**Reintegration Experiences in a Sample of Israeli Parolees on Completion of Their Term of Supervision: A Qualitative Study**

**Abstract**

For many released prisoners, the period following release is characterized by extreme challenges. The ability to overcome such challenges depends on the services, level of supervision and type of support available. One type of support offered by the Israeli Prisoners Rehabilitation Authority (IPRA) provides a supervisory and rehabilitative framework for reintegration after release from imprisonment, with an emphasis on employment. The present study examines the subjective experiences of ex-prisoners on their journey from incarceration through reentry and reintegration while participating in supervision, treatment and employment intervention operated by the IPRA. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of released prisoners who successfully completed IPRA supervision between 2014 and 2019. The interviews reveal four main themes that in turn identify pathways to “better lives” through the reintegration process.

**Keywords:** released prisoners, reentry, reintegration, supervision, treatment, employment intervention

# Introduction

Many released prisoners encounter difficulties after their release from prison that impede the reintegration process. Overcoming such difficulties depends on the individual’s abilities, motivation and mental state, as well as the social environment’s willingness to assist in the reintegration process (McNeill, 2016); the rehabilitative and therapeutic milieu; and the level of supervision and guidance provided (Seiter & Kadela, 2003; Visher & Travis, 2011).

Rehabilitation is a specific process intended to enable participants to resume and practice a normative and healthy lifestyle and activities. In the penological literature, this concept is further developed into stages of reentry and reintegration, the latter referring to the long process of reintegrating into normative society as a law-abiding citizen, desisting from crime (LeBel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001;Sampson & Laub, 2003) and exhibiting full recovery (White & Kurtz, 2005).

Specifically, rehabilitation, reentry, reintegration and desistance from crime are viewed as related concepts that describe an evolving process. Rehabilitation describes the initial process that targets the needs of the offender as identified by the intake process, and will vary in depth and duration of intervention until the point of reentry (usually the date of release back into the community). A successful rehabilitative intervention while incarcerated may culminate in early reentry followed by the reintegration process, a process of assimilation that will vary in duration depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual and the conditions of their release (Gideon & Sung, 2011; Travis, 2005). Successful reintegration means that the individual refrains from criminal involvement while assuming normative roles in society that symbolize their desistance from crime. Such desistance involves breaking away from old connections while making good (Maruna, 2001).

One theoretical model aimed at rehabilitating offenders and reducing their recidivism is the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward & Stewart, 2003). According to this model, rehabilitation of offenders should focus on those means that will enable them to better live their lives while improving their well-being and quality of life, which in turn will reduce their risk of recidivism (see Ward & Maruna, 2007). Accordingly, setting modest and attainable goals, such as securing a job, taking up new hobbies and being exposed to new experiences, will assist the individual in moving forward and building new life, rather than simply desisting and “floating” (Healy, 2014; Weaver, 2013, 2015).

The GLM approach to rehabilitation sees desistance from crime as a byproduct of major positive life events experienced by the individual offender (Cullen, 2012; Laub et al., 2006). For example, Laub and Sampson (1993), in their age-graded theory, argue that marriage, stable and meaningful employment, and military service are key turning points that lead to desistance from crime (Doherty, 2006). Such explanations were further developed into desistance theories (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Broidy & Cauffman, 2017; LeBel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001; Segev, 2018) that describe a gradual process that is completed when criminality is no longer manifested.

Specifically, desistance theories distinguish between primary desistance (temporary desistance from delinquent and criminal behavior) and secondary desistance (active participation in intervention programs that communicate a normative lifestyle). Such theories assume that it is essential to examine the overall lifestyle of the individual after the intervention program is completed (Rhine et al., 2017). They also assume that successful transition from primary to secondary desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004) does not guarantee tertiary (final) desistance, which includes broad social acknowledgment of change (McNeill, 2016).

The initial stage in desistance from crime is hope (Farrall et al., 2014), this being a time when the aims of the individual undergoing rehabilitation are still unclear and unconsolidated; he is preoccupied principally by what he does *not* want to do (e.g., return to prison, disappoint those around him). Later, as the rehabilitation process advances, and with the help of support agents, expectations and goals regarding the future begin to take shape (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). The more these are fulfilled, the more hope increases and becomes integral to the rehabilitation process (Gålnander, 2020). In contrast, a failure to achieve aims (the “pains of desistance”) can drive the individual to despair (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of individuals who have participated in the supervision and employment guidance programs operated by the Israeli Prisoners Rehabilitation Authority (IPRA). This will further our understanding of their rehabilitation, reentry and reintegration process, from their time of incarceration up to and beyond completion of mandatory supervision. Such insight will facilitate the identification of factors that may have a positive effect on that process and lead these individuals to a life free from crime.

# The Israeli Prisoners’ Rehabilitation and Community Supervision Program

Unlike many rehabilitation programs throughout the world, those geared toward paroled prisoners in Israel are not operated by volunteer agencies acting in varying degrees of coordination, such as the Second Chance Act in several US states (D’Amico & Kim, 2018). Instead, they have been mandated by law since 1983 (The Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority Act, 5743-1983, 1983) with agencies spread across the country. The IPRA’s programs enable prisoners who wish to earn early release on parole to apply to the parole board after serving approximately two-thirds of their sentence. Among many things considered by the board when making their decisions are behavioral infractions during the period of imprisonment and active participation in prison intervention programs, such as educational, professional, substance abuse, anger management, and other therapeutic and rehabilitative programs. The board also considers each prisoner’s individual risk of recidivism. This has led some to argue that prisoners seeking parole are driven by external motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2008) to take part in the rehabilitation programs offered. Nevertheless, their participation and subsequent release on parole requires them to remain under the supervision of the IPRA throughout the set period (i.e., the remaining one-third of the original sentence) while also being supervised in the community (e.g., in a seamless system of care).

From 2004 to 2013, conditional parole was granted to about 36% of sentenced offenders in Israeli prisons each year (Timor & Nagar, 2014). The vast majority of paroled offenders were mandated to participate in a rehabilitation program organized by the IPRA and to remain under its supervision.

The IPRA operates in a dual capacity as a supervising and reintegration agency that assists released prisoners, regardless of their religious and ethnic affiliation, to reassimilate into the normative community. The IPRA program combines supervision and treatment with a strong emphasis on employment integration. IPRA counselors, who are responsible for the therapeutic aspects of the programs, meet with eligible prisoners during their incarceration periods for interviews, assessment and evaluation of various reports and intake summaries. Eligible prisoners are those who express interest, motivation and commitment to the IPRA program; they are required to understand, accept and adhere to the conditions set by the counselors assigned to them. Thus, prisoners who participate in the program do so voluntarily, with the full understanding that the reduction of their prison sentence is dependent on that participation.

A tailored therapeutic program for the individual is then presented to the parole board for approval. Once this review is completed and approved, the prisoner is released conditionally (i.e., on license) and subject to the supervision of the IPRA, which is mandated to provide quarterly progress reports to the parole board.

Successful reintegration into the normative community requires the individual to change his thought processes, social perceptions and behavior (Shoham & Timor, 2014). Such change is essential when dealing with convicted criminals, who are accustomed to non-normative ways of thinking and manifest non-normative behavior (Ward & Maruna, 2007). Accordingly, as part of the conditions of release, an ex-prisoner is expected to participate in an individually tailored psychological treatment program corresponding to the conviction. In many cases, the individual is mandated to attend at least two weekly therapeutic sessions, one of individual treatment and one of group therapy, each lasting 50 minutes.

The supervisory and rehabilitative program is prepared by treatment staff and employment counselors. As mentioned earlier, entry into the program is voluntary and requires acceptance of the treatment and supervision protocol. In addition, participants are required to be drug-free for a period of at least six months prior to release (Peled-Laskov et al., 2019).

The program was developed in response to difficulties experienced by many released prisoners when seeking meaningful employment, due to factors including stigma, poor prior employment background, limited skills, low wages, and unrealistic expectations for rapid promotion (Davis et al., 2014; Lucken & Ponte, 2008; Pager et al., 2009; Seiter & Kadela, 2003). In the development of the program, securing meaningful employment was regarded as a crucial step in rehabilitation, reintegration and assimilation (Duwe, 2015; Gillis & Nafekh, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 1993). Thus, the IPRA established a counseling initiative run by employment counselors who advise and supervise ex-prisoners while providing them with the necessary support for finding and maintaining employment (Efodi, 2014). Such a system is essential if ex-prisoners are to assimilate into the workforce and persevere in their employment (Peled-Laskov & Bialer, 2013).

# The Current Study

Evaluating employment reintegration and recidivism of ex-prisoner found positive outcomes related to successful reintegration among ex-prisoners who were under IPRA supervision and who participated in its employment programs (Peled-Laskov et al., 2019). Specifically, positive outcomes were identified regarding reintegration, length of reported employment, higher overall average income and lower imprisonment rates. Yet the study failed to focus on actual subjective views and experiences of the prisoners, missing the opportunity to gain important insights into the actual experiences during the program in order to assess its strength and weaknesses. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the subjective perceptions and experiences of ex-prisoners on their journey from incarceration through reentry and reintegration while participating in an IPRA supervision, treatment and employment intervention. It thereby seeks to identify influences that may have a constructive effect on the reintegration process and help lead the participants to a normative life.

Additionally, the study identifies factors that contributed to, or impeded, the rehabilitation and reintegration process, as well as the level of satisfaction obtained from employment. The latter consideration is of great importance, as many ex-prisoners reintegrate into the least skilled sectors of employment as laborers (Ramakers et al., 2016). Unlike other recent studies (e.g., Farrall et al., 2014; Gålnander, 2020; Nugent & Schinkel, 2006), the present research focuses on prisoners’ perceptions regarding the course they have pursued rather than on the process of desistance per se.

# Methodology

## Participants

A list of eligible ex-prisoners who had completed their term of community supervision and participated in the IPRA program between 2014 and 2019 (i.e., the sampling frame) was obtained from the IPRA. Because of language limitations, the study focused on Hebrew-speaking participants, and only Jewish men were sampled and interviewed. Interviewing those who had completed the program provided insight into the process in retrospect while avoiding the biases that can arise when interviewing individuals currently involved in a process. Participants were selected from the list at random, and no additional participants were sought once saturation for the main themes had been reached.

The interviewees were 17 adult Jewish men aged between 22 and 77. Five of the interviewees reported being single, nine divorced and three married. Most reported being fathers. Their level of education ranged from nine to 17 years of formal schooling, with six holding academic degrees. The interviewees had been convicted of crimes including drug, robbery, aggravated assault, rape and white-collar crimes. Accordingly, the length of their supervision in the community varied from four to 18 months.

## Data Collection Method

To gain insight into the experiences and perceptions of participants in the IPRA employment and supervision program and their assimilation and reintegration into a normative, non-criminal way of life, a semi-structured interview was used, with an interviewer document detailing the themes and topic to be covered. This method gives researchers the flexibility to collect as much information as needed while remaining open to themes that emerge unexpectedly, allowing them to explore certain themes in depth (Shkedi, 2003) even in a single interview (Bernard, 2010). The interview guide included items exploring themes regarding the prison experience, the period of supervision (e.g., availability and supervision of IPRA treatment, finding employment, relationship with the employer and perceived benefit to the rehabilitation process) and the period immediately after the end of supervision (e.g., employment, aspirations and plans for the future). Other items covered demographics and personal background information.

## Procedure

The authors met with representatives of the IPRA to learn more about the program and to secure permission to conduct the research. This step enabled the researchers to obtain a valid sampling frame of eligible ex-prisoners who had completed the treatment and supervision. It also provided access to potential interviewees, who were asked for their consent to participate in the study and be interviewed by research staff. In compliance with the Institutional Review Board of the parent institution where the researchers work, complete and total anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Interviews were in depth, with only the interviewer (the first author and a trained graduate research assistant) and the person interviewed present. Interviews lasted approximately one hour on average and were documented verbatim in handwritten notes.

Analysis of the interviews was in three stages. First, all the interview notes were evaluated by two raters (seasoned researchers and practitioners in the field of prisoner rehabilitation) using the inter-rater/inter-observer reliability method to identify, classify and arrange the emerging themes. Next, each interview was analyzed separately by the researchers, which resulted in the identification of a small number of additional themes. Finally, the researchers compared the analyses of the interviews to finalize themes and sub-themes, and to cross-match and verify any additional information of relevance that may have been overlooked (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

# Findings

Four main themes emerged, providing a broadly chronological view of the participants’ perceptions and expectations: (A) reentry and post-release challenges; (B) psychological treatment provided by the IPRA; (C) employment during supervision; and (D) future expectations.

## A. Reentry and Post-Release Challenges

As in many studies that examine the challenges of reintegration after release, participants reported experiencing a range of difficulties regarding their marital and family relationships, monetary debts, physical and mental health, and employment. One, convicted of assault, focused on the difficulty of leaving behind his social and criminal environment (the “pains of isolation”; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) and his plans for doing so:

*I left all my friends. In time of need, a friend can come ask for a favor and then there are problems. Now I don’t have friends, only my girlfriend and another couple. We go on dates once or twice a week, and that is it.* (Interviewee #9)

Another discussed the health issues he had to deal with upon his release:

*When I got out of prison, I had bronchitis and it was difficult for me to function healthwise. After I received medical treatment, I was on my feet again*. (Interviewee #17)

Unfortunately, some were unable to overcome their medical and health issues, which also took its toll on their financial situation, as one, convicted of assault, reported:

*My mental health and health situation are not 100%. I have difficulties recovering due to what I went through. Only trouble and debts … Had to pay 50,000 in reparations for the victim. Too much for me, all of this … If not for my family, I would not be here … I’m a wreck. I cannot get over the situation, cannot support myself. My mom keeps me with my wife and kids. I can’t even make the regular payments. My home [my family] is falling apart. I am currently in psychiatric treatment … even if I wanted to begin rehabilitation, I just can’t do it because of all the debts, banks and all of that …* (Interviewee #10)

Another participant, the owner of a well-known factory, had been on the verge of despair in having to deal with major financial difficulties. He was able to recover only with the support of his new spouse and family members:

*It was the most difficult time of my life. I saw that I couldn’t lift up the business; banks won’t give you credit, everywhere is closed and sealed. You’re paralyzed and no one understands you. I wanted to die when I hit rock bottom. I have a new wife and a three-year-old son. I thought about what this would do to them. The family helped me. Within 3-4 months your head starts thinking like it did before. With God’s help and strong belief, God will not let me fail.* (Interviewee #16)

In summary, these testimonials confirm the various impediments and difficulties in reintegrating after release from prison that are well documented in the literature (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Visher & Courtney, 2006). While many can overcome such impediments with informal support from family and friends, others require further care from formal support systems, such as the IPRA, or even intensive psychiatric care.

## B. Psychological Treatment Provided by the IPRA

Experiences with the IPRA and its staff took central stage in the interviews, with a majority of the interviewees (14 participants) reporting a positive experience overall:

*IPRA supervision works. IPRA staff are doing a great job, they are trying to do everything they can to prevent a prisoner from going back to where he was before. Everyone at IPRA was amazing.* (Interviewee #5)

### B1. Individual Therapy Sessions

Twelve interviewees (including five convicted of white-collar crimes) praised the individual therapy sessions they had with IPRA social workers, crediting these sessions with a great positive influence. One, convicted of property crimes, claimed that these sessions had changed his life perceptions and positively affected his behavior and outlook:

*Talking [with the social worker] helped, now I view life completely different, I do not fight with anyone, [I] behave at work.* (Interviewee #2)

Positive attitudes toward the program were evident in interviewees who said that they wanted to continue with the treatment to continue bettering themselves and to improve their ability to cope with personal issues while avoiding criminal activity and behavior. One, convicted of drug-related crimes, said:

 *[I now] understand things differently, and this is all thanks to the intervention. A change in thinking, understanding and moving thoughts; bad thoughts that flood your mind; victimization thoughts, I was able to move it all [overcome these negative thoughts].* (Interviewee #1)

The individual treatment sessions with IPRA social workers affected perceptions and fostered a sense of accountability, as well as of interactions and relations with others, as reported by one interviewee, convicted of property crimes:

*The period of supervision changed my views on life. I was closed [did not communicate], the sessions with the social worker, it helped, it affected my relationship with my spouse, I felt responsible … I wanted to prove myself*. (Interviewee #15)

In summary, most of the interviewees expressed high levels of satisfaction with their individual sessions with IPRA social workers. Their accounts support the view that individual sessions bring much-needed changes to perceptions and ways of thinking and behaving, and thus have a positive effect on reintegration into normative society: “I waited for these meetings” (Interviewee #5). Yet, there were a few participants who viewed these sessions as onerous and a waste of time.

### B2. Group Therapy Sessions

Seven interviewees (including three convicted of white-collar crimes) expressed satisfaction with the group sessions, emphasizing that group therapy had prompted them to admit responsibility for their wrongdoing while enabling them to receive guidance from other group members. Taking part in group therapy also allowed individuals in similar situations to share their experiences more easily, being empathetic to others and easing their own mental burden. For example, one interviewee, convicted of domestic violence, reported being so satisfied with the group sessions that he continues to attend them voluntarily, even though he is no longer required to do so. He noted the value of the positive support and feedback he receives from the group:

*You have a [safe] place where you can share with everyone, and I also gave my word that I will not continue with the crime I had done. A burden has been lifted. It makes me feel good.* (Interviewee #11)

Another interviewee, convicted of violent crimes, viewed the group sessions as a valuable opportunity to learn from the experiences of others:

*Group therapy is like talking to friends. You learn from others like you what you can and cannot do. I liked the group therapy more. … You must learn and internalize things…* (Interviewee #9)

One participant, a retired army officer with an advanced degree who was convicted of white-collar crimes, compared two types of intervention sessions offered by the IPRA:

*Both individual and group sessions were very good and effective. They both changed me a lot, way more than prison did. If they would only convert some of the prison sentence either to group therapy or individual therapy sessions, like they do in IPRA, meaning less prison and more IPRA [intervention] that helps create a citizen who is more connected to society … that would have been much better.* (Interviewee #16)

A few interviewees attributed a lesser effect to the group sessions compared to the individual therapeutic sessions:

*The individual therapeutic sessions provided by IPRA helped me a lot; the group sessions had less effect on me.* (Interviewee #7)

This experience can be attributed to the fact that inclusion in the group sessions is determined by the crimes the individuals were convicted of, which affects the group dynamic and its efficiency in delivering therapeutic content. One of the interviewees, a retired army major with a bachelor’s degree explained:

*The group did not help me. I was unable to find my place in that group because they are in a completely different state-of-mind than me. It did me no good.* (Interviewee #12)

One other participant described the group sessions as a “waste of time” (Interviewee #17).

Thus, a majority of the participants indicated that they had benefited from the group sessions, which enabled them to learn from the experiences of others while getting others to listen to them, show empathy and provide social affirmation. Nevertheless, two participants viewed these group sessions as useless and a waste of time.

## C. Employment during Supervision

Acknowledging the importance of meaningful employment in the reintegration process is at the heart of the IPRA. Accordingly, almost all its rehabilitation programs contain an employment component. This section discusses the experiences reported by individuals who took part in employment and mandated supervision by the IPRA as a condition of their parole.

Most job placements did not require any professional training. Some participants worked in deliveries, fast-food stands, car washing, garage cleaning and other unskilled jobs. A majority of participants viewed these jobs as temporary and hoped to advance to better and more respectable jobs at the end of the period of supervision, as one, an accountant convicted of white-collar crimes, explained:

*I worked in a coffee shop on the boardwalk … The employer there was amazing, he was great … he let me place supply orders, manage the merchandise. I also managed the stock room, but it wasn’t a place I could grow. It wasn’t a place with a lot of work. I waited for my [parole] to be over. I wanted higher pay. Something more stable. A place where you are being appreciated more [by others who see you].* (Interviewee #4)

Participants reported an overall positive attitude from their employers, which in turn made them work harder to please their employers, as reported by one of the participants, convicted of tax evasion:

*My boss was okay. I did not experience any rejection; the opposite, he really liked me. It is obvious that when you arrive to work on time and do a good job … it’s like showing – you get what you give. I never hide from him; I demonstrate seriousness and care. People like that.* (Interviewee #3)

Participants in the study also discussed the issues of being criminally convicted and serving time and how they dealt with these issues with their employers. One, an accountant by profession, said:

*My employer knew [about my background], I could not hide it from him … I had to tell him (a) because he needs to know that I am under supervision and as an employer, there is a document he must sign, (b) from a professional aspect, there are limitations on things I can do, like dealing with banks. My boss’s attitude was not easy.* (Interviewee #8)

While most employers treated participants well, three participants reported negative attitudes and treatment from their employers, including one who was convicted of a sex crime/indecent act:

*I began working for this employer, in a clothing store, when I was still in prison [work release]. When I got out, I continued working for him, and he treated me as if I was still a convict. He didn’t see me as a regular person, he was nervous all the time, never said good morning or anything, but it didn’t bother me because I came to work.* (Interviewee #14)

Regarding employment supervision, most of the participants did not elaborate on this topic, acknowledging it briefly and technically:

*They explained to us in the employment [IPRA employment counselor] what we can and cannot do. They taught me that even if the boss is wrong I need to restrain myself because I need him.* (Interviewee #5)

Another participant reported that the IPRA employment counselors run employee–employer simulation sessions with the ex-prisoners they supervise. Two other participants said that the supervisors had simply verified their employment:

*Once every month-and-a-half they send a supervisor to check on me, to see that I am really employed.* (Interviewee #8)

A majority of participants were able to secure employment on their own, without the help of the IPRA. Some sought the help of relatives and close friends. For example, two participants (Interviewees #11 and #16) were employed in the offices where their wives worked. Six participants reported that the IPRA employment counselor was there to help them during their entire period of supervision, including finding them a job:

[*The employment counselor] … was great. He actually helped me A LOT to find a job. He didn’t reject or abandon me, when I wasn’t managing in my place of employment, he would take care of me. I felt he cared for me.* (Interviewee #16)

In summary, employment assimilation was not easy for many of the participants. A major impediment was their criminal record; some also mentioned limited assistance in finding employment. Nevertheless, all the participants were able to secure employment, with some being successful thanks to help from personal contacts, friends and family. When they found jobs, the majority reported experiencing good and fair treatment from their bosses, along with expressions of trust and belief in their abilities. Only a few described discriminatory and stigmatizing attitudes directed at them from their bosses. Some of the participants discussed their jobs and their adjustment to their new work environment, which mostly involved unskilled physical labor.

In terms of supervision, most participants reported this to be a practical matter that needed to be completed as part of their conditions, with over one-third of them (six participants) reporting that their employment supervisor did a great job in helping them find suitable jobs and in supporting them through the process.

## D. Future Expectations

All participants in this study successfully completed their term of supervision, complying with all of the IPRA’s requirements and beginning a new chapter of their lives. It is in this context that the themes of reintegration back into society, assimilation into the workforce, and plans and expectations for the future emerged and became salient. A majority of the participants (13) continued to work in the same place after their term of supervision ended.

The majority of participants in this study did not report any grandiose expectations from their employment. They demonstrated relatively modest goals that align with normative ways of thinking. Some emphasized that they had given up on unrealistic dreams:

*I would be happy to go back to my old job, from before I went to prison, but I am happy with what I have—helping my daughter in her event-planning business.* (Interviewee #11)

Another participant explained:

*I don’t have any grandiose aspirations; just earn a decent living, not making millions.* (Interviewee #17)

With age, dreams become more realistic, as explained by another participant:

*I do what I love … I don’t aspire for much; I am 70 years old; I got old. I do things according to my ability.* (Interviewee #14)

One of the participants discussed employment that benefits society, talking about their desire to work as a lifeguard and to work with others and feel that they can contribute:

 *I have this path that I planned for myself … I work as a lifeguard, so I can teach swimming, aqua therapy, surfing classes, be responsible for pools, operating pools, and managing pools. It's also very dynamic with kids.* (Interviewee #1)

Other participants expressed their desire to invest in rebuilding a family life:

*I am a father, I have a seven-year-old son, with God’s help I will be a husband.* (Interviewee #7)

A father of five said:

*I want to have time to spend with our children. It’s a shame I don’t have more time to be with the children.* (Interviewee #3)

Two of the participants discussed their desire to gain additional professional knowledge to advance their careers:

*I work in internet infrastructure all over the country. It is a very technical thing that I connect with. I do not have any formal training for it but would like to get some. I want to learn as much as I can, to gain as much knowledge as possible.* (Interviewee #7)

Aside from making plans for the future regarding employment, family and education/vocational training, some participants emphasized their commitment to desisting from crime:

*I am never going back to prison. If it’s up to me, I will never go back!* (Interviewee #5).

Another participant, who became religious, explained:

*Your mind begins to repent. With God’s will and strong faith, God will not let me fall back down [to criminality].* (Interviewee #16)

The words of one of the participants summarizes the sentiments of all our participants in the study regarding their expectations for the future:

*I’m rebuilding my life bit by bit, I rent a house, spend some time with my children, try to see them as much as possible; use any possible opportunity. Every aspect of life, I take bit by bit, try to rehabilitate, return to normal life. I understand that I can never return to the full one-hundred percent like I was before prison. Now I am about 60%, and hope that at the end of the process I will be 80%. It’s impossible to go back to one-hundred percent, the stain [mark of being in prison] is too big… the blow I endured cannot go away.* (Interviewee #8)

No matter what plans participants reported for their future, all the interviews expressed the strong desire to desist from crime and to focus on a more normative venue in their lives, be it family, work or education. In that respect, their conviction and sentence was a trigger to behavioral change that was developed further with the IPRA’s various modes of intervention, as all participants were required to comply with IPRA supervision, intervention and employment requirements.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of individuals who participated in the supervision and employment guidance programs operated by the IPRA, furthering our understanding of their prison-reentry-reintegration journey up to the completion of the period of mandatory supervision, It sought to identify factors that may have a positive effect on the reintegration process and help the participants to desist from crime.

Accordingly, this qualitative study presents the attitudes and experiences of prisoners who were under the supervision of the IPRA. Notable are the favorable perceptions of the interviewees with respect to the programs and their expectations for the future, particularly regarding the effectiveness of the rehabilitation program. These findings are in line with previous research (Peled-Laskov & Bialer, 2013; Peled-Laskov et al., 2019) and with the statistical data available from the IPRA as to the low rate of recidivism (20%) among prisoners who have completed the program (Timor & Nagar, 2014).

The in-depth interviews also contribute to existing knowledge by helping to identify important factors that may be strongly related to desistance and successful reintegration, providing insight into these factors as experienced by the interviewees in our sample. The findings from the interviews confirm the damaging effects of imprisonment on relationships with spouses and children, health and mental health (e.g., Brinkley-Rubinstein, 2013; Corzine-McMullan, 2011; Erlyana et al., 2014), economic status, and relationships with friends and social relations. These issues are well documented in the literature and have been attributed to the deprivation/endogenous model associated with being imprisoned (Einat, 2005), as well as to the pains of desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) regarding isolation and goal failure, which often leads to hopelessness and a diminished life.

While most participants in the present study were able to surmount these obstacles with support from family and friends, others required further care from formal support systems, including the IPRA. During the rehabilitation process, it is therefore important that such sources target the difficulties that may impede reintegration, and that they assist the individual in addressing those issues.

In the interviews, the participants’ experiences with the IPRA were salient, with a majority reporting an overall positive experience. The findings provide evidence in support of the usefulness of both individual and group therapy, provided by IPRA counselors, as an overall contribution to the adoption of optimistic views and realistic life goals aligned with a normative lifestyle. Both therapeutic modalities were found to support the GLM (Ward & Maruna, 2007), enabling participants to gain those desired “goods” associated with positive and successful reintegration and assimilation into normative society upon release.

Aside from supervision and the ability to learn from other participants, group therapy serves another latent function that is essential to the rehabilitation and reintegration process: peer support. It was clear from the interviews that the participants viewed therapy meetings as an opportunity to meet and talk with friends. Thus, the combination of functions served by group therapy make it an essential social prop or platform, and it satisfies a basic need in the process of rehabilitation (Graffam & Shinkfield, 2011). However, the interviewees who had been convicted of white-collar crimes did not appear to experience those benefits of group therapy, and they tended to view it as a waste of their time. It is possible that white-collar offenders view themselves differently from other offenders and therefore lack the “sense of affiliation” that would enable them to experience the meetings in a positive way. This is reflected in the fact that the white-collar interviewees in our sample enjoyed stronger social support and social networks compared to those convicted of other crimes.

 Some participants compared the effectiveness of therapy in prison with that provided by the IPRA, claiming, for example, that the “therapeutic sessions were very good and effective. They both changed me a lot, way more than prison did.” Apart from the clear expression of the view that the therapeutic sessions operated by the IPRA are important and help to bring about change, there appears to be an expectation on the part of the prisoners (and shared by professionals) that the very fact of imprisonment will achieve the aim of rehabilitation (Timor, 2011). The gap in expectations regarding the effectiveness of prison-based therapy compared to that provided by the IPRA can be attributed to the prison environment. While prisoners tend to expect their therapy during incarceration to result in profound behavioral changes, the reality is different. Prison is not a suitable environment for rehabilitation (Ortmann, 2000), and efforts made to develop rehabilitation programs for incarcerated individuals often have few or no favorable outcomes (Bullock & Bunce, 2020). This gap can be attributed in part to the importation model; offenders bring their criminal behavior and approach from the outside into the prison, where they use it for survival purposes. Another explanation can be found in Goffman’s concept of the “total institution” having an adverse effect on rehabilitation (Goffman, 1961), as exemplified in the distance and hostility that develop between prison inmates and staff or professional personnel. In this connection, it should be noted that many therapists in prison wear a uniform, which identifies them more closely with the penal system than with rehabilitative efforts.

Participants in the current study reported positive experiences with their assigned therapists and mentioned highly supportive and constructive relationships characterized by mutual trust and respect. Many viewed their therapists as well-trained professionals. From the interviews, it seems that the mandatory aspect of participation in treatment, as part of the sentence and conditions of early release, did not play a central part in the treatment; treatment staff did not “play the mandatory participation card” that could have clouded the relationship between therapist and client (Etgar, 1999).

Employment is a key factor in successful reintegration after release from prison (Gillis & Nafekh, 2005) and in crime desistance. Accordingly, the IPRA attempts to integrate released prisoners almost immediately into the labor market by providing them with regular and meaningful employment that enables them to interact with other employees who have no prior criminal record. In this environment, the individual is under daily supervision, which makes compliance with the assigned conditions of release very likely. This positive work environment enables the individual to acquire personal and social assets (such as a steady and fair income, experience in the workforce, compliance with employer demands, and new and normative social connections) that improve self-esteem and boost social image (Bouffard et al., 2000). The desire to maintain and grow such gains further propels the desire to succeed in the program. Success in employment is one of the “goods” mentioned in the GLM as an essential component in successful rehabilitation (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Although finding employment was difficult for most of the participants, much-needed assistance was received from prior personal contacts, and in many cases, this resulted in unskilled jobs that paid low wages. In the absence of such contacts, the engaged and professional approach of the IPRA employment counselors was crucial to success. Regardless of who helped, most participants interviewed for this study reported positive experiences with their employers, who often treated them fairly, respectfully and without bias, as in previous studies (Pager et al., 2009).

The interviews indicate that most of the participants did not need the assistance of the IPRA employment counselors to find a job; as stated earlier, most of them relied on prior contacts, family and friends. This finding indicates that the presence of a strong informal support network reduces the need for formal support, such as that provided by IPRA counselors. It may also provide an indication of the actual ability of certain ex-prisoners to reintegrate successfully when they have a strong informal support network of friends and family.

Even in the presence of these support systems, barriers to meaningful employment remained. In particular, some participants reported hesitation in divulging their past to potential employers. Although such reporting was mandatory (because treatment sessions take place during normal business hours and participation is obligatory), in many cases they felt that it jeopardized their chances of securing the desired employment.

Notably, the interviewees seemed to view the formal control assigned to them by the conditions of their parole as a barrier to their personal reform. Contemporary desistance research has discussed how desisters manage the stigma that comes with a previous deviant lifestyle (Maruna, 2001). Specifically, there is evidence that “label negotiation” (Schur, 1971, 1979), and “ban-the-box” policies (Pager, 2008, 2018) are effective methods of reducing, and even neutralizing, stigmatization. Desistance theory (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Broidy & Cauffman, 2017; LeBel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001; Segev, 2018) holds that successful transition from primary to secondary desistance does not guarantee tertiary or final desistance, as the latter requires a broad social acknowledgment of change that is necessary for long-term results (McNeill, 2016). Accordingly, social acceptance is an essential stage in achieving successful desistance, and anything that jeopardizes it should be avoided. This includes negative credentials (Page, 2018) that may impede or exclude released prisoners from participating in the normative labor market and successfully reintegrating into normative society.

Since the formal educational level of the sample varied greatly (from 9 to 17 years, with some holding bachelor’s and master’s degrees), it is reasonable to assume that labor market attachment will vary accordingly. Those with higher levels of education are likely to benefit from stronger hard skills and more stable and “healthy” support networks, and thus tend to have higher expectations of securing meaningful jobs.

Examining the employment component of the IPRA program from the viewpoint of participants who completed the program exposes a weakness that is well documented in the literature. Although the program is effective and contributes to the rehabilitation and integration of offenders upon their release, it seems to lack three main components: (1) proper vocational training that will lead to meaningful employment; (2) integration into meaningful jobs and (3) a seamless transition from prison-based vocational training and employment to employment upon release in the community (see for example Cook et al., 2015). Moreover, the fact that the interviewees seem to view the supervision as an impediment to their employment reintegration and personal reform should be acknowledged and addressed by IPRA counselors. For example, mandatory therapeutic and reporting meetings could be conducted more flexibly to enable the parolee to navigate and comply with the supervision requirements without the potential harm caused to their employment reintegration by strict or unreasonable reporting hours. Meetings could be scheduled to reflect the working hours and shifts of the parolee, and adjusted according to their individual risk level.

Overall, evaluation of the experiences shared by the participants in this study alongside findings from other relevant studies (Bouffard et al., 2000; Friedmann et al., 2012) makes it clear that individual and group therapy should be considered as a top priority. More emphasis during therapy sessions should be given to strengthening existing normative social networks. These networks have the potential to draw people away from stigma and help them to rejoin normative society, as suggested by the concept of reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989), while minimizing the potential harm of defiance due to disintegrative shaming (Bouffard & Piquero, 2010; Sherman, 1993). Nevertheless, it seems that the IPRA program already provides an effective therapeutic balance while fulfilling employment needs. The connection between the supervision agents and the clients, and the process of “normalizing” and neutralizing the stigma of criminal conviction while focusing on the needs of the offender, seems to be of great importance.

The IPRA rehabilitation program triggers an important component of external motivation (Valleran, 1997) based on the desire of many prisoners to earn early release (i.e., parole). It is because of this incentive that many are willing to commit to all the components and stages of the program, including intensive supervision by both the IPRA and the parole board. Fear of being returned to prison for non-compliance also drives their motivation to work hard and to comply with the demands of the program (Maguire & Raynor, 2006; Marklund & Holmberg, 2009). It seems that this external motivation triggers internal motivation, as individuals advance through the program successfully and enjoy the benefits of the changes to their lives (Gideon, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Future expectations should be recognized as an important factor in personality functioning and adjustment (Landau, 1975) and in future orientation and socialization, which can serve as an indicator of potential assimilation and reintegration after release from prison. Contrary to the assumptions of previous studies that have examined the future time perspectives of delinquents and criminals, participants in the current study reported very modest and realistic future expectations. Such findings are in line with recent desistance research (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Gålnander, 2020). One possible explanation for this finding is a desire to avoid unrealistic expectations that will generate unwanted stress (Merton, 1968) and lead to the use of illegitimate means and further criminality. It is possible that participants, as a result of their previous failure to achieve unrealistic goals and subsequent imprisonment, internalized the consequences of their actions and gained valuable insight into the risks of repeating instrumental delinquent behavior. It can also be supposed that the individual and group sessions and conversations with IPRA counselors helped them to appreciate the safety and feasibility of pursuing more modest and attainable goals that minimize the risk of failure (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), resulting in less stress and more security and thus improving their lifestyle (i.e., the GLM).

The results of this study provide insight, albeit limited, into the prison–community transition experiences of those convicted of white-collar crimes. This is of great importance, as these offenders tend to be underrepresented in the literature. Participants in this study who had been convicted of white-collar crimes tended to view the IPRA program favorably. In particular, these participants benefited from the individual treatment sessions, which were viewed as better suited to their status. For the majority of these participants, securing employment was not an issue, as they were able to benefit from previous contacts. It seems that the success of this particular group derives partly from the fact that the IPRA is unique in allowing the use of networks in order to secure meaningful employment as part of supervision. As far as we know, this approach has no counterparts internationally, and other prison and probation services are less likely to give such influence to probationers. However, it is recommended that future studies should include a substantial focus on the experiences and perceptions of those convicted of white-collar crimes.

In our estimation, the effectiveness of the program stems from the fact that almost all rehabilitation programs for released prisoners in Israel are under the unified sponsorship of a single professional agency – the IPRA – whose aim is to rehabilitate prisoners and prevent them returning to a life of crime. This fact appears to contribute substantially to the favorable attitude toward the IPRA on the part of paroled prisoners who participated in the programs, as well as the relative success in lowering the rate of recidivism (Peled-Laskov et al., 2019). The activities of the IPRA as a governmental agency are funded by the state and managed and run by professionals in the field of prisoner rehabilitation (social workers, criminologists and educators). Its programs are developed by these professionals in coordinated efforts and focus explicitly on reducing prisoners’ predisposition to criminal activity. Moreover, its activities are subject to ongoing assessment and evaluation studies to foster evidence-based practices that will enable the development and application of the most innovative interventions.

The current study uses the qualitative method of interviews and has the associated limitations. Specifically, it focuses on a small group of Jewish, Hebrew-speaking male participants who had completed a term of community supervision and treatment operated by the IPRA (the agency that provided the sampling frame for this study). Moreover, because all the participants had completed their term of supervision and successfully reintegrated back into their communities, those who failed to complete the IPRA program are not represented here. Thus, the results provide limited insight into the multidimensional challenges faced by those who fail to comply with the IPRA’s conditions of supervision, treatment and employment.

Although our sample does not represent many groups of offenders (e.g., non-Jewish offenders and those whose primary language is not Hebrew), few white-collar and highly educated offenders were examined in our study, and thus the findings provide an interesting glimpse into the experiences of white-collar offenders and how they perceive and react to rehabilitation. Thus, our study provides a foundation for closer examination of the rehabilitation of white-collar criminals and more educated offenders who led a normative lifestyle prior to their offense. It also opens up avenues for future research. For example, future studies could usefully examine a more diverse group of ex-prisoners, including those who failed to complete the IPRA program or who were not subject to mandatory community supervision. Greater emphasis should be given to future time perspectives and expectations reported by ex-prisoners and those about to be released, as these may provide good indicators of desistance and successful reintegration (LeBel et al., 2008). Accordingly, it is recommended that future studies should combine qualitative and quantitative methods to yield more objective and empirical data on the frequencies of the perceptions and attitudes experienced and viewed by the offenders themselves, as an indication of the process of transition through rehabilitation, reentry, supervision and reintegration. This will provide much-needed insight into the resources available to them that correlate with successful completion of supervision and reintegration.

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