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From Incarceration to Reintegration: Role of Prison Environment in Social Reintegration of Offenders in Pakistan

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Abstract

As a component of the criminal justice system, prisons are operated with the aim to reform offenders, rehabilitate them, and reintegrate them into society. Prison environment serves as the vital role in exerting both a direct and indirect influence on the behavior and personality of the prisoners. Present study was undertaken to examine the association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders into society. The data consisted of perception of ex-prisoners regarding prison environment that were obtained through a survey conducted using a structured questionnaire. The survey was completed from the sample of 221 male ex-prisoners in Lahore Division who were on the probation order at the time of the study. The results showed that there was association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders into society. It is suggested that the authorities of criminal justice and policy makers should pay serious attention to prison environment making it conducive for rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders.

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Introduction

Prison environment plays a key role in shaping the well-being of prisoners, their behavioral patterns and social relationships as well as the prospects for their successful reintegration into society (Woods-Brown et al., 2023; Wright, 1993). Prisons are the institutions that are not merely designed for the enforcement of punishment. These are complex social environments where physical conditions, institutional rules, interactions between staff and inmates, relationships with fellow prisoners, educational opportunities, access to healthcare, and rehabilitative programs can significantly influence the future outcomes for those serving time in imprisonment (Khan et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2026). A humane and supportive prison environment can foster personal growth, emotional stability, and rehabilitation (Cataldi & Cataldi, 2024). Meanwhile, overcrowding, inadequate living conditions, violence, social isolation, and limited access to basic services can lead to institutional misconduct, psychological distress, and difficulties in reintegrating into society following release (Vijayan

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& Bhuvaneswari, 2025). To understand the relationship of prison conditions and outcomes for prisoners is essential as to evaluate the effectiveness of correctional institutions. Furthermore, this helps in developing evidence-based policies that protect the rights of prisoners, promote rehabilitation, and reduce recidivism (Galouzis et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, criminal justice system is necessarily a mechanism of social control which refers to the government agencies charged with enforcing law, adjudicating crime, and correcting criminal conduct (Khokhar et al., 2019). Criminal justice system is the agencies of government – police, courts (judiciary and prosecution), and corrections: prisons and community-based corrections (probation and parole), which attempts to control deviant behaviors in formal way (Joyce & Laverick, 2022). Pakistan has 128 prisons as correctional facilities having 110,513 prisoners which is the 23rd largest prison population in the world (World Prison Brief, 2026). Punjab is the largest province of Pakistan with 43% of all infrastructure of prison system. Prisoners statistics of the Punjab Prisons Department indicate that there are 45 prisons—comprising 9 central prisons, 33 district prisons, and 3 special prisons—accommodating 74,773 prisoners that is 68 percent of the total prisoner population in Pakistan.

Punishment is an essential part of the daily lives. It refers to measures—such as fines, probation, community service, or imprisonment—that are imposed under the authority of the law upon an individual who has been found guilty of an offense. According to the Pakistan Prison Rules (1978), prisons are classified into four categories namely Central Prisons, District Prisons, Special Prisons, and Sub-Jails. Central prisons shall have accommodation ordinarily for more than 1000 prisoners irrespective of the length of sentences. There shall be a Central Prison in each division of a province; District Prisons are all prisons other than Central Prisons or Special Prisons—Women Prisons, Open Prisons, and Borstal Institutes and Juvenile Jails. District prisons have three categories: First class, having accommodation ordinarily for 500 prisoners or more with sentences up to five years; Second class, having accommodation ordinarily for 300 prisoners or more but less than 500 with sentences up to three years; Third class, having accommodation ordinarily for less than 300 with sentences up to one year.

Prisons as the integral part of criminal justice system, have functions and responsibilities. One of the fundamental social functions of prisons is the re-socialization and rehabilitation of offenders, so that they may be reintegrated into society as law-abiding citizens (Kalatur et al., 2020). The re-socialization of offenders involves helping them reintegrate into society by adopting positive attitudes and ways of thinking. Rehabilitation focuses on addressing the root causes of criminal behavior through therapy, education, and skills development (Ahmed et al., 2025). Overall, these processes aim to reduce the likelihood of reoffending and promote a law-abiding lifestyle. Sociologists and criminologists have long debated this issue, presenting arguments for both positions whether prisons are criminogenic or rehabilitative. After serving their prescribed term of imprisonment, incarcerated offenders must eventually leave the prisons. The convicted prisoners face three most common consequences: they may be executed during the imprisonment; they may be released on the completion of sentence; or they may be granted parole on their good conduct.

In addition to these options, prisoners also have the option of probation. Although probation is a court order, it is granted at the time of sentencing—as an alternative to

imprisonment—as one of the sentencing options. Probation is granted to those offenders who are arrested in minor offences. For some procedural reasons, offenders are sent to the prisons but they are eligible for the grant of probation during their trial in court. Delays occur during the trial process because of prosecution, or the defense counsel requests more time to present evidence, which results in a delay in the pronouncement of the sentence. At the time of sentencing, the judge grants a probation order, as a result of which the prisoner—who has already spent some time in prison—is released conditionally and placed under the supervision of a probation officer.

Reintegration into society is the process through which released prisoners successfully rejoin society (Gisler et al, 2018). This also indicates that the prisoner had been integrated into society before being imprisoned. According to evidence (Chikadzi, 2017), former prisoners face various challenges during the process of reintegrating into society. These challenges include rejection by family members, social stigma, difficulties in entering the labor market, the struggle to adapt to a new environment after spending several years in prison, a sense of inferiority that impacts mental health, and a lack of—or inadequate—post-release care services. Former prisoners are socially isolated and rarely have access to the same opportunities as other free members of society; this situation also reflects upon the effectiveness of rehabilitation processes and programs within prisons.

To make rehabilitation effective, it is essential to focus on the process of prisoners' reintegration into society, ensuring that those released do not commit further offenses—thereby reducing the rate of recidivism. However, many prisoners have lost contact with their families and lack essential life and social skills. Furthermore, they face social stigma, which makes their reintegration into society difficult (Gisler et al, 2018). A prison is a place where individuals who have been arrested or are serving sentences for a crime are held. It is not merely a place for punishment, but also a site for rehabilitation (Sun et al., 2026). Upon their release, prisoners should be capable of becoming productive members of society once again. Therefore, this study examines the relationship of prison environment and impacts of incarceration on prisoners with their reintegration back into society as law abiding citizens.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in Maruna's Desistance Theory (2001). This theory posits that desistance from the crime is a dynamic process which is influenced by personal transformation as well as social support. The theory argues that imprisonment can either facilitate or impede this process depending on the quality of the prison environment. Positive prison experiences, including access to rehabilitation programs, education, vocational training, and supportive relationships with prison staff, can foster identity transformation and prepare prisoners for successful reintegration into society. Conversely, negative prison environments characterized by violence, overcrowding, and limited rehabilitative opportunities may reinforce criminal identities and hinder reintegration. Therefore, Desistance Theory provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between the prison environment and reintegration of ex-prisoners into society (McNeill & Schinkel, 2026).

Significance of the Study

The study has significance focusing on prison environment as a serious determinant of reintegration of offenders. As prison system has inadequate infrastructure, chronic overcrowding, lack of rehabilitation programs, and weak mechanisms for reintegration (Nudd et al., 2024). These prison conditions not only undermine the constitutional promise of human dignity but also perpetuate the cycle of recidivism by failing to prepare offenders for a law-abiding life after release (Idrees & Bilal, 2023). This study is also very significant because reintegration of offenders is direct contributing factor to social cohesion, public safety, and reduction in recidivism.

Pakistan is the country where more than half of the prison population consists of under-trial prisoners and where rehabilitation receives limited policy attention (Sheikh et al., 2025). Findings of this study would provide valuable insights for prison administration, policymakers, and organizations of civil society in designing the interventions to address structural deficiencies, mitigation of stigmatization, and fostering pathways toward desistance. This study not only fills a research gap but also carries practical implications for ensuring that imprisonment leads to reintegration rather than further marginalization. Examining the association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders, this study informs prison reforms aligned with the evolving needs of criminal justice system in Pakistan as well as international human rights standards.

This paper also serves as an exploration of prisons, which—as the final stage in the overall criminal justice process—play a role in the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into society. Similar to other countries of the world, prisons in Pakistan have many problems as impediment in rehabilitation of offenders; role of prison environment remains important (Galouzis et al., 2022) which needs to be addressed in scientific research. This study has the purpose of knowing the association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders with the following specific objective:

Objective of the Study

To examine the association between prison environment and social reintegration offenders into society.

Hypotheses

H_0: There is no significant association between the prison association and social reintegration of offenders into society.

H_1: There is a significant association between the prison association and social reintegration of offenders into society.

Data and Methods

The study population for the current quantitative research consisted of adult male probationers. Sample was of the study was finalized at three stages. First stage, one division out of nine was randomly selected. Second stage, proportionate stratified sampling technique was applied and 408 probationers were selected dividing into district-based strata. Because of time and cost constraints, only 5% probationers were taken from every district of Lahore Division (Lahore, Kasur, Nankana Sahib, and Sheikhupura). Third stages, from 408 probationers 221 were included as a sample of the study as the had been incarcerated for some

period as under trial prisoners and on the time of conviction, they were granted probation order by the court.

For the collection of data from the respondent who were ex-prisoners and presently on probation order, interview schedule was devised with the help of previous literature. Interview schedule was made in English and then translated into Urdu. The probation officer from every district was approached for organizing the interview meetings with probationers who were respondents of the study. The collected raw data were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-26) and statistical tests were performed for data analysis. Reliability of the scale were checked; 'perception about prison environment' was computed alpha= 0.962 and for 'reintegration of offenders' was alpha 0.718.

Analysis and Findings

For descriptive statistics of the variables, simple frequency tables were prepared to analyze the responses. The 'chi-square' test was used to determine the empirical findings regarding the relationship between prison environment and the reintegration of offenders into society.

Table 1: Prison Environment

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
Prison staff encourage prisoners to take responsibility for their behavior.	11 (5.1)	31 (14.0)	20 (9.1)	74 (33.7)	85 (38.1)
Prison staff show genuine interest in prisoners' problems.	02 (0.7)	38 (17.4)	20 (9.1)	86 (38.7)	75 (34.1)
Prisoners are supported by staff in making positive changes.	37 (16.6)	36 (16.3)	71 (32.2)	63 (28.6)	14 (6.5)
Prison staff help prisoners prepare for life after release.	04 (1.8)	39 (17.7)	102 (46.0)	45 (20.1)	31 (14.0)
Prison staff treat prisoners in a caring and supportive manner.	06 (2.9)	53 (23.9)	41 (18.1)	91 (41.3)	30 (13.4)
Prisoners are treated as human being.	21 (9.5)	49 (22.8)	83 (37.5)	36 (16.3)	32 (14.5)
Prisoners help and support one another.	47 (21.3)	61 (27.6)	35 (15.8)	52 (23.5)	26 (11.8)

SA: Strongly Agree A: Agree U: Undecided/.: D: Disagree SD: Strongly Disagree

Table 1 indicates that in the response of the statement 'Prison staff encourage prisoners to take responsibility for their behavior' 5.1 % of the respondents strongly agreed, 14% of the respondents agreed, 9.1% undecided, 33.7% of the respondents disagreed, and 38.1% strongly disagreed. Among all 221 respondents, 38.7% disagreed and 34.1% strongly disagreed on the statement that the prison staff show genuine interest in prisoners' problems; and only 0.7 % of the respondents strongly agreed and 17.4% of the respondents agreed, remaining 9.1% undecided. In the response of the statement 'prisoners are supported by staff in making positive changes' only 16.6% of the respondent strongly agreed and 16.3% of the respondents were agreed; 32.2% undecided while 28.6% disagreed and 6.5% strongly disagreed. On the statement 'prison staff help prisoners prepare for life after release' 1.8 % of the respondents strongly agreed, 17.7% agreed while 46.0% undecided; remaining 20.1% of the respondents disagreed and 14.0% strongly disagreed. In response of 'prison staff treat prisoners in a caring

and supportive manner.' 2.9% of the respondents strongly agreed and 23.9% of the agreed. In contrast, 41.3% disagreed and 13.4% strongly disagreed while 18.1% remained undecided. In the response of the statement 'prisoners are treated as human being' 9.5**%** of respondents strongly agreed and 22.8% agreed, whereas 37.5**%** remained undecided; 16.3% disagreed and 14.5% strongly disagreed. In the response of the statement 'prisoners help and support one another' 21.3% of respondents strongly agreed and 27.6% agreed, whereas 15.8% remained undecided; 23.5% disagreed and 11.8% strongly disagreed.

Table 2: Reintegration of offenders into society

	SA	**A**	**U**	**D**	**SD**
I am able to follow the conditions of my probation.	62 (28.1)	91 (41.2)	21 (9.5)	34 (15.4)	13 (5.8)
I know how to avoid people who may lead me back to crime.	70 (31.8)	100 (45.2)	24 (10.8)	17 (7,7)	10 (4.5)
I have a stable place to live.	89 (40.3)	58 (26.2)	34 (15.4)	21 (9.5)	19 (8.6)
I am engaged in or actively seeking legal work or education.	51 (22.5)	81 (36.6)	53 (23.3)	16 (6.1)	20 (8.5)
My family supports me during probation.	59 (26.5)	86 (39.6)	29 (13,1)	19 (8.4)	28 (12.4)
I feel accepted in my community.	69 (31.5)	97 (43.6)	21 (9.8)	23 (10.2)	11 (4.9)
I know where to seek help if I face problems.	72 32.6	62 28.1	38 17.2	28 12.6	21 9.5
My probation officer treats me fairly and supports my reintegration.	80 (36.2)	104 (47.1)	14 (6.3)	16 (7.2)	7 (3.2)
I am determined not to return to prison.	76 (34.4)	71 (32.1)	28 (12.7)	34 (15.4)	12 (5.4)

SA: Strongly Agree A: Agree U: Undecided: D: Disagree SD: Strongly Disagree

Table 2 presents frequency and percentage regarding reintegration of offenders into society. In the response of the statement 'I am able to follow the conditions of my probation' 28.1% of the respondents strongly agreed, 41.2% agreed, 9.1% remained undecided, while 15.4% disagreed and 5.8% strongly disagreed. Responding the statement 'I know how to avoid people who may lead me back to crime' almost half (45.2%) of the respondents agreed, 31.8% strongly agreed, and 10.8 remained undecided, whereas 7.79% disagreed and 4.5% strongly agreed. Among all respondents, 40.3% strongly agreed, 26.2% strongly agreed, and 15.4% remained undecided, while 9.5% disagreed and only 8.6% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement 'I have a stable place to live.' In response to the statement 'I am engaged in or actively seeking legal work or education,' 22.5% of the respondents strongly agreed, 36.6% agreed, 23.3 remained undecided, whereas 6.1% disagreed, and 8.5% strongly agreed. Among the respondents 26.5% strongly agreed, 39.6% agreed, 13.1% remained undecided, 8.4% disagreed and 12.4% strongly disagreed with the statement 'My family supports me during probation.' Regarding the statement 'I feel accepted in my community' 31.5% of the respondents strongly agreed, 43.6% agreed, 9,8% were undecided, 10.2% disagreed and only 4.9% strongly disagreed. Responding the statement 'I know where to seek

help if I face problems' 32.6% of the respondents strongly agreed, 28.1% agreed, 17.2% remained undecided, 12.6% disagreed and 9.5% strongly disagreed. In the response of the statement 'My probation officer treats me fairly and supports my reintegration' 36.2% of the respondents strongly agreed, 47.1% agreed, 6.3% remained undecided, whereas 7.2% disagreed and only 3.2% strongly disagreed. Responding the statement 'I am determined not to return to prison' 34.4% of the respondents strongly agreed, 32.1% agreed, 12.7% remained undecided, whereas 15.4% disagreed and only 5.4% strongly disagreed.

Table 3: Association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders

Prison Environment	**Reintegration of offenders**		
	Low	***Moderate***	***High***
Poor	47	11	6
Moderate	34	36	24
Good	14	24	25
Chi-square value	39.15		
Significance Level: $\alpha = 0.05$ $p < 0.001$ Difference: 4			
Effect size: Moderate			

Table 3 shows that the results of chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders. The association between the prison environment and the reintegration of offenders into society was examined at three levels: low, medium, and high. The results of the chi-square test $\chi^2(4, N=221)= 39.15$, $p < 0.001$, $\alpha = 0.05$ indicate a statistically significant association, suggesting that the reintegration of offenders into society is not independent of their experiences in prison environment. Conversely, a conducive prison environment appears to have a positive impact on the outcomes of reintegration into society. The distribution of responses supports this finding. In a "poor" prison environment, the majority of offenders reported low outcomes regarding reintegration into society (47), while only a small number achieved high outcomes for reintegration (6). Conversely, higher levels of reintegration into society were more common in a "good" environment (25 high; 24 moderate), while the number of offenders reporting low levels of reintegration was smaller (14). This pattern demonstrates that the quality of prison conditions serves as a crucial factor in determining post-release adjustment.

Table 3 further illustrates the empirical association between the prison environment and the reintegration of offenders into society. Out of 221 respondents, 47 (21.3%) rated the prospects of offenders reintegrating into society following poor prison environment as 'low,' 11 (4.9%) described these prospects as 'moderate,' and only 6 (2.7%) characterized them as 'high.' Conversely, better prison environment was associated with a higher likelihood of offenders reintegrating into society. The chi-square test conducted in SPSS-26 produced a p-value of less than 0.05; consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis—that there is a significant association between prison environment and reintegration of offenders into society—was accepted. Cross-tabulation confirms that poor

prison environment reduces the opportunities for offenders to reintegrate into society, whereas better prison environment increases these opportunities.

Discussion

The present study revealed that prison environment was significantly associated with reintegration of offenders into society. Furthermore, the results showed that the prison environment was positively associated with reintegration of offenders. It is consistent with previous evidence as which emphasizes that a supportive and humane prison environment facilitates the reintegration of offenders into society (Mohamed & Hwong, 2022). Liebling (2004) emphasizes that the prisons characterized by respectful staff-prisoner relationships, safe environment, access to rehabilitation programs are more likely to reduce reoffending after release by promoting pro-social attitudes.

Positive prison environment enhances the sense of dignity and self-efficacy as well as institutional legitimacy, which strengthen the readiness for compliance with social norms and community reentry (Evans, 2024). Prison environment which is punitive, overcrowded, and having violent prison conditions inclines to aggravate reinforce criminal identities, psychological distress, and weaken social bonds, thereby undermines the efforts of reintegration of offenders into society (Mensah et al., 2026). Prison environment should not be viewed merely as site of the confinement but a formative social setting which can either support or impede the adjustment after release of an offender, particularly when linked with probation, parole, and other community-based services (Visher, 2007; Youssef, 2023).

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2025), successful rehabilitation of prisoners is a vital pathway to reintegration into society, not only in terms of what prisons do, but also in terms of what they are. A respectful, humane prison environment in which rehabilitation is consistently and sustainably supported provides the necessary foundations for personal transformation. Similarly, Liebling (2019) argues that humane prison environments foster personal growth, social responsibility, and reduced recidivism. On the other hand, overcrowded and under-resourced prisons obstruct the rehabilitation processes which facilities education, vocational training, and psychological support promoting reintegration (Ahmed et al., 2025; Boateng, 2025).

Ahmed and colleagues (2026) further argue that punitive and overcrowded prisons are not conducive for rehabilitative processes. Byrne and Miofsky (2009) agreeing with Cullen (2013) contend similarly that prisons fail to create the supportive conditions necessary for behavioral change. All arguments showcased in these studies echo the current evidence that offenders exposed to adverse prison environments exhibit lower reintegration outcomes, reinforcing the claim that institutional conditions directly affect post-release adjustment. Empirical research further strengthens this alignment. Bales and Piquero (2012) points out that incarceration in negative environments can intensify criminal tendencies. Cid and Martí (2026) adds that criminogenic environments foster criminal cognitions, which increase the risk of recidivism.

Environmental quality within prisons is a decisive determinant of whether incarceration leads to rehabilitation or entrenches cycles of reoffending. In light of the findings of the current study, the importance of improving the prison environment has been highlighted as a pathway toward successful reintegration into society. Consistent with Maruna (2025) and

Farrall (2021), the present study indicates that moving away from punitive isolation toward environments that promote skill development, treatment, and constructive social interaction is essential for reducing reoffending and supporting rehabilitative goals.

Conclusion

Rehabilitation of incarcerated offenders for reintegration into society is one of the important functions of prisons as integral component of criminal justice system. For this purpose, environment of prison has central point of attention which has direct effect on the personalities of prison inmates. The present study examined the environment of prison as well as analyzed its association with reintegration of offenders. Findings of this study revealed that there was significant positive association between prison environment and the reintegration of offenders. Furthermore, prison environment was found not conducive for the rehabilitation of offenders and supportive for their reintegration into society as law abiding citizens. Policy makers and prison authorities should pay serious attention to prison environment, making it rehabilitative for offenders rather than focusing on the construction of new prisons. Focusing on rehabilitation programs and improved visitation process, they should make prisons more humane and violence free through professional trainings of prison management.

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