

### Impact of Prison Rehabilitation on Recidivism in Sri Lanka

Bandaranayake P.<sup>1</sup>✉, De Silva P.<sup>2</sup>

#### Abstract

The incarcerated prison population in Sri Lanka has been on the increase in recent years reaching over 24,000 in 2018, where the majority of them are functionally illiterate. As in many jurisdictions, rates of criminal recidivism in Sri Lanka are reported to be as high as 50 per cent. It has been revealed that the majority of inmates do not possess the basic social and educational skills that they need to function in society as literates and law-abiding rational citizens. The responsibility of prison authorities in making these prisoners law-abiding citizens is significant. However, with the high rate of recidivism, it is argued that whether prison rehabilitation is effective enough. The main purpose of this study is to get a deeper insight into the perception of prison rehabilitation programmes by prisoners, ex-prisoners and prison officials. This study is mainly a qualitative approach particularly applying an inductive grounded theory approach as it requires a deep understanding of the effect of rehabilitation programmes on inmates' skills and attitudes and how inmates view rehabilitation programmes. Focus group discussions with recidivists at 4 closed prisons: Welikada, Mahara, Bogambara (Kandy) and Angunakolapelessa, life histories with ex-prisoners and semi-structured interviews with prison rehabilitation officers paved the way for collecting qualitative data. Obtrusive and unobtrusive observations were also useful in better understanding this issue. Even though prisoners and ex-prisoners see that prison rehabilitation helped them to overcome boredom, acquire self-esteem and get basic literacy skills, issues such as overcrowding, lack of funding, lack of trained staff affected the quality of programmes conducted. The majority of prisoners believe that education will serve them well when they are released. It was observed that all sorts of rehabilitation are carried out in an ad hoc manner without proper planning. However, a minority of prisoners and ex-prisoners believed that nothing works for them as they tend to continue criminal behaviours while prison officials believed that no substantial impact can be observed despite how much they struggled to rehabilitate certain offenders. Structural conditions of prisons such as current policies, funding, program availability and program quality are shown to be factors that negatively affected prisoner participation. In conclusion, this paper focuses on the urgent need for introducing a more humanizing approach to the penal administration of the Sri Lankan prison system through proper planning of prison rehabilitation programmes.

**Keywords:** *Rehabilitation, prison education, qualitative study, prisons in Sri Lanka*

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup> Senior Professor of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

✉ Corresponding author: pbandaranayake@gmail.com