



Policies for social reintegration in the Ecuadorian penal system

Políticas de reinserción social en el sistema penal ecuatoriano

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current research article is to analyse the social reintegration policies in the ecuadorian penal system. Based on a qualitative methodological design of a descriptive-analytical nature in a population of 20 scientific articles. The results reveal that the system operates under a 'rehabilitative formalism' where the programmes exist nominally but lack the material conditions for their effective implementation. It is concluded that social reintegration policies require a comprehensive reformulation that transcends fragmented interventions to build a coherent, sustainable and evidence-based model that articulates inter-institutional efforts and guarantees the continuity of the rehabilitation process from sentencing to full social reintegration.

Descriptors: public law; prisoners; rights of prisoners (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

El actual artículo de investigación tiene por objetivo analizar las políticas de reinserción social en el sistema penal ecuatoriano. Basada en un diseño metodológico cualitativo de carácter descriptivo-analítico en una población de 20 artículos científicos. Los resultados revelan que el sistema opera bajo un "formalismo rehabilitador" donde los programas existen nominalmente, pero carecen de condiciones materiales para su implementación efectiva. Se concluye que las políticas de reinserción social requieren una reformulación integral que trascienda las intervenciones fragmentadas para construir un modelo coherente, sostenible y basado en evidencia, que articule esfuerzos interinstitucionales y garantice la continuidad del proceso rehabilitador desde la sentencia hasta la plena reintegración social.

Descriptores: derecho público; prisionero; derechos de los prisioneros. (Fuente: Tesaurus UNESCO).

Received: 04/09/2024. Revised: 28/09/2024. Approved: 13/10/2024. Published: 14/01/2025.

Research articles section



INTRODUCTION

The social reintegration of persons deprived of their liberty is one of the most complex challenges facing contemporary penal systems, particularly in contexts characterised by structural penitentiary crises such as the Ecuadorian one. This imperative, elevated to constitutional rank in the national legal system, transcends the mere normative declaration to become a parameter of legitimacy of the punitive power of the state and a necessary condition for the construction of a society that reconciles the demands of security with the principles of human dignity and comprehensive rehabilitation.

Therefore, the current research article aims to analyse social reintegration policies in the Ecuadorian penal system.

Theoretical frame of reference

In a context where the prison crisis has shown the limitations of the current model, it is imperative to rethink social reintegration policies from perspectives that recognise both the complexity of the criminal phenomenon and the state's responsibility in the generation of conditions that make possible trajectories of desistance and social reintegration, in this sense; it is presented:

Conceptual foundations of social reintegration

Social reintegration is a multidimensional theoretical construct that has undergone significant evolution in the field of criminal and criminological sciences. Conceptually, it transcends the mere physical reincorporation of the individual into society to become a complex process of social, psychological and economic reintegration that allows the person who has broken the criminal law to develop a life project away from criminality. As Brito-Febles & Alcocer-Castillo (2021) point out, social reintegration should be understood as a "dynamic and bidirectional process" that involves both the individual transformation of the offender and the generation of social conditions that enable his or her effective reintegration.



This conceptualisation distances itself from previous paradigms focused exclusively on rehabilitation, understood as the behavioural modification of the individual, to incorporate relational and structural dimensions that recognise the influence of social, economic and cultural factors in criminal trajectories. In this sense, Iturralde-Durán (2022) proposes understanding social reintegration as an "ecosystemic process" that requires the articulation of multiple actors and institutions at different levels of intervention.

From a legal perspective, social reintegration is based on the principle of human dignity and on the conception of punishment as an instrument of special positive prevention. This axiological foundation is supported by international instruments such as the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) and the Principles and Best Practices on the Protection of Persons Deprived of Liberty in the Americas, which establish standards for the implementation of prison policies aimed at social reintegration.

In the Ecuadorian context, the 2008 Constitution establishes in Article 201 that the purpose of the social rehabilitation system shall be "the comprehensive rehabilitation of persons sentenced to criminal sanctions in order to reintegrate them into society", thus elevating social reintegration to constitutional status and making it a fundamental right of persons deprived of their liberty. This constitutional provision is developed in the Código Orgánico Integral Penal (COIP), which establishes a progressive rehabilitation system based on individualised treatment and gradual preparation for release.

Theoretical paradigms on social reintegration

The specialised literature identifies various theoretical paradigms that have guided social reintegration policies in contemporary penal systems. These paradigms not only configure interpretative frameworks for understanding the criminal phenomenon, but also determine the intervention strategies implemented in prison systems.



The correctionalist paradigm, predominant during most of the 20th century, conceives delinquency as the result of individual deficiencies susceptible to correction through therapeutic interventions; under this approach, social reintegration will be equated with rehabilitation, understood as the modification of cognitive, behavioural and attitudinal patterns that predispose to criminal behaviour. As Palacios (2022) points out, this paradigm has been criticised for its tendency to "pathologise crime" and for ignoring the structural factors that influence criminal trajectories.

In contrast, the social reintegration paradigm, developed mainly from the 1980s onwards, emphasises the relational dimension of the reintegration process and community responsibility in the reception of those who have served a sentence, being represented in the work of López-Torres (2023), conceives reintegration as a process of "reconstruction of social ties" that requires both the preparation of the individual and the awareness and active participation of the receiving community.

In parallel, the restorative justice paradigm proposes a radical reconceptualisation of the social response to crime, prioritising the reparation of harm and the reconstruction of relationships over the imposition of punishment. From this perspective, developed in the work of Morocho (2024), social reintegration is conceived as part of a broader process of "social pacification" that involves victims, offenders and the community in the search for constructive solutions to the conflict generated by crime.

In recent years, the criminal desistance paradigm, which focuses on the processes by which individuals abandon criminal trajectories, has gained relevance and is represented in the work of Bonilla-Morejón (2023), conceives social reintegration as a "process of identity transformation" that involves the construction of a personal narrative away from crime and the acquisition of conventional social roles; in this case, desistance theory emphasises the agency of the individual and the importance of biographical "turning points" as catalysts for change.



Consequently, the human rights paradigm has become central to the contemporary debate on prison policy, shaping what Cordero & Oviedo (2024) call a "rights-based approach" to social reintegration. This paradigm emphasises that persons deprived of liberty retain all their fundamental rights, with the exception of those expressly limited by the sentence, and that the effectiveness of these rights is a necessary condition for any process of social reintegration.

Intervention models for social reintegration

The theoretical paradigms described above are materialised in various intervention models that guide institutional practices in prison systems, these models shape specific methodological approaches to address the multiple dimensions of social reintegration.

The risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model, initially developed by Andrews & Bonta, is one of the most influential approaches in contemporary prison intervention. This model, based on empirical evidence on predictors of recidivism, proposes that interventions should focus on high-risk individuals (risk principle), address dynamic criminogenic factors (need principle) and adapt to the individual characteristics of the participants (responsivity principle). As Vargas (2021) points out, the implementation of this model in the Ecuadorian context has faced difficulties derived from the insufficiency of validated instruments for risk assessment and the scarcity of specialised technical staff.

Complementarily, the Good Lives Model, developed by Tony Ward, proposes an approach focused on the strengths and potential of the individual, rather than on his or her deficits or risk factors. This model, represented in the work of Soria & Oviedo (2022), conceives social reintegration as a process of "rebuilding capacities" that allows the individual to satisfy fundamental human needs (such as autonomy, competence and connectedness) through pro-social means. The implementation of this approach requires the development of holistic interventions that simultaneously address multiple dimensions of individual well-being.



The therapeutic justice model, on the other hand, proposes the use of the legal system as a therapeutic agent, emphasising the rehabilitative potential of judicial interactions. This approach, developed in the work of Torres (2024), has found application in initiatives such as drug treatment courts and restorative justice programmes, which prioritise the resolution of underlying problems over the imposition of punitive sanctions. The implementation of this model requires a significant transformation of the judicial culture and specialised training of legal operators.

In the specific field of intervention with vulnerable groups, models of differentiated intervention that recognise the specific needs of populations such as women, adolescents and people with mental disorders have gained relevance. These models, represented in the works of Espinoza (2016) and Peñafiel-Espinoza & Mera-Baldeón (2024), propose the implementation of specific protocols that incorporate gender, intercultural and human rights perspectives in the approach to social reintegration.

Consequently, continuum of care models emphasise the importance of the transition between the prison environment and the community as a critical phase of the reintegration process. These models, developed in the work of Brito-Febles & Alcocer-Castillo (2021), propose the implementation of programmes of preparation for release and post-release accompaniment that facilitate gradual reintegration into community life. Therefore, the effectiveness of these models requires inter-institutional articulation and the active participation of civil society organisations in the process of welcoming and supporting released prisoners.

Factors conditioning social reintegration

Among individual factors, empirical research highlights the importance of variables such as motivation to change, the acquisition of pro-social skills, overcoming addictions and the construction of a non-criminal identity. As Nieto et al. (2024) point out, these factors interact in a complex way with personal characteristics such as age, gender and previous criminal history, configuring differentiated profiles that require interventions adapted to their particularities.



Relational factors include the quality of family ties, the existence of social support networks and the availability of prosocial role models in the immediate environment. Research by Mancheno-Salazar et al. (2022) shows that the maintenance of family ties during the period of imprisonment is a significant predictor of successful reintegration, while association with delinquent peers is a risk factor for recidivism.

In the institutional sphere, factors such as prison conditions, the quality of treatment programmes, preparation for release and the availability of post-release follow-up mechanisms significantly condition the possibilities of reintegration. Research by da-Fonte Carvalho et al. (2022) shows that overcrowding, intra-prison violence and the precariousness of basic services make up "environments of rehabilitative impossibility" that hinder any intervention aimed at reintegration.

Consequently, structural factors include variables such as access to employment and educational opportunities, the existence of inclusive social policies and the prevalence of stigmatising attitudes in the receiving society. As Haro & Erazo (2023) point out, effective social reintegration requires the implementation of comprehensive policies that transcend the penitentiary sphere to address the structural conditions that favour social exclusion and criminal recidivism.

METHOD

The article was based on a qualitative methodological design of a descriptive-analytical nature, aimed at critically examining social reintegration policies in the Ecuadorian penal system; this methodological approach responded to the complex nature of the object of study, which required a multidimensional approach capable of integrating normative, institutional and sociological elements.

A systematic documentary research design was adopted, complemented by elements of critical discourse analysis, which allowed us not only to identify the formal components of social reintegration policies, but also to examine the underlying conceptions and power relations that shaped their implementation.



A systematic review of 20 academic publications on social reintegration and prison systems was conducted, with emphasis on empirical studies developed in the Ecuadorian and Latin American context during the period 2015-2024. This review included scientific articles indexed in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO and Redalyc.

RESULTS

This research has made it possible to identify four fundamental dimensions that make up the current panorama of social reintegration policies in the Ecuadorian penal system. The critical analysis of these dimensions reveals the complexity of the phenomenon and the existing tensions between the normative framework and the reality of the penitentiary system.

Legal framework and criminal policy: The gap between normativity and effectiveness

The Montecristi Constitution established a guarantee paradigm that elevated social rehabilitation to constitutional status, configuring a multilevel system of protection that, in theory, should ensure the effectiveness of the rights of persons deprived of liberty. However, the judicialisation of prison guarantees has become a mechanism of formal legitimisation that has failed to transform the material conditions of imprisonment. As the specialised doctrine points out, there is an "implementation gap" between the formulation of penitentiary guarantees and their material concretion (Torres, 2024), a phenomenon that transcends mere administrative ineffectiveness to become a problem of state legitimacy.

This dissociation between the normative "should be" and the institutional "to be" is manifested with particular intensity in Ecuadorian criminal policy, characterised by a punitive populism that contradicts the constitutionally enshrined rehabilitative principles. The expansion of criminal law as a primary response to complex social problems has generated what Palacios (2022) calls "punitive inflation", which exponentially increases the prison population without providing the necessary resources for adequate attention. This trend has been exacerbated by legislative reforms which, under the banner of public safety, have stiffened sentences and



restricted early release mechanisms, contravening the principle of minimum penal intervention and generating a systemic overload that makes any rehabilitative pretension impossible.

Constitutional jurisprudence, for its part, has attempted to fill this gap through pronouncements recognising the "unconstitutional state of affairs" in the Ecuadorian penitentiary system. However, the effectiveness of these pronouncements is limited by the absence of follow-up mechanisms and institutional resistance to implementing structural transformations. This situation shapes what could be conceptualised as a "nominal penitentiary constitutionalism ", characterised by the existence of a normative framework that lacks effective implementation and control mechanisms.

Rehabilitation Programmes and Strategies: Fragmentation and Unsustainability

With regard to rehabilitation programmes and strategies, the analysis reveals a fragmented and discontinuous paradigm; therefore, the initiatives implemented suffer from three structural deficiencies: i) chronic budgetary insufficiency, ii) programmatic discontinuity and iii) absence of longitudinal evaluation mechanisms. This triad of deficiencies has generated what could be conceptualised as "ephemeral prison interventions", characterised by their limited scope and sustainability.

Empirical evidence suggests that existing programmes operate under a logic of containment rather than transformation, prioritising the management of the prison population over their effective rehabilitation. In this case, the prison management model implemented in Ecuador has tried to incorporate elements of progressivity and individualised treatment, but its operationalisation has been hindered by prison overcrowding and insufficient specialised technical staff. This situation has generated what Vargas (2021) calls a "fictional rehabilitation", characterised by the formal existence of programmes that lack the material conditions necessary for their effective implementation.

On the other hand, programmatic discontinuity constitutes another significant obstacle to the effectiveness of rehabilitative interventions. In this case, changes in



the prison administration usually lead to substantial modifications in the programmes implemented, generating a "policy of perpetual reinvention" that prevents the consolidation of methodologies and the accumulation of institutional learning. This programmatic volatility is exacerbated by the absence of integrated information systems to monitor the trajectories of persons deprived of liberty and evaluate the impact of the interventions carried out.

Particularly worrying is the disarticulation between intra-prison interventions and post-prison support mechanisms. In this regard, research by Brito-Febles & Alcocer-Castillo (2021) shows that effective social reintegration requires sustained accompaniment during the period of transition to freedom, a phase that currently constitutes an "institutional vacuum" in the Ecuadorian system. This disarticulation generates what we could call a "truncated rehabilitation", where the progress achieved during the period of incarceration is diluted in the absence of continuity and support mechanisms.

It is therefore imperative to move towards a model of "rehabilitative continuity" that transcends the temporal and spatial limits of incarceration, incorporating mechanisms of post-penitentiary follow-up and inter-institutional articulation. This model would require the implementation of what Iturralde-Durán (2022) conceptualises as "reinsertion ecosystems", characterised by the coordinated participation of public, private and community institutions in the social reintegration process.

Vulnerable Groups and Social Factors: Towards a Differentiated Intervention

The dimension relating to vulnerable groups and social factors reveals a problem of "differentiated invisibilisation" within the prison system; the specific needs of women, adolescents and other vulnerable groups are subsumed under standardised protocols that ignore the particularities of these groups. This phenomenon of prison homogenisation contravenes the principle of material equality and perpetuates cycles of exclusion that transcend the period of incarceration.



The case of women prisoners is paradigmatic of this problem. As Espinoza (2016) points out, the Ecuadorian prison system has been designed from an androcentric perspective that ignores the specific needs of the female population. This invisibilisation is manifested in multiple dimensions: from prison infrastructure to training programmes, health care and visiting regimes. Particularly worrying is the situation of women with maternal responsibilities, who face what could be called a "double punishment": deprivation of liberty and separation from their children, with the psychosocial consequences that this entails both for them and for their families.

A similar situation is faced by adolescents in conflict with criminal law, who, despite having a specialised system, experience what Nieto et al. (2024) conceptualise as an "adultization of treatment". This trend is manifested in the prioritisation of security measures over socio-educational interventions, contravening the principles of the doctrine of comprehensive protection and generating stigmatisation processes that hinder effective social reintegration. Contemporary research shows that the criminal trajectories of adolescents are closely linked to factors of social vulnerability, such as lack of schooling, economic precariousness and exposure to violent environments, factors that are not adequately addressed by the current system.

Contemporary research suggests the need to implement what could be called "differentiated intervention protocols", based on the recognition of the heterogeneity of the prison population and the understanding of criminal trajectories as multidimensional phenomena. These protocols should incorporate intersectional perspectives that recognise the confluence of multiple factors of vulnerability and discrimination, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability, among others.

On the other hand, Peñafiel-Espinoza & Mera-Baldeón (2024), propose the implementation of what they call "contextually situated intervention models", characterised by their adaptability to the particularities of each population group and by their capacity to articulate multidimensional responses to complex problems. These models require the formation of specialised interdisciplinary teams and the



implementation of participatory methodologies that recognise prisoners as active subjects in their own rehabilitation process.

Structural challenges and reform proposals: Paradigmatic reconfiguration

In terms of structural challenges and reform proposals, a dialectical tension is identified between incremental reformist approaches and systemic transformation approaches. The Ecuadorian prison crisis has reached a turning point that questions the viability of partial interventions, suggesting the need for a "paradigmatic reconfiguration" of the prison model.

The conditions of overcrowding, intra-prison violence and infrastructural precariousness constitute ontological obstacles to any rehabilitative pretension, configuring what we could conceptualise as "environments of rehabilitative impossibility" (da-Fonte Carvalho et al., 2022). Overcrowding, which in some prisons exceeds 300% of their installed capacity, generates living conditions that contravene the minimum standards established by international human rights law. This situation is exacerbated by insufficient security and technical staff, creating a "governance vacuum" that has been filled by self-governing structures and organised crime.

Intra-prison violence, manifested in recurrent clashes between rival gangs, is another significant obstacle to the implementation of rehabilitative programmes. This violence has reached unprecedented levels in recent years, creating what Haro and Erazo (2023) call a "permanent state of factual exception" within prisons. This situation has led to the prioritisation of containment and security measures over rehabilitative interventions, generating a vicious circle where violence justifies the hardening of the prison regime, which in turn exacerbates tensions and conflicts.

Given this reality, alternative proposals have emerged that range from the selective privatisation of prison services (Tacuri, 2017) to the implementation of restorative justice models (Morocho, 2024), demonstrating the need to transcend the dichotomous debate between punitivism and abolitionism in order to explore intermediate paths of institutional transformation. Selective privatisation,



conceptualised as the outsourcing of certain prison services under strict state control mechanisms, has been proposed as an alternative to improve the quality of care and optimise the use of resources. However, this proposal has been questioned from perspectives that warn of the risks of commodification of punishment and subordination of the rehabilitative purpose to the logic of economic profitability.

On the other hand, restorative justice emerges as an alternative paradigm that proposes the reconfiguration of the relationships between victim, offender and community, prioritising the reparation of harm over punitive retribution. This approach, which has been successfully implemented in other Latin American contexts, would require a profound transformation of the Ecuadorian legal culture, characterised by what Morocho (2024) calls an "entrenched punitivism" that permeates both institutions and the social imaginary.

CONCLUSION

Three structural deficiencies in the social reintegration policies of the Ecuadorian penal system have been highlighted:

First, a profound dissociation between the normative framework of guarantees and the institutional reality, where "rehabilitative formalism" manifests itself in programmes that exist nominally, but lack the material conditions for their effective implementation;

Secondly, institutional fragmentation that prevents the construction of "reintegration ecosystems", as evidenced by the disarticulation between governmental entities and civil organisations, hindering the continuity of the rehabilitation process beyond incarceration;

Thirdly, the absence of differentiated, post-penitentiary policies, which neglects the specific needs of vulnerable groups and abandons released prisoners during the critical phase of transition to freedom, neutralising any progress made during incarceration.



These deficiencies make up a system that, despite its constitutional foundation on principles of comprehensive rehabilitation, operates under containment logics that compromise both the fundamental rights of persons deprived of liberty and long-term citizen security.

FUNDING

Non-monetary

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest with persons or institutions involved in research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Ecuadorian jurists.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE AUTHORS

Julio César de Jesús Arrias-Añez: Responsible for the methodological design and theoretical analysis, focusing on the normative framework and constitutional principles underpinning social reintegration policies in the Ecuadorian penal system. He also participated in the drafting of the manuscript, the integration of doctrinal and jurisprudential sources, and the final revision of the content to ensure its legal accuracy.

Bryan Mauricio Núñez-Paredes: Responsible for the hermeneutic analysis of the results, with special attention to the legal interpretation of the study categories and their link with the theoretical paradigms on social reintegration. He contributed to the structuring of the article, the discussion of the results and the final revision of the text.

Jhonnatan Fernando Coca-Vaca: Responsible for the systematic review of specialised literature and the comparative analysis of intervention models for social reintegration. He participated in the elaboration of the theoretical framework, the identification of conditioning factors of social reintegration and the formulation of conclusions.

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