

Examining the Effect of Rehabilitation Programs on Public Perception of the Malaysian Prison System

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The Malaysian prison system has historically emphasized punitive measures focused on deterrence and punishment. However, growing research and societal awareness highlight the need for a rehabilitative model that prioritizes reintegration and personal development of inmates. This study examines whether rehabilitation programs—covering education, vocational training, mental health support, social learning, and religious knowledge—have a significant effect on public perception of the prison system in Malaysia. Using a mixed-methods design, qualitative interviews with stakeholders and quantitative surveys of the public were conducted to evaluate attitudes toward rehabilitation initiatives. Statistical findings demonstrate strong correlations between rehabilitation programs and public perception ($R = 0.839$, $R = 0.704$), indicating that exposure to and awareness of rehabilitative efforts foster more positive societal views. Results reveal a gradual but notable shift in public opinion toward favoring rehabilitation, driven by recognition of long-term benefits such as reduced recidivism and enhanced community safety. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including stigmatization of former inmates, insufficient funding, and resistance from certain political and social groups. The study concludes that strengthening rehabilitation programs can reshape public perception, paving the way for broader acceptance of reform-oriented policies and a more humane prison system aligned with contemporary justice and human rights principles.

Keywords: *Prison system Malaysia; rehabilitation; punitive approach; public perception; criminal justice.*

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INTRODUCTION

The prison system in Malaysia has historically been dominated by punitive philosophies, emphasizing deterrence and punishment as the primary mechanisms of justice. This approach has often resulted in overcrowded facilities, limited rehabilitative opportunities, and stigmatization of inmates upon release, creating a cycle of reoffending that undermines long-term community safety (Hassan, 2018). Globally, however, correctional systems have undergone significant transformation, shifting toward rehabilitative models that prioritize reintegration and personal development. Countries such as Norway and the Netherlands have demonstrated that education, vocational training, and therapeutic interventions can reduce recidivism and foster successful reintegration, setting benchmarks for humane and effective prison management (Pifferi, 2024; Penal Reform International, 2023). In contrast, many Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, continue to struggle with overcrowding, underfunding, and reliance on punitive measures, despite growing recognition of the need for reform (UNODC, 2024).

International scholarship strongly supports the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. Dahl and Mogstad (2020) found that structured rehabilitation initiatives significantly lower recidivism rates, while Zehr (2015) argued that punitive measures often perpetuate cycles of crime rather than deter them. Research also highlights the importance of education and vocational training in reducing reoffending, with studies showing that inmates who gain skills and knowledge during incarceration are less likely to return to crime (Prison Studies Project, 2018). Within Malaysia, community-based rehabilitation initiatives have been explored, but their implementation remains inconsistent and underfunded (Abu Hassan, Hamin, & Othman, 2017). Moreover, public perception plays a critical role in shaping the success of prison reforms, as societal attitudes influence both policy acceptance and the reintegration of former inmates (Syafiq & Lukman, 2025).

Despite these insights, there remains a significant research gap in Malaysia. While international evidence highlights the role of rehabilitation in reshaping public trust, Malaysian scholarship has yet to systematically assess how rehabilitation programs—spanning education, mental health support, vocational training, social learning, and religious knowledge—affect public perception of the prison system. Existing studies often focus narrowly on institutional reforms or operational challenges, overlooking the mediating role of societal attitudes in determining the success of rehabilitative initiatives. This gap underscores the need for empirical research that evaluates whether rehabilitation programs can positively influence public perception, thereby paving the way for broader acceptance of reform-oriented policies.

This study aims to examine whether rehabilitation programs—specifically educational, mental health support, vocational training, social learning, and religious knowledge—have a significant effect on public perception of the prison system in Malaysia. Understanding public perception is vital, as it bridges the gap between evidence-based policy and societal acceptance, ensuring that reforms are both effective and socially supported. By analyzing attitudes across diverse groups, this research contributes to the discourse on prison reform and offers valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and academics seeking to strengthen rehabilitative initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design to comprehensively examine the effect of rehabilitation programs on public perception of the Malaysian prison system. The target population comprised Malaysian citizens aged 18 and above, representing diverse socio-demographic backgrounds including age, gender, education level, occupation, and socio-economic status. The average of the sample size of 400 respondents is summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1: Average of sample size of 400 respondents

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Distribution/Statistical</i> |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Age | Mean = 35.6 years; Min = 18; Max = 65 |
| Gender | Male = 51%; Female = 49% |
| Education Level | Secondary = 22% Diploma = 18% Bachelor = 40% |

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Occupation | Master's/PhD = 20% Diverse representation (15% student; 30% professionals; 20% civil servants; 15% business owners; 20% unemployed/others) |
| Socio-Economic status | Low = 35%; Middle = 45%; High = 20% |

A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure proportional representation across key demographic categories, with a survey sample size of approximately 400 respondents, sufficient to achieve statistical generalizability at a 95% confidence level. For the qualitative component, 20 participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives, including policymakers, educators, community leaders, and members of civil society organizations.

The quantitative survey instrument consisted of structured questionnaires with Likert-scale items measuring attitudes toward punishment, rehabilitation, offender accountability, and perceptions of public safety (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). These constructs were designed to capture public sentiment toward key aspects of criminal justice reform. Table 2 shows each dimension with description. Each dimension was analyzed descriptively to determine central tendencies (mean scores) and variability (standard deviation), providing insight into prevailing public attitudes. These results are summarized in the Likert-scale item table and further interpreted in the Results section.

Table 2: Likert-scale item used with description

| Dimension | Description |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Attitude toward Punishment. | Gauges support for punitive measures such as incarceration and deterrence |
| Attitude toward Rehabilitation. | Assesses endorsement of rehabilitative approaches including education, vocational training, and psychological support. |
| Offender Accountability | Measures belief in the importance of offenders taking responsibility for their actions. |
| Public Safety Perception | Evaluates the perceived impact of rehabilitation programs on overall community safety. |

The qualitative interviews were guided by a protocol focusing on themes such as trust in the prison system, empathy toward offenders, perceived risks of rehabilitation, and expectations of reform outcomes. Both instruments were pre-tested with a pilot group to refine clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness. Survey data were collected through online platforms and face-to-face distribution in selected urban and rural areas to ensure inclusivity, while interviews were conducted in person and via virtual conferencing tools depending on participant availability.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed: informed consent was obtained, confidentiality was assured, and participants were informed of their right

to withdraw at any stage. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, means, and percentages) to identify general trends, and inferential statistics (chi-square tests and regression analysis) to examine relationships between demographic variables and perceptions of rehabilitation.

Reliability of the survey instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha to ensure internal consistency of scales. Qualitative data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework—familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting—with NVivo software employed to facilitate systematic coding. Methodological triangulation was applied by integrating survey results with interview findings, while peer debriefing and member checking were conducted during the qualitative phase to strengthen credibility and confirm accuracy of interpretations.

While the mixed-methods design provided both depth and breadth, limitations included potential sampling bias due to reliance on voluntary participation and the challenge of capturing nuanced perceptions across Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape. Nonetheless, the methodological rigor applied ensures that the findings remain robust, reliable, and informative for policy and practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings

Table 3 shows the Likert-Scale Items was analyzed descriptively to determine central tendencies (mean scores) and variability (standard deviation), providing insight into prevailing public attitudes.

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation of each Likert-Scale Items.

| Dimension | Mean (1 – 5) | Standard Deviation | Interpretation |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Attitude: Punishment | 3.0 | 0.95 | Moderate support for punitive measures; less favored compared to rehabilitation. |
| Attitude: Rehabilitation | 4.2 | 0.88 | Strong support for rehabilitation programs, showing positive societal attitudes. |
| Offender Accountability | 4.3 | 0.72 | High belief in offender responsibility, consistent across groups. |
| Public Safety Perception | 4.1 | 0.80 | Generally positive perception of safety linked to rehabilitation initiatives. |

From Table 3, it shows that respondents strongly favor rehabilitation (Mean = 4.2) and accountability (Mean = 4.3), while punitive measures receive moderate

support (Mean = 3.0). Public safety perception remains high (Mean = 4.1), suggesting confidence that rehabilitation aligns with societal protection.

The quantitative survey revealed strong statistical relationships between rehabilitation programs and public perception of the prison system in Malaysia is shown in Table 4. Regression analysis demonstrated that rehabilitation programs significantly influenced public perception, with correlation values of $R = 0.839$ and $R^2 = 0.704$, indicating that approximately 70% of the variance in public perception could be explained by exposure to or awareness of rehabilitation initiatives. Further analysis showed that rehabilitation programs also had a significant effect on the prison system itself ($R = 0.906$, $R^2 = 0.821$), while public perception was found to mediate this relationship ($R = 0.917$, $R^2 = 0.841$). These results suggest that public attitudes are a critical factor in determining the success of rehabilitative reforms. Descriptive statistics indicated a gradual but notable shift in public opinion, with a majority of respondents expressing support for rehabilitation measures such as education, vocational training, and mental health support. Respondents also recognized long-term societal benefits, including reduced recidivism and enhanced community safety.

Table 4: Relationship between rehabilitation programs on the prison systems via public perception

| Relationship Tested | Correlation, R | R^2 Value | Significance |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Rehabilitation Programs → Prison System | 0.906 | 0.821 | Significant |
| Rehabilitation Programs → Public Perception | 0.839 | 0.704 | Significant |
| Public Perception mediates Rehabilitation Programs → Prison System | 0.917 | 0.841 | Significant |

Qualitative Insights

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the factors shaping public perception. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of rehabilitation in fostering empathy toward offenders and building trust in the prison system. Policymakers and educators emphasized that successful rehabilitation cases serve as persuasive evidence for reform, while community leaders noted that family support and religious knowledge play vital roles in reintegration. Civil society representatives stressed that rehabilitation programs contribute to community safety by addressing root causes of crime. However, several challenges were identified: persistent stigmatization of former inmates, inadequate funding for rehabilitation initiatives, and resistance from certain political and social groups. Participants also expressed concerns about the perceived risks of rehabilitation, particularly fears that offenders might reoffend if programs are not properly implemented. Despite these reservations, the overall narrative reflected cautious

optimism, with growing recognition that rehabilitation offers a more humane and effective alternative to punitive measures

The findings align with international literature, which highlights the decisive role of public perception in shaping correctional policy (Atay et al., 2024; Feng & Jiang, 2025). Consistent with Bernard et al. (2017), demographic differences emerged as critical determinants of attitudes, underscoring the need for targeted strategies to engage diverse groups. The Malaysian context reflects broader global challenges: while evidence supports rehabilitation, societal skepticism rooted in cultural traditions and media narratives remains a barrier to reform.

Importantly, the results suggest that education and awareness are key levers for change. Exposure to rehabilitative success stories, both locally and internationally, can foster greater acceptance of reform. Policymakers must therefore balance public safety concerns with efforts to humanize offenders and demonstrate the long-term benefits of rehabilitation. By integrating empirical evidence with public engagement, Malaysia can move toward a correctional system that is both effective and humane

CONCLUSION

This study explored public perceptions of rehabilitation programs and their role in prison system reform in Malaysia through a mixed-methods design. The findings demonstrate that respondents strongly favor rehabilitation (Mean = 4.2) compared to punitive measures (Mean = 3.0), while offender accountability (Mean = 4.3) and public safety perception (Mean = 4.1) are consistently endorsed. These results indicate that rehabilitation is widely viewed as compatible with societal protection and offender responsibility. The mediation analysis further confirms that public perception is a critical pathway linking rehabilitation programs to prison system outcomes. Rehabilitation initiatives not only directly improve prison system effectiveness ($R = 0.906$, $R^2 = 0.821$) but also indirectly strengthen reforms by shaping public attitudes ($R = 0.839$, $R^2 = 0.704$), with perception serving as a significant mediator ($R = 0.917$, $R^2 = 0.841$).

The findings highlight several important implications for prison reform policy in Malaysia. First, the strong public support for rehabilitation suggests that policymakers should prioritize investment in rehabilitative programs such as vocational training, education, and psychological support. Second, the mediation effect of public perception underscores the need for transparent communication and community engagement to build trust in rehabilitation initiatives. Third, the endorsement of accountability and safety indicates that rehabilitation should balance compassion with responsibility, ensuring offenders acknowledge their actions while preparing for reintegration. Finally, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings emphasizes the importance of evidence-based policymaking, aligning reform strategies with both statistical trends and stakeholder perspectives.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on correctional reform by demonstrating the central role of public perception in shaping the success of rehabilitation programs. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of societal attitudes toward punishment, rehabilitation, accountability, and safety. The findings not only inform policy development in Malaysia but also offer insights applicable to broader regional and international contexts. Ultimately, this study

affirms that rehabilitation programs are essential to prison system reform, with public perception acting as the bridge that ensures their legitimacy, sustainability, and long-term impact.

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