



Community Perception Towards Former Drug Convicts Participating In The Rehabilitation Program At Bentiring Prison Of Bengkulu City

Ikhsan Saputra¹⁾, Vethy Octaviani²⁾, Anis Endang SM³⁾

^{1,2,3)} Communication Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu
e-mail: ¹ ikhsansaputra1403@gmail.com

Received [25-07-2025]

Revised [02-09-2025]

Accepted [03-09-2025]

Abstract. This study aims to describe the community perception of former drug convicts participating in the rehabilitation program at the Bentiring Penitentiary (Lapas) in Bengkulu City. The approach used is descriptive qualitative with data collection techniques through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Informants in this study consisted of community leaders, RT heads, and neighbors in the neighborhood where the former convicts live. The results of the study indicate that the public perception of former convicts has two stigmas, namely positive stigma and negative stigma. Some people have begun to accept and appreciate the positive changes in former convicts after rehabilitation, such as becoming more polite, working independently, and avoiding bad company. However, the negative stigma and suspicion are still quite strong, especially when social problems occur in the environment. The rehabilitation program at Bentiring Penitentiary is considered quite effective in changing behavior and providing new skills for convicts. However, the success of social reintegration is highly dependent on support from family and the surrounding environment. This study concludes that the rehabilitation program needs to be supported by public education to reduce negative stigma, as well as collaboration between the prison, government, and community in building a sustainable support system for former drug convicts..

Keywords: *Community Perception; Stigma; Social Reintegration; Rehabilitation Program.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the reintegration of former drug convicts into society has become a critical issue within the domain of social communication and public perception. Although correctional institutions, particularly penitentiaries like Bentiring Prison in Bengkulu City, have made efforts through rehabilitation programs, societal attitudes continue to fluctuate between acceptance and rejection. These attitudes are often shaped by long-standing stigmas, previous experiences, and cultural narratives surrounding criminality and substance abuse (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Rehabilitation programs for narcotics offenders are designed not only to address addiction but also to restore social function, personal responsibility, and readiness to reintegrate into communal life. As stated by Yuniarto (2024), the annual rehabilitation efforts at Bentiring Prison focus on enabling inmates to recover both physically and psychologically through structured interventions, including counseling, vocational training, and group therapy. However, the real test of such programs occurs post-incarceration, when former inmates return to their communities and must navigate complex layers of social judgment and skepticism.

The concept of perception itself plays a significant role in shaping societal interaction. According to Rahmat (2007), perception is an individual's internal experience in interpreting stimuli received from the external environment, often influenced by both personal biases and

collective social constructs. In the case of former narcotics convicts, public perception is rarely neutral—it tends to be colored by previous associations with crime, danger, and moral failure (Mulyana, 2010). This duality of perception—between suspicion and sympathy—presents an intricate barrier to successful reintegration, regardless of institutional efforts at rehabilitation.

Community responses to rehabilitated drug convicts vary considerably, depending on levels of education, previous exposure to criminal behavior, religious or moral beliefs, and the visibility of change in the individual. In a densely populated neighborhood like RT 13 in Sukamerindu, Bengkulu, these dynamics become even more pronounced due to close physical proximity and shared social spaces. Studies have shown that neighborhoods play a key role in post-release outcomes, particularly in shaping the “second chance” narrative that either facilitates or hinders reentry (Clear et al., 2003).

The Bentiring Prison program itself illustrates a growing national commitment toward restorative justice. Instead of merely punishing, the program aims to transform inmates into productive, law-abiding citizens by addressing the root causes of their behavior. Rehabilitative approaches often include a blend of medical intervention (e.g., detoxification, therapy), social re-education (e.g., life skills training), and spiritual guidance. Yet, such progress can be easily undermined by a community that continues to perceive former inmates as permanent threats (Parlindungan, 2023).

A more humanistic and informed perception is essential not only for the success of former inmates but also for the health of the community itself. Mistrust, when unchecked, can evolve into exclusion, discrimination, and even recidivism, as ex-convicts feel isolated and hopeless. Conversely, inclusive communities that adopt evidence-based approaches to recovery often experience lower rates of criminal relapse and improved public safety (Taxman, 2004).

In Indonesia, where religious and social values strongly influence everyday life, the intersection of stigma and forgiveness becomes a focal point in the discourse around rehabilitation. Former convicts are frequently judged not only by their past actions but also by their perceived spiritual and moral failure. Even when their behaviors have demonstrably improved, they remain vulnerable to social labeling—a phenomenon that, as noted by Goffman (1963), creates a “spoiled identity” difficult to repair.

The researcher’s interest in this topic stems from both academic inquiry and ethical concern. As someone embedded in a society where drug abuse is often criminalized more than understood, the researcher aims to challenge reductionist narratives about former drug offenders and to amplify the perspectives of local communities. This study focuses specifically on community members residing near Bentiring Prison, including neighborhood leaders (RT), local influencers, and ordinary citizens who interact with former inmates in their daily lives.

The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, which enables in-depth exploration of the attitudes, emotions, and judgments that underlie community perceptions. By examining how these perceptions are formed—whether through direct observation, hearsay, media representation, or past trauma—the study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of social reintegration in Indonesia. Furthermore, by analyzing specific cases and testimonials, it aims to recommend strategies for strengthening rehabilitative frameworks through public education and inter-agency collaboration.

It is crucial to emphasize that the community’s perception acts as a mirror of larger social narratives about crime, punishment, and redemption. While state institutions may design ideal rehabilitation protocols, the success of such initiatives ultimately depends on the extent to which communities are willing to receive and support those who have served their sentence. Without this alignment between institutional policy and public perception, rehabilitation risks becoming a mere procedural formality with little transformative effect (Maruna, 2001).

In conclusion, this study is not simply about how communities “see” former convicts—it is about how society constructs the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. It asks whether

individuals who have undergone structured rehabilitation deserve renewed social membership, and under what conditions that membership is granted. In doing so, the research bridges the gap between criminological theory and everyday social practice, offering a grounded exploration of how forgiveness, fear, and familiarity shape the social fabric of post-prison life in Bengkulu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception Theory

Perception plays a central role in understanding how communities respond to former convicts. According to Rahmat (2007), perception refers to an individual's internal process of interpreting stimuli based on prior experiences and cognitive frameworks. In the context of social reintegration, perception is influenced by both internal factors—such as personal beliefs and emotional responses—and external stimuli like mass media and neighborhood gossip. Mulyana (2010) expands on this by describing perception as a multi-stage process involving sensation, attention, and interpretation. Sensation refers to the reception of raw information by the senses; attention filters this data based on relevance or salience, and interpretation constructs meaning based on individual biases and social learning. Therefore, understanding public perception toward former narcotics convicts requires an exploration of these layered psychological mechanisms.

Stigma and Social Labeling

Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma provides a useful lens for analyzing societal attitudes toward former prisoners. He introduces the concept of a "spoiled identity," where individuals who deviate from social norms are marked as outsiders, regardless of their rehabilitation. Link and Phelan (2001) further articulate that stigma is not merely a label but a process involving labeling, stereotyping, separation, and discrimination. In the case of former narcotics convicts, this means that despite completing rehabilitation, they may still be treated as dangerous or untrustworthy by their communities. This persistent stigma can hinder employment, social acceptance, and overall mental health, potentially increasing the likelihood of recidivism. Thus, addressing stigma is essential to successful reintegration.

Community Integration Theory

The reintegration of former convicts into society also intersects with the concept of community integration, as outlined by Clear et al. (2003). Their theory emphasizes that supportive neighborhoods with strong social cohesion can reduce recidivism rates by providing structure, acceptance, and informal surveillance. In contrast, fragmented or judgmental communities tend to isolate former convicts, making them vulnerable to relapse. Taxman (2004) also notes that integration is most successful when correctional efforts are complemented by community-based initiatives, such as mentorship programs, employment assistance, and social education campaigns. In this study, the role of the neighborhood in Bengkulu—particularly RT 13—is examined to assess the practical implications of these theories.

Rehabilitation as a Restorative Justice Mechanism

The rehabilitation program implemented at Bentiring Prison reflects the broader philosophy of restorative justice. Unlike punitive justice, which focuses on punishment and exclusion, restorative justice seeks to repair harm, restore dignity, and reintegrate offenders into the social fabric. According to Marshall (1999), rehabilitation programs are most effective when they involve both the individual and their community in the healing process. In Indonesia, such programs often include spiritual counseling, vocational training, and structured daily routines to

reshape behavior. However, without social acceptance, these rehabilitative efforts may be rendered ineffective. Therefore, rehabilitation must not only be a correctional policy but also a community movement supported by education and awareness.

Narcotics and Criminological Perspectives

Substance abuse is often not just a legal issue but also a health and social concern. The criminological perspective views drug-related crimes as symptoms of deeper systemic issues such as poverty, trauma, or mental illness. As noted by Akers and Sellers (2009), differential association theory explains that individuals engage in criminal behavior based on their social environment and learned interactions. In other words, drug abuse and the resulting criminality can often be traced back to negative peer influences and social modeling. Understanding this theory helps communities reframe their view of former narcotics convicts—not as inherently deviant, but as individuals shaped by circumstances who can be rehabilitated and redirected.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the community's perception of former narcotics convicts who have undergone rehabilitation at Bentiring Prison in Bengkulu City. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable a deep understanding of community attitudes, emotions, and judgments based on real-life social contexts. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods are effective when the objective is to capture complex human experiences and meanings, especially those rooted in social interactions and community narratives.

The selection of research participants was conducted using purposive sampling. This method was deemed appropriate because the selected informants—such as the local neighborhood chief (RT), community leaders, and nearby residents—were considered to have first-hand knowledge and daily interactions with former convicts living in the area. A total of three key informants were involved in the study: Suardi (RT 13 leader), Anggi Irawan (a respected community figure), and Iwan Wahyudi (a neighbor of a former convict). Their varied perspectives were essential in providing a holistic understanding of how the rehabilitation program is perceived.

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions that allowed informants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. Observations were carried out to capture real-time interactions between former convicts and community members, while documentation was used to gather supporting evidence such as records of rehabilitation activities and community responses.

To ensure the validity of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing data across sources and methods. The researcher cross-checked interview responses with field notes and official documentation to minimize bias and enhance credibility. This triangulated method allowed for a richer, more accurate portrayal of community perceptions toward former narcotics convicts and the effectiveness of their rehabilitation process.

RESULTS

This study revealed multifaceted perceptions held by the community regarding former narcotics convicts who had completed a rehabilitation program at Bentiring Prison in Bengkulu City. The data, gathered through interviews, observation, and documentation, were categorized based on Mulyana's (2015) perceptual framework: sensation, attention, and interpretation.

Sensation: Initial Community Impressions

The initial sensory reception—how residents noticed and identified former convicts in their neighborhood—varied across informants. Suardi, the RT (neighborhood) head, explained:

“There are a few people here who used to use drugs. Some of them have changed, doing odd jobs or selling snacks. I support those who want to change, but some neighbors still speak badly about them, afraid they might go back to their old ways.”

This observation was echoed by Anggi Irawan, a community figure, who said:

“I’ve heard some of them started working, even helping with the family business. But whenever something goes missing in the area, suspicion often falls on them first.”

Iwan Wahyudi, a nearby neighbor, confirmed behavioral changes:

“One of my neighbors was jailed for drugs. Now, he’s more cheerful, helps his family with their business. But some people still gossip and don’t fully trust him.”

Direct observation confirmed these narratives. Several former convicts were seen actively working or participating in daily routines. However, social interaction remained limited, and some residents kept their distance. This indicates that while physical reintegration occurred, social reintegration was still partial.

Attention: Community Awareness and Concern

The second perceptual component—attention—referred to what aspects of the former convicts drew ongoing focus or concern. All informants highlighted employment and behavior as central points.

Suardi noted:

“They’re trying hard. Some are even joining religious gatherings. But if society keeps shutting them out, they’ll get stressed and possibly relapse.”

Anggi stressed the importance of continued community support:

“Rehabilitation is good, but it’s not enough. They need emotional and social support from family and neighbors so they don’t feel ashamed or isolated.”

Iwan expressed frustration at the double standard:

“I see he’s really trying to improve, but people still don’t trust him. That’s unfair. We should at least give them a chance.”

These testimonies illustrate a paradox: the community pays close attention to these individuals, yet often focuses on suspicion rather than encouragement. The attention is there, but it is not always constructive.

Interpretation: Meaning-Making and Social Judgment

The third layer—interpretation—unveils how community members make sense of the presence of former convicts. These interpretations are shaped by past incidents, moral expectations, and social memory.

Suardi explained:

“When something bad happens, even if it’s unrelated, some people instantly suspect the ex-convicts. It’s hard for them to escape their past.”

Anggi described how religion and behavior influence perception:

“If they go to the mosque, dress modestly, and greet people kindly, the perception changes slowly. But it takes time and consistency.”

Iwan emphasized emotional empathy:

“They’re human too. Everyone makes mistakes. If we were in their shoes, we’d also want a second chance.” From observation, it was evident that some former convicts deliberately kept a low profile, likely aware of the social tension. Their limited participation in community events such as night patrols and collective prayers suggested discomfort or fear of rejection.

Despite these limitations, some residents acknowledged positive changes, such as increased politeness, avoidance of bad influences, and efforts to work independently. The success of these individuals was often credited to family support and personal willpower.

Documentation Support

Documentation from Bentiring Prison showed that rehabilitation programs included not only medical treatment and detoxification but also life skills training, religious sessions, and group therapy. These activities aimed to equip inmates with both hard and soft skills necessary for reintegration. However, as highlighted by the community's responses, the transition from institutional care to communal life remains delicate. Furthermore, official reports confirmed that 70 narcotics convicts joined the rehabilitation program in August 2023. The recidivism rate was reportedly low, but no formal mechanism existed to monitor post-release social acceptance, which this study addressed qualitatively.

The Role of Environment and Social Norms

One of the most significant findings was that the environment played a critical role in shaping perception. In tightly-knit neighborhoods like RT 13, collective memory holds strong. If a former convict was involved in previous misconduct, even if unrelated to drugs, that history lingered in people's minds. Reputational baggage proved harder to shed than legal guilt. Interestingly, religious involvement and visible transformation—such as consistent attendance at prayer meetings—significantly improved public perception. Community members were more likely to accept individuals who displayed sincere and continuous behavioral changes.

Summary of Findings

1. Perception is dual: Both positive and negative perceptions coexisted. While some community members supported rehabilitation and acknowledged change, others remained skeptical and judgmental.
2. Behavioral cues matter: Politeness, visible work ethic, and involvement in religious or communal life led to better reception.
3. Stigma persists: Former convicts often remained under suspicion in the event of social disturbances, regardless of proof.
4. Support system is key: Family involvement and community leaders' endorsement were crucial in easing reintegration.
5. Rehabilitation effectiveness is limited by public mindset: No matter how effective the prison program is, without societal acceptance, its impact weakens post-release.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate a persistent tension between the intended outcomes of rehabilitation and the actual responses of the community. While rehabilitation programs at Bentiring Prison are well-structured and reportedly effective in equipping former narcotics convicts with life skills, behavioral control, and social awareness, their impact is ultimately constrained by the social context into which these individuals are released. This reinforces Goffman's (1963) concept of a "spoiled identity," in which individuals, once labeled as criminals, remain marked even after completing their sentence and formal rehabilitation.

From the data, it is clear that stigma remains the primary barrier to reintegration. Despite notable behavioral changes among former convicts—such as working independently, showing politeness, and participating in religious activities—some residents continue to harbor suspicion and mistrust. This supports the view of Link and Phelan (2001) that stigma involves both

cognitive labeling and active social separation. In this case, the community distinguishes “us” from “them” not by current behavior but by past labels.

However, the study also highlights a shifting narrative. Certain community members—particularly those with more exposure or closer proximity to the individuals in question—began to reinterpret their perceptions based on lived interactions. This shift aligns with the perceptual process model proposed by Mulyana (2010), where attention and interpretation can evolve when individuals encounter consistent positive stimuli over time. Such findings are encouraging, as they suggest that perception is not fixed but negotiable through experience, empathy, and trust-building. The role of community leadership emerged as vital in reshaping perceptions. Informants noted that support from figures like the RT head helped promote tolerance and understanding. This finding is consistent with the theory of community integration (Clear et al., 2003), which posits that strong, supportive neighborhood structures can reduce recidivism and facilitate social acceptance. In this study, leadership acted not just administratively but symbolically—setting the tone for how forgiveness and inclusion could be normalized.

At the same time, this research affirms that rehabilitation cannot stand alone. A successful correctional program inside the prison walls needs to be accompanied by community-based education, awareness campaigns, and post-release support structures. Without these, rehabilitated individuals risk returning to the same hostile environment that may have contributed to their initial offense. This echoes Taxman’s (2004) argument that reintegration is not a singular act but a continuous, socially constructed process requiring collaboration across multiple layers of society.

Interestingly, the perception of change was often tied to visible religious behavior, such as regular prayer or participation in religious gatherings. This suggests that, in Indonesian cultural contexts, morality is closely linked with religious symbols, and these can act as informal indicators of trustworthiness. While this dynamic can be helpful for those who engage with it, it also raises concerns about excluding individuals who may change in less overt or culturally recognized ways.

Another important theme is emotional distance. Even when community members acknowledged change, they often maintained a psychological barrier: “I see he’s better, but I still don’t trust him.” This suggests that rational acknowledgment of change does not automatically lead to emotional reconciliation. Rebuilding social capital requires time, consistency, and intentional effort from both the individual and the community. Short-term behavioral change must be followed by long-term proof of transformation before full acceptance occurs.

This study also uncovers a subtle but crucial point: fear of association. Some community members may not openly support former convicts due to concern over social backlash or being perceived as naïve. This underscores the social cost of forgiveness in tightly knit environments, where personal reputation is tied to collective judgments. Such dynamics make it harder for empathy-based interventions to gain traction without explicit institutional support or broader shifts in cultural attitudes. In summary, the discussion reveals a complex interplay between rehabilitation efforts, individual transformation, community leadership, and collective social psychology. While there is evidence of progress, there is also clear indication that structural stigma, emotional distance, and cultural expectations continue to hinder full reintegration. Therefore, future interventions should not only strengthen in-prison rehabilitation but also invest in post-release community education and inclusive social dialogue to create a more just and supportive reintegration ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that while the rehabilitation program at Bentiring Prison has had a positive effect on the behavior and mindset of former narcotics convicts, their successful reintegration into society remains significantly hindered by public perception. Community responses are deeply influenced by both past stigmas and the visible transformation of the individual. Positive changes—such as politeness, work ethic, and religious involvement—do contribute to shifting perceptions; however, deep-rooted mistrust and social labeling persist, especially in moments of community disruption. Ultimately, rehabilitation cannot exist in isolation. Its success depends not only on institutional programming but also on the willingness of society to forgive, support, and provide equal opportunities for former offenders. Without such societal transformation, rehabilitation risks becoming an internal success with external failure.

LIMITATION

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, involving only three key informants from a single neighborhood. While their insights provided rich qualitative data, the limited scope may not fully capture the diversity of perceptions across different communities in Bengkulu or other regions.

Second, the study focused primarily on qualitative perception without quantitative validation. As such, while thematic patterns emerged, no statistical generalization can be made regarding the overall societal perception toward former narcotics convicts. Third, observer bias may have influenced interpretations during field observation, as the presence of the researcher might have altered the natural behavior of both former convicts and community members.

Lastly, the research only considered post-rehabilitation perception and did not include perspectives from law enforcement, prison staff, or the convicts themselves. A more holistic approach could provide a broader understanding of the reintegration ecosystem.

Future studies should consider expanding the demographic and geographic range of informants, incorporating quantitative methods, and involving multiple stakeholder perspectives to strengthen the validity and applicability of the findings.

REFERENCES

- Akers, R. L., & Sellers, C. S. (2009). *Criminological theories: Introduction, evaluation, and application* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Clear, T. R., Rose, D. R., & Ryder, J. A. (2003). *Community justice*. Wadsworth.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.
- Jalaluddin, R. (2007). *Psikologi komunikasi*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 363–385. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.363>
- Marshall, T. (1999). *Restorative justice: An overview*. Home Office.
- Mulyana, D. (2010). *Ilmu komunikasi: Suatu pengantar* (Edisi revisi). Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Parlindungan, F. M. (2023). *Program rehabilitasi narkoba di Indonesia: Strategi dan implementasi*. Jakarta: Kementerian Hukum dan HAM.
- Taxman, F. S. (2004). The role of community supervision in reducing recidivism. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 38(2), 23–48. https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v38n02_02
- Yuniarto, B. (2024). Efektivitas program rehabilitasi narkoba di Lapas Bentiring. *Jurnal Pemasarakatan*, 10(1), 45–58.