

Conceptualizing Digital Reintegration Frameworks around the Challenges of Incarcerated Individuals

Vivian C. Gruyal

Department of Industrial Technology, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Cantilan 8317, Surigao del Sur, Philippines
Correspondence: vcgruyal@nemsu.edu.ph

Abstract: The widening digital divide within correctional facilities severely limits the rehabilitative potential of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), leaving them ill-equipped for a technologically driven society upon release. To address this institutional gap, this study employed a quantitative-descriptive design to conduct a foundational user needs assessment of 47 male PDLs confined in a Philippine correctional facility. The primary objective was to conceptualize an evidence-based digital reintegration framework. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that while respondents expressed a neutral stance toward daily emotional struggles and confinement challenges, persistent institutional vulnerabilities regarding social isolation and resource accessibility remain evident. Notably, participants strongly agreed that their incarceration fostered new aspirations, resilience, and a profound desire for self-improvement. Synthesizing these quantitative insights, the study proposes a conceptual digital architecture that integrates AI-mediated communication tools, culturally responsive user interfaces, and outcomes-based e-learning portals explicitly tailored for adult learners. By adopting these learner-centered strategies, correctional administrators can transform the passive experience of confinement into a proactive, digitally inclusive pathway for sustainable development, ultimately bridging the technological inequality that returning citizens face during societal reintegration.

Keywords: digital reintegration, correctional technology, outcomes-based education, learner-centered strategies, persons deprived of liberty

1. Introduction

The glaring disparity between the rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and their severely limited integration into correctional rehabilitative frameworks represents a critical institutional gap that leaves persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) ill-equipped for a digitally driven society. The concept of deprivation of liberty entails the restriction of an individual's freedom of movement and personal autonomy, most often carried out through legal mechanisms such as incarceration or detention. Under such circumstances, individuals find themselves confined to prescribed physical spaces explicitly designed to curtail their mobility. This physical confinement unfortunately mirrors a severe technological confinement; while ICT use has increased exponentially for the general public, Kerr and Willis (2018) explicitly note the urgent need to bridge the digital divide, as those held in prisons have not had the same access to this technology. Consequently, returning citizens face significant digital inequality barriers, struggling to access computers and use technology for online job searching, education, and personal needs post-release (Sanders, 2025). Furthermore, PDLs constitute a population with a markedly higher prevalence of mental-health disorders, social vulnerability, and unmet health needs compared with the general population, making correctional settings a crucial site for bridging both public-health and technological inquiry (Ndindeng, 2024; Cunha et al., 2023). Empirical work over the last five years has underscored that incarceration is associated with elevated rates of anxiety, depression, trauma-related symptoms, and other psychiatric morbidity, which not only affect well-being during confinement but also heavily influence post-release outcomes such as recidivism and successful social reintegration (Ndindeng, 2024; Rowlandson, 2024).

Globally, correctional systems face multifaceted challenges, including overcrowding, restricted access to healthcare, operational strains, and limited social contact, all of which significantly affect the well-being of incarcerated individuals (Machado et al., 2024; Arafat et al., 2024). In the United States, recent mixed-methods studies observed how emergency measures during the COVID-19 pandemic severely strained service delivery and limited opportunities for education, work, and social contact, mechanisms that increase the pains of imprisonment and exacerbate stressors (Novisky et al., 2023). In Ethiopia, research on juvenile delinquency pointed to socio-economic conditions as drivers of incarceration, while in Nigeria, awaiting-trial prisoners face prolonged uncertainty leading to heightened psychological distress and cognitive decline (Ezenwa & Orjiakor, 2017). Compounding these material and psychological deprivations is the reality that ICT maturity in many facilities is poor and cannot drive correctional education service delivery efficiently, meaning most inmates lack access to it (Akinsanya et al., 2020). Locally, the Philippine correctional system has long been characterized by severe overcrowding, inadequate staffing, and resource limitations, where cells designed for ten inmates often accommodate more than 100 individuals (Narag & Jones, 2017). The lived experiences of PDLs in these detention facilities present challenges such as restricted freedom, poor nutrition, inadequate ventilation, and the lack of physical and emotional support spaces (Saguran et al., 2023). Moreover, human rights concerns regarding mistreatment and compliance with international standards remain pressing (Kleinsman, 2017). Heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were documented among PDLs during the pandemic (Ramones, 2022), stressing the need for policy transformation to strengthen mental health services (Alibudbud, 2023). Integrating AI-mediated environments and digital support systems could offer scalable solutions to these pervasive infrastructural limitations.

Despite adverse conditions, incarcerated persons deploy a range of coping strategies and resilience processes, informal social supports, cognitive reframing, participation in available programs, and adaptive behaviors, that buffer psychological harm to varying degrees (Mendes et al., 2023; Tsabedze et al., 2023). Mendes et al. (2023) found that resilience and social support significantly mitigated the effects of pandemic-related fear among Portuguese inmates. Tsabedze et al. (2023) similarly documented adaptive coping strategies, including spirituality, peer bonding, and mental reframing, that serve as protective factors against psychological harm. Prosen et al. (2024) further emphasized the intersection of coping with health-seeking behaviors, showing that even in constrained environments, inmates engage in adaptive practices to sustain their well-being. These findings align with local Philippine evidence of resilience and adaptation, wherein inmates develop informal systems of cooperation to survive adverse conditions (Saguran et al., 2023). To effectively integrate technology into these complex sociocultural dynamics, a user-centered implementation approach is paramount. Hart (2023) emphasizes the importance of understanding user experiences to maximize the benefits and minimize the harms of ICT use. Designing smart, learner-centered correctional platforms requires considering spatial, scheduling, and security measures while actively supporting equitable access (Hart, 2023). A rigorous quantitative approach can classify these coping styles and test their associations with psychological distress, thereby identifying protective factors that correctional management applications can strengthen.

Finally, aspirations and future-oriented goals, educational attainment, employment plans, family reunification, and desistance aspirations, play a pivotal role in rehabilitation and successful reentry, yet remain under-quantified in many jurisdictions (Cunha et al., 2023). Pasma et al. (2022) found that many inmates identify reintegration needs such as education, employment, and family reunification but often lack adequate institutional support. Mourão et al. (2025) argued that focusing only on recidivism overlooks positive outcomes such as skill development, social ties, and aspirations for meaningful change. In the Philippine context, despite harsh conditions, many PDLs express hope for family reunification, education, and renewed community roles post-release (Alibudbud, 2023). By framing outcomes-based education within a digital reintegration framework, these aspirations can be practically supported. Measuring these hopes alongside challenges and coping mechanisms serves as a vital needs assessment, enabling the examination of how adaptive strategies shape readiness for reintegration and potential reoffending risk. Collectively, these quantitative insights supply the foundational evidence required to guide the design of AI-driven institutional platforms and community-based digital supports, improving reintegration outcomes for PDLs and public safety alike.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to conduct a user needs assessment by examining the self-reported challenges, coping mechanisms, aspirations, and experiences of incarceration among persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) through a quantitative lens. By identifying these institutional gaps and psychosocial realities, the research sought to:

1. Determine the profile of the respondents in terms of:
 - 1.1. Age
 - 1.2. Sex
 - 1.3. Years of imprisonment

2. Investigate the daily challenges, emotional struggles, and psychological effects experienced by PDLs who have been confined for an extended period.
3. Assess the influence of the incarceration environment on the challenges, coping mechanisms, and social interactions of individuals within the correctional system.
4. Identify the aspirations, hopes, and personal narratives that emerge from the perspectives of PDLs during their period of imprisonment.
5. Propose a conceptual digital reintegration framework utilizing learner-centered strategies that directly respond to the quantified challenges and aspirations of the respondents.

3. Methods

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative-descriptive research design to systematically analyze the challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs). Within the context of conceptualizing an ICT integration strategy, this design functioned as a foundational user needs assessment and requirements elicitation phase. The descriptive design is appropriate as it allows for the collection of numerical data to describe patterns, trends, and relationships among variables. By quantifying these elements, the research effectively captures the institutional gaps and psychosocial realities that the proposed learner-centered digital framework must address.

Research Locale and Respondents

The study was conducted at the Cantilan District Jail, where the targeted PDLs are currently serving their sentences. Viewed through an information systems lens, these respondents represent the primary end-users of the proposed digital platform. The participants consisted of incarcerated individuals who have been confined for at least one year, ensuring they possess adequate experience within the prison system to provide meaningful insights. Inclusion criteria considered age, sex, and length of imprisonment, while those with severe mental illness or who were unable to consent were excluded.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. This non-probability sampling approach was necessary due to the restricted nature of the correctional setting, institutional security protocols, and ethical considerations governing access to incarcerated populations. The final sample consisted of 47 eligible respondents who voluntarily participated in the study following approval from the correctional facility and the completion of the informed consent process.

Research Instrument

A structured survey questionnaire, adapted from validated instruments concerning incarceration experiences, coping mechanisms, and rehabilitation, was utilized as the primary data collection tool. Serving effectively as a foundational user-experience audit, the questionnaire's contents were specifically aligned with the study's stated objectives. Instead of merely gathering traditional criminological data, it systematically captured the requisite demographic baselines, psychosocial pain points, systemic constraints, and future aspirations necessary for digital framework conceptualization. To establish rigorous content validity, the instrument was evaluated by a panel of experts in criminology, psychology, and research methodology. Their recommendations regarding the relevance, clarity, coherence, and appropriateness of the items were fully incorporated to refine the tool prior to its administration among the respondents.

Data Gathering Procedure

Upon securing approval from the facility authorities, data collection was conducted with strict adherence to confidentiality and ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The survey was administered in person, with assistance provided when necessary for respondents with literacy difficulties. This specific methodological accommodation highlights a crucial finding for future ICT implementation, emphasizing that any digital interface designed for this demographic must prioritize accessibility and intuitive user-experience design.

Data Analysis

The data gathered was processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically utilizing frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation. This analysis was used to present the demographic profile, challenges, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of the respondents. By translating abstract user experiences into

measurable metrics, the statistical analysis provides the empirical justification required to prioritize specific features within the digital reintegration architecture.

Ethical Considerations

The study upheld the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and non-maleficence. Respondents were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequences. No identifying information was collected, and the results were presented in aggregate form to protect anonymity. These stringent ethical protocols also establish the baseline data privacy and security standards required for the subsequent development of the digital framework.

4. RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
20 - 30 yrs. old	10	21.3
31 - 40 yrs. old	19	40.4
41 - 50 yrs. old	13	27.7
51 - 60 yrs. old	4	8.5
61 - 70 yrs. old	1	2.1
Sex		
Male	47	100
Years of Imprisonment		
1 month - 1 year	21	44.7
2 years	11	23.4
3 years	13	27.7
4 years	1	2.1
5 years	1	2.1
Total no. of respondents	47	100

The demographic profile reveals that most respondents are in their productive years (31–40 years old, 40.4%; 41–50 years old, 27.7%). All respondents are male (100%), which mirrors national correctional trends. In terms of incarceration length, nearly half have been imprisoned for less than a year (44.7%), while only a few have spent four to five years behind bars.

Table 2. Daily Challenges, Emotional Struggles, And Psychological Effects

STATEMENTS	Weighted mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. I often feel a sense of isolation and loneliness during my daily life behind bars.	2.81	Neutral
2. Coping with the daily routine of confinement is a significant challenge for me.	3.11	Neutral
3. Extended confinement has had a negative impact on my emotional well-being.	2.60	Neutral
4. I often experience anxiety and fear due to my prolonged stay behind bars.	2.36	Disagree
5. My sense of self-worth has been diminished by my extended confinement.	2.51	Disagree
6. Traumatic incidents within the prison/detention facility have negatively impacted my emotional state.	2.79	Neutral
7. I have effective coping strategies to deal with the stress and uncertainty of life behind bars.	3.19	Neutral
8. I often experience feelings of depression and hopelessness due to my confinement.	2.60	Neutral
9. My relationships with family and friends have been strained by my extended confinement.	2.72	Neutral
10. My ability to adapt to life outside of prison or detention has been significantly affected by my extended confinement.	2.62	Neutral
General Assessment	2.73	Neutral

The findings show that PDLs generally expressed a neutral stance (WM = 2.73) toward the daily challenges, emotional struggles, and psychological effects of incarceration. While many reported feelings of isolation and loneliness (WM = 2.81) and acknowledged the difficulty of coping with confinement routines (WM = 3.11), respondents disagreed with statements related to anxiety, fear (WM = 2.36), and diminished self-worth (WM = 2.51). Neutral responses to experiences of trauma (WM = 2.79), strained family ties (WM = 2.72), and depression (WM = 2.60) were recorded. The relatively higher mean for possessing coping strategies (WM = 3.19) points to the presence of adaptive mechanisms.

Table 3. Influence of the incarceration environment

STATEMENTS	Weighted mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. The physical environment of the correctional facility impacts my overall well-being.	3.32	Neutral
2. My daily experiences in the correctional environment are primarily negative.	3.06	Neutral
3. The correctional facility's conditions affect my ability to cope with the challenges of incarceration.	3.09	Neutral
4. The social interactions within the correctional system have a significant impact on my emotional well-being.	3.49	Agree

5. The correctional environment provides opportunities for rehabilitation and personal growth.	3.83	Agree
6. The correctional staff's behavior and attitudes affect my sense of safety and security.	3.38	Neutral
7. I have access to support systems or resources that help me cope with the challenges of incarceration.	3.15	Neutral
8. The correctional environment encourages productive and positive social interactions among inmates.	3.66	Agree
9. The correctional system's policies and procedures facilitate my reintegration into society upon release.	3.83	Agree
10. The correctional environment has a positive impact on my prospects for successful reintegration into society.	3.60	Agree
General Assessment	3.44	Agree

The findings reveal that the respondents generally agreed (WM = 3.44) that the incarceration environment significantly shapes their self-reported challenges, coping mechanisms, and social interactions. Positive ratings were observed for social interactions (WM = 3.49), opportunities for productive relationships among inmates (WM = 3.66), avenues for rehabilitation and personal growth (WM = 3.83), and support for reintegration into society (WM = 3.83). Neutral responses were recorded regarding the physical environment (WM = 3.32), staff behavior (WM = 3.38), access to resources (WM = 3.15), and daily experiences (WM = 3.06).

Table 4. Aspirations and hopes during imprisonment

STATEMENTS	Weighted mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. While incarcerated, I have developed new aspirations and life goals.	3.83	Agree
2. My hopes for the future have been positively influenced by my experiences in prison.	3.68	Agree
3. The personal narratives I've created during my imprisonment reflect my growth and transformation.	3.81	Agree
4. I believe that my time in prison has provided me with opportunities for self-improvement and personal development.	3.94	Agree
5. My experiences in prison have encouraged me to explore new interests and talents	3.87	Agree
6. I have hope for a positive and meaningful future after my release from prison.	3.77	Agree
7. My personal narrative now includes a story of resilience and determination.	3.77	Agree
8. I have found a sense of purpose or direction through my experiences during long-term imprisonment.	3.96	Agree
9. My aspirations for the future have evolved and become more meaningful as a result of my time in prison.	3.89	Agree

10. My personal narrative now includes stories of personal growth and transformation that inspire me to pursue a better future.	4.02	Agree
General Assessment	3.85	Agree

The results show that respondents agreed overall (WM = 3.85) that incarceration has led them to develop new aspirations, life goals, and personal narratives of growth and transformation. The highest-rated statement indicates that many PDLs now construct stories of personal growth that inspire them toward a better future (WM = 4.02), followed by a recognition of purpose and direction gained during imprisonment (WM = 3.96). Respondents also emphasized the role of incarceration in self-improvement (WM = 3.94), exploration of new interests and talents (WM = 3.87), and the reshaping of future aspirations (WM = 3.89).

Conceptualizing the Digital Reintegration Framework

The quantitative findings of this study serve as the foundational architecture for an evidence-based digital reintegration framework. Bridging theoretical concepts with real-world practice, the proposed technology aims to address the systemic constraints of the Philippine correctional environment while actively empowering the individual learner.

The demographic profile establishes that the primary end-users are in their highly productive years, specifically between 31 and 50 years old. Any digital interface introduced into the facility must move away from juvenile or overly academic aesthetics and instead prioritize culturally responsive teaching principles tailored to adult learners. The instructional design of the system's interface must account for varying levels of digital literacy among adult male PDLs, ensuring that navigation is intuitive and accessibility is prioritized to prevent technology-induced frustration. This user-centered implementation approach is crucial; as Akinsanya et al. (2020) highlighted, ICT maturity in correctional services is often poor, meaning systems must be deliberately designed to bridge the digital divide without overwhelming users who have historically lacked access (Kerr & Willis, 2018).

While respondents demonstrated a degree of psychological adaptability, reporting neutral stances toward emotional struggles (WM = 2.73), underlying vulnerabilities persist regarding isolation (WM = 2.81) and strained family ties (WM = 2.72). An effective digital framework must incorporate an AI-mediated communication module designed to reduce communication anxiety between PDLs, institutional counselors, and external support networks. Hart (2023) emphasizes that ICT platforms must be strategically deployed to maximize the benefits of communicating with families while navigating strict spatial and security measures. Furthermore, the neutral rating concerning access to support systems or resources (WM = 3.15) exposes persistent institutional gaps. By centralizing these resources into a digital governance dashboard, facility administrators can directly address the reintegration needs that inmates frequently identify but struggle to access (Pasma et al., 2022).

The most striking finding is the strong agreement among respondents that incarceration has provided opportunities for self-improvement (WM = 3.94) and encouraged the exploration of new interests and talents (WM = 3.87). These aspirations justify the development of a robust, outcomes-based education portal within the digital framework. Utilizing learner-centered strategies, this offline-accessible intranet platform would allow PDLs to engage with vocational modules, digital literacy courses, and cognitive-behavioral exercises. Providing this access during confinement directly combats the digital inequality that returning citizens face post-release when attempting to navigate online job searching and continuing education (Sanders, 2025). By capturing their reported narratives of growth and transformation (WM = 4.02) and aligning them with structured digital curricula, the framework aligns with Mourão et al.'s (2025) assertion that rehabilitation must focus on skill development and meaningful change. Ultimately, this transforms the passive experience of confinement into a proactive pathway for sustainable development, equipping returning citizens with the competencies required for a digitally driven workforce.

5. Conclusion

The conceptualization of a digital reintegration framework represents an essential institutional evolution necessary to bridge the widening digital divide within correctional facilities. Translating psychosocial needs into actionable technological architectures ensures that rehabilitative efforts remain relevant in a digitally driven society. By integrating culturally responsive UI/UX designs, AI-mediated communication tools, and outcomes-based education portals, correctional institutions can effectively shift their operational models from purely punitive confinement to proactive, digitally inclusive rehabilitation. This technological integration directly addresses existing

institutional gaps, empowering individuals to pursue continuous self-improvement and sustainable development prior to their release.

To actualize this framework, policymakers and facility administrators must prioritize the funding, development, and phased deployment of secure, offline-accessible intranet platforms tailored for adult learners. Correctional management should embed digital governance dashboards into their daily operations to streamline the allocation of mental health resources, legal updates, and vocational training, thereby enhancing overall leadership efficacy. Furthermore, it is critical that institutional staff undergo specialized training to successfully facilitate these AI-mediated environments, ensuring that the introduction of digital tools maximizes learner-centered engagement while strictly adhering to facility security protocols.

Future research must transition from the current conceptual phase to the applied development and empirical testing of prototype digital reintegration platforms within active correctional settings. Investigators should utilize qualitative, exploratory designs alongside experimental models to measure the direct impact of specific digital interventions, such as communication anxiety reduction modules and instructional e-learning frameworks, on post-release employment and recidivism rates. Additionally, expanding this technological inquiry to encompass diverse subpopulations, including female and juvenile offenders, will be vital for designing universally inclusive, highly adaptive educational technologies that account for the complex sociocultural dynamics of incarceration.

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