into the community is a sensitive and crucial phase that have a significant influence on the course the CICL will take post-rehabilitation. Reintegration is similar to a large puzzle in that it takes time to assemble all of the pieces that the juvenile needs to get his/her life back on track (Jaggers et al., 2018).

The juvenile probation system is meant to assist juvenile offenders with the reintegration process (Macklin, 2016). To better understand what detained youth have experienced in juvenile halls, research that allows formerly detained youth to share their experiences is essential. Allowing formerly detained youth to share their experiences can increase awareness of ways to prepare youthful offenders for their reintegration into society and help reduce their rates of reoffending. Research is needed on formerly detained youths' experiences in a juvenile hall because it can provide unique insights into how the juvenile halls have impacted their identities and social and academic development as well (Nakama, 2020).

Juvenile reintegration involves the various components of the community. The juvenile is reintegrating into all of these systems, and these are the systems being impacted through recidivism. Families and communities also have the most contact with the juvenile to be able to assist with successful reintegration. Involving these systems in the reintegration process and listening to their needs could increase successful reintegration (Macklin, 2016).

In assisting the youth in their re-entry in the community the roles of various agencies in the community are necessary, Ramos (2022) cited in his study the works of Mueller (2021) stating that research indicates that there is a positive correlation between an individual's bond to their school and involvement in activities at school to the lower likely they will be incarcerated.

The work of Frey et al. (2008) suggests that similar positive correlations were found in students with stronger parental control and more academic motivation. It is important to implement alternative methods and practices for youth from poor communities, troubled backgrounds, and those who are incarcerated to better assist and plan for youths' social and academic development.

Additionally, Sudewo et al. (2020) conducted legal research on the application of restorative justice system through diversion of children in conflict with the law, which is conducted to find solutions to legal issues that arise (know how) in law (Hovey et al., 2017). The study concluded that the principle of restorative justice which is basically an attempt to divert from the criminal justice process to the settlement by deliberation, cannot be applied to all types or levels of crime. However, in certain criminal acts, the application of this principle may be said to be far more effective than conventional criminal justice processes. The principle of restorative justice in Indonesia has begun to be applied to the juvenile justice system. Through restorative justice, a crime is considered as an illness that needs to be cured, not just an unlawful act. Retributive justice theory is able to accommodate the understanding that criminal acts are only a violation of the law. Meanwhile, if it is considered a disease that must be cured, then the treatment must be holistic, comprehensive, involving all elements touched by the crime. In this case, restorative justice is an approach that can be used.

Furthermore, Peralta & Dominguez (2020) focused on the effectiveness of intervention to control, manage or eradicate aggression among young people. The researchers intended to determine if the level of aggression of the Child in Conflict with the Law would be reduced by their participation in the Aggression Management Program which the researchers implemented. The research design of the study is quasi-experimental design due to limited group for comparison and no random assignment made. Working with AMP (as the independent variable) using modular approach, the researchers intentionally manipulate a single treatment group known as the reversal design (ABA method). Eight (8) Children in Conflict with the Law residents of Bahay Kalinga became the final participants of the study.

The research ran for three months from the administration of the test to the implementation of AMP. Results indicate that the participants' level of aggression dropped from high to average and low which are indicative of relative absence of violent behavior and a strong capacity for self-control which was achieved by the participants with the aid of the intervention. Specifically, it signifies that participants acquired the ability to manage physically aggressive impulses. Results indicate that the participants' level of aggression dropped from high to average and low which are indicative of relative absence of violent behavior and a strong capacity for self-control which was achieved by the participants with the aid of the intervention. Specifically, it signifies that participants acquired the ability to manage physically aggressive impulses. The implementation of the psychoeducational group activities and individual counseling sessions resulted in the remarkable changes in the children's behavior as exhibited by the absence of aggressive behaviors which were made more obvious by the development of positive traits. CBT components are useful in teaching the CICL adaptive behavior, whereas EFT is a helpful therapy for processing the CICL's unresolved anger as well as in altering other unpleasant emotions.

Macklin (2016) studied the reintegration of Juvenile Offender to society by examining the effectiveness of advocacy projects. The purpose of the study was to explore the logistics of implementing an advocacy project and if an advocate can help juveniles reintegrate into society. Juvenile offenders who wish to reenter mainstream society will find that this process is impeded. They have difficulty effectively navigating a number of different systems with limited knowledge and support as to how to do so effectively. Many services may be mandated upon their release, such as individual and family counseling, substance abuse treatment, frequent meetings with parole officers, and other requirements. The systems themselves are challenging to navigate in that the juvenile has to understand complex policies and procedures associated with accessing these systems. The systems put in place to assist with reintegration are often overtaxed and do not have resources to help the offender gain access to these services.

The study was conducted as a single case study pilot program to address these issues (Macklin, 2016). The study participant was a juvenile navigating the court process pre-adjudication. The study assisted the juvenile with navigating the court process, learning about possible mandates, and providing resources for local services. The advocate also allowed the participant to discuss his experiences in the system. The project was designed to meet the needs of the participant and prioritize what he viewed as important for successful reintegration. The study used a qualitative method. The design was a pilot study with a single-case study. The population consisted of those youth who had experience with the criminal justice system and who were interested in re-integrating into society. This pilot of the advocacy project was successful.

Furthermore, Fagbongbe (2020) examined educational leaders' perceptions about the most prevalent causes of juvenile delinquency and best practices for the management and remediation of delinquent behavior to allow the reintegration of non-violent juvenile offenders into school. All six participants offered information that supported two themes : educational leaders saw domestic violence and neglect as well as academic difficulties and emotional problems as contributing factors to juvenile criminality. Furthermore, educational leaders to identify the components of a school setting (such as instructors, school culture, or specific regulations) they believed had the greatest potential to reduce or eliminate juvenile delinquency. Structure and emotional

support at school may help to lower delinquency, additionally administrator believed that educational strategies would deter or treat juvenile delinquency. Another finding of the study is that policies that facilitate preventative supports are the best means of preventing and remediating delinquency.

To sum up, this study shows that children who get in trouble with the law go through both good and bad experiences while in rehabilitation. They can change for the better if they are given the right help and support. Some face problems with the justice system and with how their families and communities treat them. Others find strength through prayer, friendships, and the kindness of people who care. This shows how important it is for the justice system to truly support these children so they can return to society as better and more hopeful individuals.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The researcher utilized Transcendental phenomenology in gathering the data from the informant. This design is preferred since that it is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants as this study will dwell on the lived experiences of former Children in Conflict with the Law. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Transcendental phenomenology (TPh) was primarily developed by Husserl, It is a philosophical method of qualitative research that aims to comprehend human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Pure TPh is based on the idea of letting go of any preconceived notions (epoche) to view phenomena through clear lenses, allowing the true significance of events to inevitably emerge with and within their own individuality (Moustakas, 1994). That is why Husserl's concept of epoch (or bracketing) is emphasized, through which the investigator has to set aside her experience, as much as possible and has to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination based on the description of the lived experience presented by the informant. The term "transcendental" means "in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time."

This research design identified three steps to investigate and make meaning of experiences. Initially, epoche, the researcher must disclose her own experiences to set aside judgement, prejudice and view the phenomenon without any biases. Next is transcendental-phenomenological reduction, this is used to describe the essence of the phenomenon which includes bracketing, horizontalizing, organizing invariant qualities and themes, and constructing textural description. And lastly is, imaginative variation this procedure requires imaginations and intuitions to reflect the relationship between themes pertinent to the experience.

3.2 Research Informants

The participants were former Children in Conflict with the Law in Negros Occidental. Ten participants were invited as the informants of the study. The samples or participants in phenomenological research are generally chosen according to what is known as "purposive sampling". Purposive sampling is characterized by the incorporation of specific criteria met by the participants at the moment of selection (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). An individual interview was first conducted with three informants and two (2) groups of focused-group discussion was conducted, the first group consists of two (2) informants and the other group consisting of five (5) informants. The participants have undergone the process of rehabilitation, and they have been committed to a Youth Rehabilitation Center/Bahay Pag-asa for reformation and rehabilitation program. After such process, the participants have successfully fulfilled the rehabilitation that they were granted release.

3.3 Research Instrument

An interview guide was used as the research instrument. It is semi- structured and open-ended. For every three (3) sub-problem, five (5) guide questions to answer the sub-problem. To answer sub-problem number one (1) "What are the experiences of the informants who underwent rehabilitation, including the positive and negative experiences ?", five (5) questions will be asked. And another five (5) for each of the remaining sub-problem such as, sub-problem number two (2) "How did the informants cope with the challenges encountered during the rehabilitation ?" (3) "What is the impact of the rehabilitation program to the lives of the informants ?".

The validity of the instrument was established through consultation for evaluation of the research instrument to three jurors who are expert in qualitative research.

The focus of the phenomenological interview is the description of the meanings of phenomena (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). It is recommendable to carry out some additional interviews to: verify the information obtained, allow the participant the opportunity to provide further detail or expand on the information offered and, lastly, for the participant's final approval. As exposed,

phenomenological interview is complex and requires a great deal of time to scrutinize the studied phenomenon with the necessary depth. It is therefore vital for the researcher to have excellent skills and/or competency in interviewing.

3.4 Research Locale

The study was conducted in the province of Negros Occidental in the year 2023, comprising the cities of particularly in the city of Bacolod, Municipalities of Hinigaran, Binalbagan, La Castellana and Candoni. In each locality the local Department of Social Welfare and Development Office, Youth Rehabilitation Center, Bahay Pag-asa and Barangay, as to the case maybe, will be visited for the gathering of data regarding former CICL.

Negros Occidental is a province in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines dubbed as the sugar capital in the Philippines. The total population in the province is two million four hundred ninety-seven two hundred sixty one (2,497,261) as of 2015, and the recorded number of CICL cases for the year 2021 is fifteen thousand eight hundred ninety-six (15, 896). This is situated approximately at these coordinates of 10.302 (latitude) and 123.907 (longitude) on the Philippine map. Negros Occidental has 13 cities and 18 municipalities with 662 barangays.

The study focused on the city of Bacolod and Municipalities of Hinigaran, Binalbagan, La Castellana and Candoni as the source of informants for the study. Bacolod City is a first class highly urbanized city in the region of Western Visayas with a total area of 2,265.30 km² (874.64 sq mi). It is the capital of the province of Negros Occidental. It has a total of 600,783 inhabitants as of the 2020 census, it is the most populous city in Western Visayas

Municipality of Hinigaran is a first-class coastal municipality situated along the southern coast of Negros Island. Hinigaran covers an area of around 68.53 square kilometers and is composed of 24 barangays (villages).

According to the 2020 census, it has a population of approximately 82,342 people. Municipality of Binalbagan is a coastal municipality in the province of Negros Occidental. The municipality has a land area of 189.96 square kilometers or 73.34 square miles which constitutes 2.42% of Negros Occidental's total area. Its population as determined by the 2020 Census was 71,407.

Municipality of La Castellana is situated in the southern part of Negros Island and is composed of 27 barangays. La Castellana has a land area of approximately 272.73 square kilometers and a population of around 63,415 as of 2020.

Municipality of Candoni is classified as a fourth-class municipality, meaning it has a moderate level of development and economic activity. Covering a land area of approximately 152 square kilometers, Candoni is situated in the mountainous and agricultural region of southern Negros Occidental. The municipality is surrounded by scenic natural landscapes, including rolling hills and lush forests. Candoni has a population of around 36,000 people, according to the latest census.

The total population in the province is two million one hundred thirty- six thousand six hundred forty-seven (2,136,647) and the recorded number of CICL cases for the year 2021 is fifteen thousand eight hundred ninety-six (15, 896). This is situated approximately at these coordinates of 10.302 (latitude) and 123.907 (longitude) on the Philippine map.

3.5 Data Collection

The data was collected through interviews and FGD's, the consent of the participant was acquired for voice recording, as a supplement, notetaking was utilized also. The research instrument is semi-structured, with open-ended questions. The informants were briefed properly so that the desired response and cooperation from them was achieved. A venue conducive to the conduct of the interview and FGD was chosen so that the participants can focused on the questions given to them.

After the data collection, the recorded file was transcribed and coded for generation of common themes.

3.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the phenomenon the researcher utilized the Colaizzi's method. The significant statements were extracted from the informant's transcript that is relevant to the research phenomena. Formulated meanings were created from the significant statements and put together into a cluster.

The first step in the data analysis is familiarization. The researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading through all the participant accounts several times.

Second step undertaken was identifying significant statements. The researcher identified all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.

The third step is formulating meanings. The researcher identified meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements.

The fourth step is clustering themes. The researcher clustered the identified meanings into themes that are common across all accounts.

The fifth step is developing an exhaustive description. The researcher wrote a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced at step 4.

The sixth step is producing the fundamental structure. The researcher condensed the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.

And the last step is seeking verification of the fundamental structure. The researcher returned the fundamental structure statement to all participants (or sometimes a subsample in larger studies) to ask whether it captures their experience.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Experiences of the Informants who Underwent Rehabilitation

4.1.1 The Positive Experiences

4.1.1.1 The Prodigal Son is Home : Former CICLs' Change of Heart

One of the positive experiences cited by the informant is that they have changed through the process, they learned to care for others and realize the bad consequences of their acts. Yearning for a fresh start is common to people who have reflected on their wrong doings and repented. There is this grateful feeling within them that they have been saved from going farther down the hill, to where their actions might have worse consequences.

Completing a reform program can instill a sense of pride and self-efficacy in individuals. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their ability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments, the joy experienced by the respondents can be mainly attributed to the attainment of such, additionally Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides that self-efficacy is a step toward self-actualization, leading to feelings of fulfillment and happiness (Bandura, 1978).

Similarly, another study by Syifanita and Soetikno (2023) focuses on the role of self-esteem in improving the resilience of juvenile offenders. The study revealed that self-esteem positively predicts the resilience of juvenile offenders which means that the higher the self-esteem of these children, the higher will be their resilience. The opportunity for change to youthful offender is wide, given that mostly of the respondents identified such experience for them as positive, is a message of gratitude for being saved from a then destructive way of life to a promising one, it is like finding home again.

4.1.1.2 Reforming a Lost Soul : The Rehabilitation Programs in the Center

This theme encapsulates the different programs and activities inside the Rehabilitation Center which the participants were subjected to and which they identified as one of their positive experiences. Undeniably, mostly of the informants were from under privileged backgrounds, thus mostly of the common services, trainings and care experienced by young people like education, recreation, and even disciplinary measures to control and shape behavior were not available to them. Being exposed to such in the center made them feel like a normal youth brought up with guidance, support and love.

Attachment Theory might be applied to understand how a young person's attachment style affects their behavior and relationships, and how rehabilitation programs can provide corrective attachment experiences (Holmes, 2014). Programs that offer stable, supportive relationships with staff or mentors might elicit gratitude, especially from juveniles who have experienced disrupted attachments therefore giving them a sense of happiness. Nowadays, the focus of the juvenile justice system has historically changed to now rehabilitation (not punishment) and courts have sought to turn delinquents into productive citizens through treatment by subjecting them into different programs and measures (Porter, 2019).

Aside from education, one important aspect of the rehabilitation program is the organization of the activities for the CICLs, the informants reported there is a systematic schedule followed in the center. Providing a stable environment for juvenile offenders in rehabilitation centers has been shown to be crucial for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Underwood & Knight, 2006). A structured routine helps CICLs manage their time effectively. They know what activities they need to engage in at specific times, such as meals, work assignments, educational programs, recreational activities, and personal hygiene. This helps them develop a sense of responsibility and teaches them the importance of time management. Structure and routine in rehabilitation centers may provide stability for some juvenile offenders, particularly those who have experienced chaotic or unstable home environments. A predictable daily schedule, clear expectations, and consistent rules can help create a sense of security and allow juveniles to focus on personal growth and rehabilitation.

4.1.2 The Negative Experiences of the Former CICLs

4.1.2.1 Disheartening Encounters with the Juvenile Justice and Welfare System in the Philippines

Juvenile offenders are at a heightened risk of experiencing abuse in the justice system due to their vulnerability and lack of legal representation (Clark et al., 2016). When authorities conducted the initial contact with the former CICLs, the common experiences of the participants are that they were detained in jail and most of the time together with adults. One had the experience of having his father jailed because the police believes that he was using his child to rob. Authorities would also use incarceration as a means of scaring the child to learn his lesson. Such claims if proven are outrightly in violation of Republic Act No. 9344 (2006).

These reports are frustrating to know, the worst claim from the CICLs during interview is that it is said that upon their arrest, the police physically assaulted them, this is not an isolated case, this is prevalent not only locally but as well as internationally, as supported by the study of Copeland et.al (2023), which found that involvement in the juvenile justice system may expose youth to verbal, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.

Morrow et al. (2018) examined a host of situational- and suspect-level predictors of police use of force among a juvenile arrestee population. The findings of the study showed that most robust predictors of police use of force for juvenile arrestees were non-compliant demeanor, disrespect, and resistance on the part of the juvenile offender, it concluded that regardless of age, police officers will employ force to control the encounter in order to protect themselves and the public.

4.1.2.2 A Long Road Home : Challenges of the Former CICLs.

The former CICLs suffered challenges in their family, peer and community relations because of various factors. As to familial challenges, one is brought by discrimination coming from relatives, at times their parents would also displace anger and frustration towards them blaming them for the difficulties in their lives. The stigma of juvenile offenses can create tension within families, sometimes leading to reduced support systems crucial for successful rehabilitation. They also shared a common experience of sadness of yearning for home and comfort of parents. The CICL struggled because their family would rarely visit due to financial constraints, while one chose not to see his parents because he does not want to see them hurting because of his situation, and another lost his connection with his family by choice. The emotional and mental well-being of the child is greatly affected by these factors, there is an inevitable sadness due to the new environment and having no familiar companion.

Upon release in the center the former CICLs did not established again a connection with their previous peers, rather they focused on working on themselves, this is important because youth associated with anti-social peers and youth associated with gangs were significantly more likely to recidivate (Ryan et al., 2013).

This community reaction to juvenile offenders can be explained through the Classical Stigma theory. According to this theory, stigma is a negative social meanings or stereotypes placed upon individuals or groups, serves to limit a person's ability to perform positively in a specific role (Coleman, 1986).

Frost (2011) conducted a study which presents an integrative review of current and classic theory and research on social stigma and its consequences for the socially stigmatized. He paid specific attention to stigma-related processes surrounding race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The origins and perpetration of social stigma are discussed alongside perspectives on how stigmatized groups and individuals experience stigma-related stress. Both the potential negative and positive consequences of social stigma are highlighted in his review through the integration of predominant social psychological theory with emerging critical and feminist theories of positive marginality and resistance. The paper culminates in a theoretical process model designed to provoke future theory and research that share its integrative aims.

4.2.1. Coping with the Challenges Encountered by the Informants in Rehabilitation

4.2.1.1 Entertainment, Companionship and Prayer

Coping is a reaction people manifest as a reaction to stress or trauma, it can be an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral methods used by the human individual in order to face any situation related to various forms of personal or interpersonal loss (Saucan et al., 2011). The respondent has indeed suffered from loss of their normal childhood, separation from their home and parents, and loss of certain opportunities which they should have enjoyed were it not for their conflict with the law, such may have traumatic effect and requires coping, which they found inside the center.

Another is companionship, friendships formed within juvenile rehabilitation centers can provide crucial emotional support, helping offenders cope with the stress of confinement and separation from family. The friendships they built with their fellow CICLs helped them find joy in their situation. They are also able to relate to their experiences, making them realize that they are not alone. It also reduces the feeling of isolation, wherein forming bonds with peers in rehabilitation centers can significantly reduce feelings

of loneliness among juvenile offenders, potentially lowering the risk of depression and anxiety. It also may serve as motivation for increased engagement of CICLs to rehabilitation programs, since that positive peer relationships within rehabilitation facilities can increase motivation for personal change and engagement in treatment programs among juvenile offenders. Friendships developed during rehabilitation can potentially extend beyond release, providing valuable peer support networks for juveniles transitioning back into their communities (Wilson et al., 2021).

4.2.1.2 Heaven Sent : The Kindness of a Rescuer

All of the participants have experienced having certain people help them along the way. They realize how big of an influence these supporters have had on their lives and how much more difficult their path would have been without them. These people provided them with opportunities, resources, financial support, and other forms of aid. The participants felt supported and believed in by others while these folks were there, letting them know they are not alone. This instilled in them a desire to improve themselves. Positive adult influences can help reform juvenile offenders, redirecting them from criminal paths. Supportive adults in providing guidance and opportunities for youth to desist from crime are important (Bersani & Doherty 2018).

Cauffman, Fine, and Dickman (2019) showed that juvenile offenders showed significantly higher potential for rehabilitation when provided with consistent adult mentorship and support. Their study found that juveniles with strong adult guidance were 60% more likely to successfully complete rehabilitation programs and demonstrate positive behavioral changes compared to those without such support.

4.3.1 Impact of Rehabilitation Program to the Lives of the Informant

4.3.1.1 Liberation: Reintegration to the Community

The participants made major adjustments when released, they got used to the life in the center where everything is provided for them and that they are guided. They realized that outside they need to live and survive on their own eventually. Having undergone many challenges in life, it seemed that the youths who entered the juvenile justice system, found refuge within these systems from past negative and abusive family circumstances (Simmons-Horton, 2020).

To effectively assist the participants the center provides an aftercare program, one form is through scholarships. Comprehensive aftercare programs that provide a continuum of care from facility to community can significantly reduce recidivism rates among juvenile offenders (Underwood, et al., 2016).

Latessa et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of ongoing support and supervision post-release, as well as the need for community reintegration programs to help youthful offenders successfully transition back into society. This indicates that the success of rehabilitation efforts is contingent upon continued support and resources to ensure long-term positive outcomes. Furthermore, community involvement also has a high impact in the process, Successful aftercare programs leverage community partnerships to provide comprehensive support services, enhancing juvenile offenders' access to resources and opportunities for positive development (Mathur & Clark, 2014). The right combination of aftercare, community support and determination on the part of the former CICL can steer them towards successful reintegration.

4.3.1.2 Agent for Change to Fellow CICLs

This theme highlights the participants' initiative to warn and encourage young people, especially those involved in criminal activities, to change and lead an honest life. In their messages to youth currently engaged in crime, the informants reminded them that youth does not last forever. Eventually, they will face the consequences of their actions. The participants emphasized that young people should focus on building a better future now. They also expressed how heartbreaking it is to see families and parents suffer because of the situation their children are in.

Levick and Schwartz (2020) concluded in their study that former youthful offenders using their personal stories to influence public opinion and policy decisions, they can become powerful advocates for juvenile justice reform. The most compelling reason is that they have firsthand experience with the criminal justice system and understand the challenges and shortcomings it presents. Their personal experiences can motivate them to work towards reforming the system to be more effective and fairer for all individuals involved.

Additionally, Bagnall et al. (2015) found that peer mentoring programs, where former juvenile offenders mentor at-risk youth, can be effective in reducing recidivism and promoting positive youth development. Former youthful offenders may feel a sense of responsibility to prevent others from making the same mistakes they did.

4.3.1.3 Padayon: Leaving Behind the Troubled Childhood with the Fruits of Transformation

"Padayon" is a Hiligaynon word which means to continue. This depicts the undertakings of the informants as they go forward with hope for the future. Former juvenile delinquents often develop strong, prosocial relationships in adulthood, including stable

romantic partnerships and positive peer networks which enables them to move forward being a reformed individual (Schubert et al., 2016).

However, Cauffman et al. (2021) found that the vast majority of justice-involved youth desist from offending by their mid-20s, even without intervention, highlighting adolescence-limited antisocial behavior as the norm. This is supported by neuroscience research, which confirms that the brain systems responsible for basic cognitive functions reach adult levels of maturity by mid-adolescence, while those supporting advanced self-regulation do not fully mature until around age 25. The life stories of the participants serve as a source of inspiration, reminding us of the power of transformation made possible through effective rehabilitation programs. Justice can be served in many ways ; it is not limited to imprisonment. In the case of these CICL (Children in Conflict with the Law), their pursuit of an honest and better life is justice, restored, and fulfilled.

Many argue that we still have a long way to go in achieving a truly child-friendly juvenile justice system (Young et al., 2017). The absence of age-appropriate services and facilities, inconsistent and inadequate legal frameworks, and a shortage of trained professionals make it difficult to properly hire, supervise, and support staff working with this vulnerable population. Yet, the stories of the former CICLs in this study give us hope. Despite the system's imperfections, its positive aspects can still bring about meaningful change. This should not be a reason for complacency but rather a call to action, for the government and the community to do more. The goal is not for just a few CICLs to be given a second chance, but for the Juvenile Justice System to be limitless in its capacity to welcome and restore lost souls.

5. Conclusion

Many argue that we have a long way to go before arriving at 'child friendly' juvenile justice (Young et al., 2017). This is also highly true in the Philippines, the absence of age-appropriate services and facilities, inconsistent and insufficient legislative frameworks, and a shortage of professionals in these fields create difficulties when it comes to hiring, supervising, and training staff to deal with this vulnerable demographic. However, the stories of the former CICLs in the study gives us hope, that despite the imperfect system, still the good and proper aspects can produce a positive change. This is not an indication to settle and be complacent, this is a challenge to the government and the community to give and do more so that not only a few CICLs are given a chance, the goal is for the Juvenile Justice System to be limitless in welcoming souls that are astray.

The important point that this study highlights is that if given a good quality of rehabilitation program that genuinely cares for the Children in Conflict with Law, reformation with actual positive outcomes is possible. Paving a way for these reformed youths or young adults to be agents of the main advocacy that the Juvenile Justice and Welfare System is fighting is an opportunity that should be explored.

The reports of abuse and violations against the rights of the CICL are yet to be confirmed, however the mere fact that it was identified as common theme among the CICLs speaks volumes of the high probability of these unhinging acts occurring. This is a call to the government to closely and strictly monitor reports of these cases, as it not only spoils the rehabilitation process but it also alarmingly results in trauma to the abused CICL.

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