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PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF REHABILITATION OF PRISONERS AFTER RELEASE

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ABSTRACT

The reintegration of individuals into society after imprisonment presents a significant challenge to the criminal justice system, particularly when social attitudes and public acceptance influence the opportunities available to them. Although imprisonment is intended to address criminal conduct through lawful punishment, the difficulties experienced after release may continue long after the sentence has been completed. Social stigma, reluctance among employers, financial instability, and limited community support can create obstacles to rebuilding a stable life. In this context, public perception becomes an important subject of investigation because the success of rehabilitation may depend not only on institutional measures but also on the willingness of society to provide former prisoners with opportunities for reintegration.

The present study examines public perception of the rehabilitation of prisoners after release, with particular attention to awareness, social acceptance, employment opportunities, perceived barriers, media influence, and opinions regarding the adequacy of existing legal and policy measures in India. Adopting an empirical approach, the study analyses questionnaire responses to understand how respondents view rehabilitation as an objective of criminal justice and whether their attitudes extend to practical situations involving the employment and professional acceptance of former prisoners. The survey findings indicate considerable support for rehabilitation in principle, while also revealing uncertainty and differences in willingness to provide practical opportunities. This distinction provides an important basis for examining the challenges that may arise between the recognition of rehabilitation as a desirable objective and its acceptance in everyday social and professional life.

2. INTRODUCTION

The criminal justice system performs several important functions, including the prevention of crime, the administration of justice, the protection of society, and the correction of offenders. Imprisonment is one of the principal forms of punishment used by the State, but contemporary correctional approaches recognise that punishment should not be viewed in isolation from the possibility of reform. A criminal justice system concerned with long-term social welfare must also consider what happens when an individual completes a sentence and returns to the community.

Rehabilitation after release refers to the process through which former prisoners are supported in rebuilding their lives and participating in society in a lawful and constructive manner. It may involve employment assistance, education, vocational training, housing support, counselling, family engagement, legal assistance, and access to welfare services. Rehabilitation is not limited to activities conducted inside prison. It also concerns the social and economic conditions that determine whether individuals can use their skills, maintain stable relationships, and access legitimate opportunities after release.

One of the major challenges facing released prisoners is the stigma associated with a criminal record. Even after a sentence has been completed, a person may be viewed with suspicion by prospective employers, neighbours, acquaintances, and members of the wider community. This can affect access to employment, housing, social relationships, and financial independence. When individuals are repeatedly excluded from ordinary opportunities, the objectives of rehabilitation may be undermined. Reintegration therefore requires attention not only to the individual's conduct but also to the attitudes and practices of the society to which that person returns.

Public perception is particularly significant because social acceptance often determines whether formal rehabilitation measures can be translated into practical outcomes. Members of the public may agree that rehabilitation is an essential objective of criminal justice while remaining hesitant to employ a former prisoner or accept that person into a professional environment. This distinction between general support and practical acceptance forms an important basis for the present research. Understanding public attitudes can help identify the areas in which awareness, institutional support, and community engagement may be strengthened.

Judicial decisions have also recognised principles relevant to reformatory justice and the rights of prisoners. In *Mohammad Giasuddin v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, the Supreme Court emphasised the reformatory dimension of sentencing. In *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*,

the Court considered the rights and treatment of persons in custody and reinforced the importance of humane treatment. These decisions provide legal context for understanding rehabilitation, although their principles do not independently establish whether post-release support is adequate in practice.

Rehabilitation also has a wider social dimension. Employment, family relationships, community participation, and access to support services may influence the transition from imprisonment to independent living. A former prisoner who receives relevant assistance may be better positioned to rebuild a stable life, while a person who experiences persistent exclusion may face additional difficulties. These outcomes are not identical for all individuals, and rehabilitation should be responsive to the circumstances of each case.

Against this background, the present study examines public perception of rehabilitation after release through questionnaire responses. It considers respondents' awareness of rehabilitation, their views on its importance, their willingness to provide social and economic opportunities, perceived barriers, the influence of media representation, and their assessment of legal and policy measures

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of public acceptance of the rehabilitation of prisoners after release?
2. What social and psychological factors contribute to the stigma associated with former prisoners?
3. Why do people hesitate to provide employment opportunities to former prisoners despite supporting rehabilitation?
4. How does media representation influence public attitudes towards former prisoners?
5. How do people perceive the effectiveness of existing rehabilitation and post-release support mechanisms in India?

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the present study is to examine public perceptions regarding the rehabilitation of prisoners after their release and to understand the challenges associated with their reintegration into society. The study aims to identify the social and psychological barriers that contribute to the stigma faced by former prisoners and to analyse public willingness to provide them with employment and professional opportunities. It also seeks to understand the influence of media representation on public attitudes towards former prisoners and to examine

respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing rehabilitation and post-release support mechanisms in India. Based on the empirical findings, the study intends to suggest suitable measures to reduce social stigma, promote public awareness, and facilitate the effective reintegration of former prisoners into society.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts an empirical research methodology to examine public perceptions of the rehabilitation of prisoners after release. The research is based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire designed to obtain respondents' views on social acceptance, employment opportunities, public awareness, media influence, and the challenges associated with the reintegration of former prisoners. The collected responses are analysed using a descriptive approach, with percentages and graphical representations used to identify patterns in respondents' opinions. Secondary data are obtained from relevant books, research articles, legal provisions, government reports, and policy documents relating to prisoner rehabilitation and correctional administration in India. The study interprets the primary data alongside the relevant legal and policy framework to understand the gap between public attitudes towards rehabilitation and the practical acceptance of former prisoners. The findings are used to formulate suggestions for reducing social stigma and strengthening post-release support. The study is limited to the responses obtained from the selected participants and does not claim to represent the views of the entire population of India.

6. CONCEPT AND MEANING OF REHABILITATION OF PRISONERS AFTER RELEASE

Rehabilitation of prisoners after release refers to the process of assisting individuals who have completed their imprisonment in returning to society and rebuilding their lives as responsible, independent, and law-abiding members of the community. It involves addressing the social, economic, psychological, and practical difficulties that individuals may experience after leaving prison. Rehabilitation is not limited to the period of incarceration; it also includes the assistance and opportunities available to former prisoners during their transition back into society. The ultimate aim is to enable them to lead a stable life, avoid further criminal involvement, and participate constructively in their families and communities.

The concept of rehabilitation is based on the understanding that imprisonment should not be viewed solely as a means of punishment. It should also provide opportunities for personal

reform, education, vocational training, and the development of skills that can support an individual's life after release. However, successful rehabilitation depends on more than the efforts of prison authorities. Access to employment, accommodation, family support, counselling, and community acceptance can significantly affect the ability of former prisoners to establish a new life. Where these opportunities are absent, social exclusion and financial insecurity may make reintegration difficult.

Rehabilitation and after-care have received recognition in the correctional framework developed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Model Prison Manual, 2016 contains provisions concerning after-care, rehabilitation, vocational training, education, and prisoner welfare. It envisages cooperation between prison authorities, probation and welfare services, voluntary organisations, and community groups to facilitate reintegration. The Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023 also addresses reformation, rehabilitation, integration, and after-care services. These are model frameworks intended to guide States and Union Territories; their provisions should not automatically be treated as uniformly applicable legislation throughout India.¹

Rehabilitation after release must also be distinguished from mere release from prison. Release marks the end of a period of confinement, whereas rehabilitation is a continuing process through which an individual seeks to regain social relationships, financial independence, dignity, and a sense of belonging. A former prisoner may have completed the sentence imposed by a court but continue to face rejection because of their criminal record or past conduct. Therefore, public perception is an important dimension of rehabilitation. If society refuses to provide reasonable opportunities for employment and social participation, formal correctional efforts may not translate into meaningful reintegration.

Accordingly, rehabilitation of prisoners after release should be understood as a shared responsibility involving government institutions, civil society, employers, families, and the wider community. Effective rehabilitation requires practical support as well as a change in attitudes towards individuals who have served their sentences. Examining public perception is therefore essential to understanding whether rehabilitation is accepted not merely as a legal or correctional objective, but also as a social responsibility that enables former prisoners to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society.

¹ 1. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Model Prison Manual, 2016

7. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

7.1 Constitutional framework

The Constitution of India provides the broader legal foundation for the protection of human dignity and the fair treatment of individuals within the criminal justice system. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, while Article 21 protects life and personal liberty in accordance with constitutional and legal requirements. Article 39A directs the State to promote equal justice and provide free legal aid.²

These provisions are relevant to the treatment of prisoners and the broader objectives of justice. They should not, however, be interpreted as creating an unrestricted right to every form of post-release assistance. Their relevance lies in the constitutional principles of equality, dignity, and access to justice that inform correctional policy.

7.2 The Prisons Act, 1894

The Prisons Act, 1894, is an important historical statute governing prison administration. Its provisions must be read alongside applicable State laws, subsequent legal developments, judicial decisions, and modern correctional policies. The continuing significance of prison legislation lies in its role in regulating institutional custody and administration, while the challenges of reintegration require additional attention to rehabilitation and after-care.

7.3 The Probation of Offenders Act, 1958

The Probation of Offenders Act, 1958, provides for probation and admonition in appropriate cases, subject to statutory requirements. Probation is not the same as rehabilitation after release from imprisonment, but it reflects the reformatory approach within Indian criminal justice. It demonstrates that the law recognises circumstances in which correction and reintegration may be better served by measures other than conventional imprisonment.

7.4 Model Prison Manual, 2016

The Model Prison Manual, 2016, issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, provides guidance on prison administration and correctional practices. It addresses areas relevant to rehabilitation, including education, vocational activities, welfare, and after-care. Such measures are important because preparation for release should begin during imprisonment rather than only after a person returns to society.

The effectiveness of these measures depends on implementation, trained personnel, resources, and coordination with services available in the community. Vocational training may have limited long-term value if a released individual cannot access employment or receive support

² Constitution of India, arts. 14, 21 and 39A.

in applying newly acquired skills.

7.5 Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023

The Ministry of Home Affairs circulated the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023, to States and Union Territories to guide the modernisation of prison administration and encourage reform, rehabilitation, reintegration, welfare, and after-care. It reflects an approach in which correctional services extend beyond confinement.

The model legislation must be distinguished from legislation automatically applicable throughout India. Its circulation does not, by itself, make every provision binding in every State. The relevant State's legislative and administrative framework must be considered when determining which provisions apply.

7.6 Judicial decisions

In *Mohammad Giasuddin v. State of Andhra Pradesh*,³ the Supreme Court emphasised the reformatory dimension of sentencing. The decision is relevant to the principle that criminal justice should consider the possibility of reform rather than treating punishment as an end in itself.

In *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*,⁴ the Supreme Court examined the rights and treatment of prisoners and reinforced the importance of humane treatment in custody. The case principally concerns prisoners' rights during incarceration, but its constitutional principles are relevant to the broader discussion of dignity within the correctional system.

In *Sukanya Shantha v. Union of India*,⁵ the Supreme Court addressed discriminatory caste-based practices in prisons and the constitutional requirements of equality and dignity. The judgment is relevant to the wider reform of prison administration and the elimination of discriminatory institutional practices.

8. MAJOR CHALLENGES IN REHABILITATION AFTER RELEASE

8.1 Social stigma

Social stigma occurs when a person continues to be judged primarily by a past conviction, even after completing the sentence imposed by a court. Former prisoners may experience rejection by neighbours, employers, social groups, or acquaintances. Such attitudes can make it difficult to restore relationships and participate in ordinary community life.

Stigma may also affect an individual's confidence and willingness to seek assistance. Where a

³ *Mohammad Giasuddin v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, (1977) 3 SCC 287.

⁴ *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*, (1978) 4 SCC 494.

⁵ *Sukanya Shantha v. Union of India*, 2024

person repeatedly encounters rejection, the transition to independent living may become more difficult. Reducing stigma does not require society to disregard offences or public safety; it requires fair consideration of the individual and the circumstances relevant to a particular decision.

8.2 Employment discrimination

Employment is important because it can provide income, routine, responsibility, and social participation. However, former prisoners may face barriers arising from criminal records, gaps in employment history, limited qualifications, or employer concerns.

Employment initiatives should therefore include vocational training, career guidance, job placement, and opportunities for self-employment. Employers should assess applicants in accordance with applicable law, legitimate job requirements, relevant risks, and individual qualifications rather than relying solely on general assumptions about former prisoners.

8.3 Financial insecurity

A person leaving prison may have limited savings, debts, interrupted employment, or family responsibilities. Financial insecurity can affect access to housing, transportation, food, and healthcare. Where no appropriate support is available, the individual may struggle to establish an independent life.

Post-release assistance should therefore consider immediate practical needs alongside longer-term employment and training. The extent of support should be responsive to the individual's circumstances rather than based on a single standard approach.

8.4 Family rejection and strained relationships

Imprisonment may disrupt family relationships through separation, financial pressure, damaged trust, or social embarrassment. Some former prisoners may return to supportive families, while others may have no safe or stable family environment.

Counselling and family engagement may assist reintegration where appropriate. However, family reconciliation cannot be assumed possible or desirable in every case. The safety, wishes, and rights of family members and victims must be respected.

8.5 Psychological and emotional difficulties

The transition from imprisonment to community life may involve anxiety, isolation, uncertainty, and difficulty adjusting to ordinary responsibilities. Some individuals may benefit from counselling or other appropriate support.

A 2026 study involving short-term former prisoners in Assam reported improvements in several outcomes among participants who received structured post-release assistance, including counselling, family mediation, and employment support. The study provides a reason

to examine structured interventions further, although its sample and setting limit the extent to which its findings can be generalised.

8.6 Inadequate after-care services

Rehabilitation activities inside prison do not necessarily guarantee support after release. An individual may complete a training programme but still be unable to find employment or access housing, counselling, or other services.

The availability of after-care therefore requires separate consideration from the existence of in-prison programmes. The Prisons in India 2024 report discusses gaps in after-care arrangements and the uneven availability of post-release support across jurisdictions. This highlights the importance of evaluating actual implementation rather than relying solely on policy commitments.

8.7 Media influence

Media representation can influence how the public understands crime, punishment, and rehabilitation. Sensationalised coverage may reinforce negative stereotypes, while balanced reporting may help explain the challenges of reintegration and the importance of lawful opportunities after release.

Media influence is not necessarily uniform, and the present survey records respondents' views about such influence rather than directly proving its causal effect. Nevertheless, the subject is relevant to public perception and merits further examination.

9. FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Based on the responses collected from 122 participants, the findings reveal that public opinion is generally favourable towards rehabilitation as an objective of the criminal justice system. Approximately 73% of respondents agreed that rehabilitation is essential, while 59.8% supported providing social and economic opportunities to individuals after their release. However, the findings also reveal hesitation regarding the practical acceptance of former prisoners. Although 50.8% of respondents expressed willingness to employ a rehabilitated former prisoner, 38.5% remained uncertain, indicating that support for rehabilitation does not always translate into a definite willingness to provide employment opportunities. Similarly, responses concerning recruitment in professional settings reflected differing levels of acceptance. The survey further indicates that media representation is perceived to influence public attitudes, with 75.4% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that media has an impact on perceptions of former prisoners. Regarding existing legal frameworks and rehabilitation policies, 60.7% of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement that the

arrangements were adequate, although a proportion remained neutral or dissatisfied. The responses also revealed varying levels of awareness about prisoner rehabilitation, demonstrating the need for greater public understanding of post-release support and reintegration. Overall, the findings suggest that while respondents recognise the importance of rehabilitation, uncertainty surrounding employment, professional acceptance, and social reintegration remains a concern. The study therefore highlights the importance of strengthening public awareness, reducing social stigma, expanding employment opportunities, and improving post-release support mechanisms to help former prisoners rebuild their lives and participate meaningfully in society.

10. SUGGESTIONS AND REFORMS

The successful rehabilitation of prisoners after release requires a comprehensive approach involving the government, correctional institutions, employers, families, and society. Based on the findings of the present study, it is suggested that the government strengthen post-release support services by providing former prisoners with access to counselling, accommodation, legal assistance, vocational training, and welfare schemes. Employment opportunities should be expanded through partnerships between government authorities, private organisations, and skill-development institutions to help former prisoners achieve financial independence and rebuild their lives. Public awareness programmes should be organised through educational institutions, community organisations, and social campaigns to reduce negative stereotypes and promote a better understanding of rehabilitation. Media organisations should adopt responsible reporting practices and give appropriate attention to rehabilitation and reintegration rather than focusing exclusively on criminal histories. Existing correctional policies and after-care programmes should be implemented effectively, with adequate funding, trained personnel, and regular evaluation to identify gaps in service delivery. Psychological counselling and family support should also be made accessible to individuals who experience emotional difficulties, social isolation, or strained family relationships after release. Furthermore, fair recruitment practices should be encouraged so that former prisoners are not subjected to unnecessary discrimination solely because of their past convictions, subject to applicable legal requirements and legitimate role-related considerations. Rehabilitation programmes should be tailored to individual needs by considering educational qualifications, employment skills, family circumstances, and other barriers to reintegration. Regular monitoring should be undertaken to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives in improving employment, housing stability, social acceptance, and long-term reintegration. Finally, non-governmental organisations, legal aid

institutions, employers, and community groups should be encouraged to participate actively in rehabilitation initiatives. These reforms can help bridge the gap between public support for rehabilitation and the practical acceptance of former prisoners, while balancing their rights and dignity with legitimate public-safety concerns.

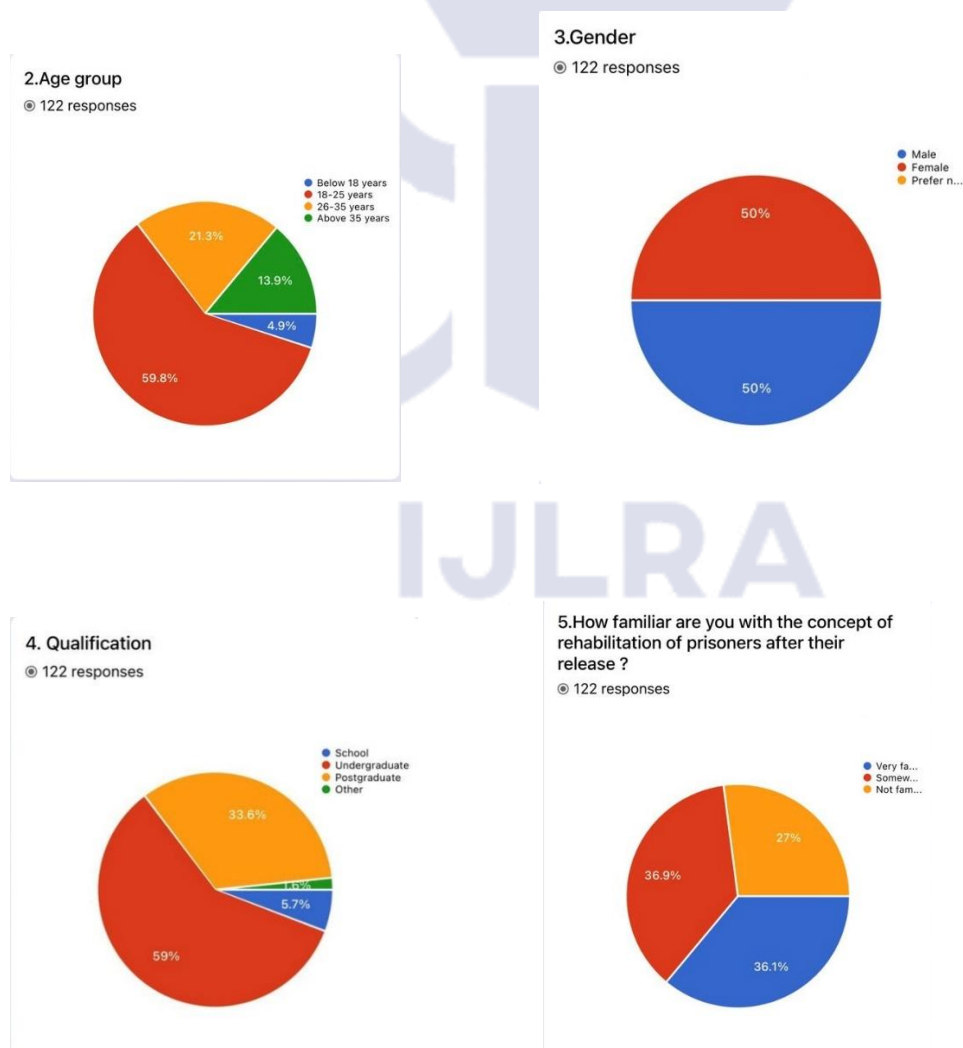
11. CONCLUSION

The rehabilitation of prisoners after release is an essential aspect of the criminal justice system, as the purpose of justice should extend beyond punishment to include reformation, reintegration, and the prevention of further criminal involvement. The survey findings indicate that a considerable proportion of respondents recognise rehabilitation as an important objective of criminal justice and support providing social and economic opportunities to individuals after their release. However, uncertainty regarding employment, professional acceptance, and social reintegration suggests that positive attitudes towards rehabilitation do not always translate into practical acceptance. The findings also highlight the perceived influence of media representation and the importance of public awareness in shaping opinions about former prisoners. These observations demonstrate that rehabilitation cannot be achieved solely through correctional institutions or government policies; it also requires the active participation of employers, families, community organisations, and society as a whole. Although legal and policy frameworks in India provide a foundation for reformative and rehabilitative measures, their effectiveness depends on proper implementation, accessible after-care services, and sustained institutional support. Greater attention must therefore be given to vocational training, employment opportunities, psychological counselling, family support, and measures to reduce social stigma. At the same time, rehabilitation initiatives should respect legitimate public-safety concerns and encourage responsible, law-abiding participation in society. The study concludes that former prisoners should be given a fair opportunity to rebuild their lives after completing their sentences, without facing unnecessary and permanent social exclusion. A balanced approach that combines accountability with compassion, effective rehabilitation policies with public participation, and legal safeguards with practical support can contribute to more successful reintegration. Ultimately, the success of rehabilitation depends not only on an individual's willingness to reform but also on whether society is prepared to provide meaningful opportunities for a new beginning.

12. REFERENCES

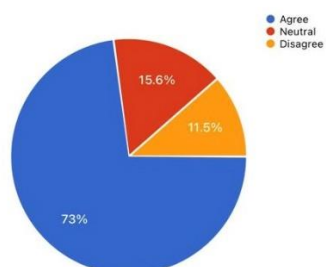
1. Constitution of India. 1950
2. The Prisons Act, 1894.
3. The Probation of Offenders Act, 1958.
4. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Model Prison Manual 2016.
5. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act 2023.
6. Mohammad Giasuddin v. State of Andhra Pradesh, (1977) 3 SCC 287.
7. Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration, (1978) 4 SCC 494.
8. Sukanya Shantha v. Union of India, (2024)

ANNEXURE



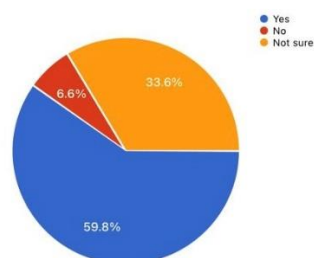
6. To what extent do you agree that rehabilitation is an essential objective of the criminal justice system ?

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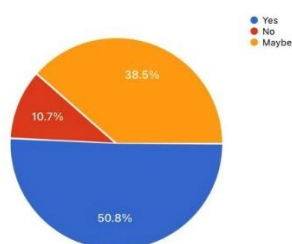
7. Do you believe that individuals who have completed their sentence should be provided with opportunities for social and economic reintegration?

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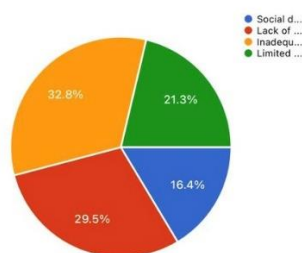
8. Would you consider employing a rehabilitated former prisoner if they meet the required qualifications and job criteria?

© 122 responses



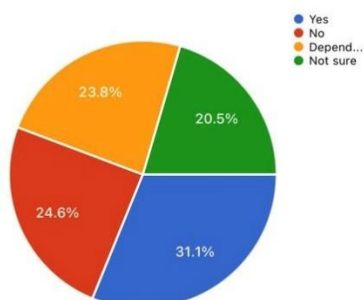
9. Which factor do you consider to be the greatest barrier to the rehabilitation of former prisoners ?

© 122 responses



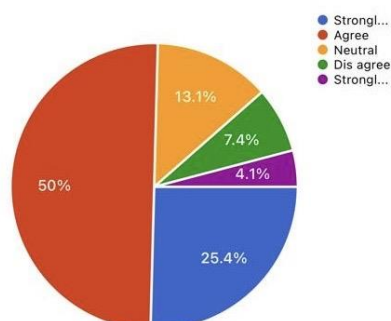
10. Would you personally trust a rehabilitated former prisoner in a professional or workplace environment if they have demonstrated reform?

© 122 responses



11. Do you think media representation of former prisoners affects public perception of their rehabilitation?

© 122 responses



12. Do you believe that the existing legal framework and rehabilitation policies in India are sufficient to ensure the successful reintegration of released prisoners into society?

© 122 responses

