



Increasing performance in preparation of pre-release for elderly inmates in Thailand

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Abstract

This qualitative study has considered the current pre-release preparation programmes provided to elderly inmates in Thailand and further suggests developments in the provisions/approaches employed here. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 informants and focus groups held with 39 elderly inmates in Thailand. In addition, content analysis has been produced to fully understand the context of such correctional and rehabilitation practice. The results of the study note that the pre-release preparation programmes provided to elderly inmates in Thailand require improvement, particularly in the prison management instituted (e.g., by ensuring that appropriate correctional staff are involved, that pertinent programmes are available for elderly inmates and that families/communities are involved within the pre-release preparation process. Through the suggestions offered in this paper, the pre-release preparation programmes provided to elderly inmates in Thailand will be able to witness greater efficiency and effectiveness.

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Introduction

Background

The Thai Department of Corrections is an agency operating at the heart of the Thai justice system, evidenced in it being responsible both for supervising inmates in accordance with respective court judgments and for rehabilitating offenders during their imprisonment and in the pre-release stage. In this sense, the Thai Department of Corrections is tasked with preventing recidivism and achieving the successful re-integration of inmates into society post-release (Thai Department of Corrections, 2018).

The pre-release stage for inmates is where they are prepared to re-integrated into society following incarceration. The pre-release process involves the providing of training to inmates which covers physical, mental and vocational aspects while also offering pre-release inmates means through which they can understand and manifest appropriate behaviour post-release. The aim of this process is to allow inmates to adjust themselves correctly to their family, their community and wider society (Pangpang, n.d.; Thai Department of Corrections Thailand, 2018)

In recent years, the Thai Department of Corrections has struggled to deal with the exponential rise in elderly inmates being detained in Thai prisons or correctional institutions. By 2020, 7,406 elderly inmates fell under the purview of the Thai Department of Corrections, with this constituting 6,072 (82%) male inmates and 1,334 (18%) female inmates (Tititampruk & Ketsil, 2020). Notably,

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the proportion of elderly inmates in Thailand is higher than other demographic groups. In light of this growing population of elderly inmates, any failure to provide adequate rehabilitation among this subset—both during their imprisonment and via a pre-release process—will have a significantly negative impact upon the lives of elderly prisoners, which could cause physical and mental health problems upon release, and would heighten the risk of recidivism.

Research Rationale and Purpose

The increasing number of elderly inmates in Thailand is proving to be problematic for the Thai Department of Corrections. In addition, the pre-release rehabilitation programmes delivered in this context are designed to respond to all ages and thus are not adapted to respond to specific inmate demographics. However, elderly inmates (both male and female) face specific issues in relation to gaining employment, maintaining their health and reincorporating into society—a context exacerbated by the often-difficult process of re-gaining connections with their family, relationships or community post-release. It is therefore necessary to study the pre-release preparation programmes provided to elderly inmates in Thailand and to produce developed guidelines for more effective and efficient practice here, thereby strengthening the ability of elderly inmates to re-enter society, contribute to society and avoid recidivism.

Literature Review

Correctional Process of Treating Inmates in Thailand

In Thailand, inmates are treated in accordance with international standards and undergo 4 stages: primary admission, rehabilitation, pre-release and post-release (Thai Department of Corrections, 2018);

Primary admission

In the primary admission stage, inmates are classified and are separated between those undergoing trial and those who have been convicted. The purpose of such classification is to understand the background, personality, criminal history and cause of criminal behaviour of inmates. From this classification, a determination can be made as to how best to control and rehabilitate respective inmates (Thai Department of Corrections, 2018).

Rehabilitation

As the Thai Department of Corrections is tasked with rehabilitating inmates, programmes are designed and delivered to allow inmates to reform themselves and to adjust their attitudes towards living in society in an appropriate way. This rehabilitation spans from an offender's initial entering into the Thai Correctional Service and can either manifest a general programme designed for generic inmates or a specific process which corresponds to the crime committed by an individual inmate. The programme delivered shall be decided by the Thai Department of Corrections (2018).

Pre-release

The pre-release process of inmates witnesses an intensive training programme being provided where the Thai Department of Corrections classifies inmates and then addresses their life post-release—including in the areas of physical development/disciplinary practice, mental/cognitive development/life skills, vocational preparation and family/social reconnection preparation (Thai Department of Corrections, 2018).

Post-release

The post-release assistance offered is positioned to allow inmates to live with family and to re-engage with society in a normal manner. Here, the Thai Correctional Service is required to cooperate with governmental sectors and/or agencies involved in assisting inmates post-release to allow efficient and effective re-integration (Thai Department of Corrections, 2018). [Figure 1](#).

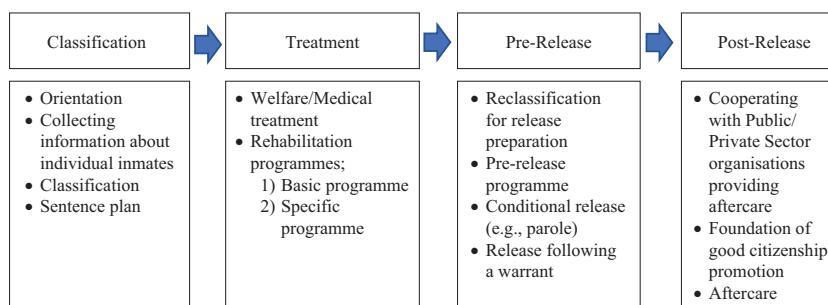


Figure 1 Correctional Treatment of Prisoners in Thailand

illustrates the correctional and treatment process of prisoners in Thailand.

Rehabilitative Theory and its Application in Thailand

The notion of early punishment being imposed is based on Retributive Theory. Under this rubric, as an offence is considered to manifest rule-breaking, those who commit an offence deserve to be reprimanded or punished by society as a form of retribution (Suttiyotin, 2014). Such early punishment also aims to suppress the occurrence of offences in society, arising under the belief that the prevention of crime is better than having to respond to crime (Beccaria, 1985; Suttiyotin, 2014). Through scientific advancements and empirical observations, analysis has been given to the causes of crime and the best means available in preventing crime from happening. In addition, academic attention has been given towards the most appropriate approaches in punishing offenders in respective contexts (Suttiyotin, 2014), with this being called rehabilitative punishment.

Rehabilitative Theory primarily seeks to understand the causes of crime by focusing on perpetrators and their environment, thereby looking for rehabilitative methods rather than to merely impose punishment. In this regard, the purpose of rehabilitative practice is to rehabilitate offenders to ensure they reform themselves as decent people who will not reoffend whereupon they re-enter society. Rehabilitative Theory holds that punishment should be designed: (1) so the personalities of offenders are not destroyed, which necessitates the exploration of methods other than imprisonment; (2) to manifest appropriate sentence plans; and (3) to ensure that upon successful rehabilitation, the punishment imposed should be stopped (Suttiyotin, 2014). The concept of rehabilitative punishment has been widely accepted and implemented in the correctional services of many countries – including Thailand, evidenced in the Thai Department of Corrections being tasked with both supervising inmates according to respective court judgments and also, more pertinently, with rehabilitating inmates to allow their re-entry into society in accordance with the concept of rehabilitative punishment. There are 2 levels of rehabilitation implemented by the Thai Department of Corrections in Thailand—basic rehabilitation and specific rehabilitation.

Basic rehabilitation, as is provided to most inmates incarcerated in Thai prisons, includes the provision of vocational training, education, moral training, religious activity, welfare enhancements and recreation. Overall, this rehabilitation aims to convey basic life skills to inmates, which are necessary for living harmoniously in

society. However, such rehabilitation does not explore, in-depth, the cause of the criminal behaviour undertaken by each inmate. Consequently, the Thai Department of Corrections should improve its rehabilitation practice to offer specific rehabilitation that aims to adjust the attitudes and behaviours of respective inmates, therein providing those inmates with knowledge and skills. Group processes can here be used to adjust the attitudes and behaviours of inmate groups and individual inmates as appropriate. The specific rehabilitation instituted may be designed in accordance with the criminal behaviours of certain inmate groups—such as in producing respective rehabilitation programmes for sex offenders, for violent offenders and for those convicted of life-and-body offences, property offences, drug offences and alcohol offences,. Similarly, specific rehabilitation programmes can be instituted for repeat offenders and for general inmates with short-term sentences.

Pre-Release Preparation Among Elderly Inmates

Under the Thai Correction Act B.E. 2560 (2017), inmate rehabilitation and pre-release are set as the preparation stages for allowing inmates to eventually re-enter society. An effective pre-release process requires appropriate officers being involved, intensive pre-release programmes being designed and delivered, adequate locations being available and the genuine engagement of inmates (Khamkorngaeat, 2010). However, previous research has revealed the problems and difficulties faced in the implementation of pre-release programmes for inmates. Many of these studies have pointed to the insufficient budgets available to cover the large number of inmates who qualify for this pre-release process (Di Tomas et al., 2021; Paopeng, 2015; Pangpang, n.d.). In addition, the number of officers tasked with operationalising pre-release programmes is inadequate when considering the number of inmates who require this provision. Consequently, these officers are overloaded, stressed and unable to provide appropriate pre-release programme implementation (Lertpanichpun, 2020; Takulram & Chirinang, 2019; Paopeng, 2015; Pangpang, n.d.).

Moreover, most rehabilitation programmes focus on vocational training that may not be suitable for certain inmate groups – such as those who are transgender, elderly or suffering from chronic illnesses (Arbour et al., 2021; Auidumrongtham 2021; Pongsri, n.d.; Silarat & Limprasert, 2013). In addition, the educational programmes offered rarely influence the rehabilitation of elderly inmates (Langat et al., 2015). In reflection of these findings, the rehabilitation programmes provided should be designed to specifically respond to the respective demographics and needs of inmates

– with this being especially true in relation to the provisions instituted for elderly inmates (Arbour et al., 2021; Bedard et al., 2017; Langat et al., 2015; Pironrit, 2011; Pongsri, n.d.; Siangyai, 1998; Wolfe, 2018). In addition, to respond to the fear of inmates that they will not be accepted by their family, friends and society post-release, the peers of inmates should participate in the pre-release process (Engineering and Medicine, 2020; Fontaine et al., 2012; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020).

Methodology

In the present study, qualitative data has been gained through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Participants

64 participants have contributed to this research. Through purposive sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 informants from the Thai Department of Corrections, the Thai Department of Older Persons, the Thai Institute of Justice, the Thai Ministry of Public Health, not-for-profit organisations in Thailand and criminological scholars. Each informant had at least five years of experience working with elderly inmates. In addition, through purposive sampling, focus groups were held with 39 elderly (60 years old or over) inmates who had been imprisoned for over 3 years.

Table 1 shows informants accessed via in-depth interviews.

Table 2 shows informants accessed via focus group.

Table 1 Informants Accessed Via In-Depth Interviews

Organisation	Qualification	Number of Informants
Thai Department of Corrections	At least five years of experience working with elderly inmates	11
Thai Department of Older Persons		4
Thai Institute of Justice		1
Thai Ministry of Public Health		4
Not-For-Profit Organisations in Thailand		2
Criminological Scholars	Conducted research on prison systems, rehabilitation and the correction of inmates for at least five years	3
Total		25

Table 2 Informants Accessed Via Focus Groups

Informants	Number of Informants	Qualification
Male Inmates	27	Elderly inmates (60 years old and older)
Female Inmates	12	Imprisoned for at least 3 years
Total	39	Gave informed consent to participate in research

Research Instruments

The research instruments employed in this research were structured interviews and focus groups. To ensure accuracy in the data collection process and in directly addressing the research objectives held, the questions and structure of the interviews/focus groups were considered and approved by both criminologists and the Committee for Research Ethics of Mahidol University.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to each interview, the researcher explained the research objectives held and gained approval for the interview to be audio-recorded (or, alternatively, for notes to be taken during the interview). Each interview lasted around 45–60 minutes. When conducting the focus groups, strict adherence was given to the rules of the Thai Department of Corrections, with stringent consideration being given to the nature of the participants (e.g., being elderly inmates). Prior to each focus group, the researcher conveyed all of the questions that were to be asked and the research objectives held to the elderly inmates. A positive and open environment was created by the researcher (as the focus group facilitator) to reduce any possible stress among the elderly inmate participants. From this, informed consent was gained from the participants. Each focus group lasted between two and three hours and notes were taken throughout. The participants were informed that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with, and that this would have no negative effect upon themselves. The data gained from the in-depth

interviews and focus groups were analysed via content analysis techniques.

Results

Below, the problems faced in the pre-release preparation programmes provided to elderly inmates in Thailand are detailed alongside suggestions for the development of this process to manifest more efficient and effective practice here. The findings presented are derived from the contributions of the participants.

Inadequate Correctional Staff Resourcing

The number of correctional staff available in delivering the pre-release preparation process in Thailand is often insufficient. This is because correctional officers are tasked with both controlling and rehabilitating inmates, despite the population of Thai prisons being extremely high and the number of correctional officers in this area being relatively limited. This has resulted in an unbalanced ratio of correctional officers to prisoners and, consequently, to the ineffective development of pre-release preparation among elderly inmates.

“The number of correctional staff available is limited yet the number of inmates is very high. We have a duty to control inmates and to rehabilitate the prisoners at the same time. The correctional staff face work overloads that may affect their work performance and health” (Informant from the Thai Department of Corrections).

Inappropriate Programmes and Duration of Rehabilitation

Most of the elderly inmate participants identified that the activities and training provided in their rehabilitation programmes were inappropriate and failed to acknowledge or address their health. Generally, the Thai Department of Corrections sets either basic rehabilitation or specific rehabilitation for respective prisoners based on each inmate’s offence and behaviour. Here, elderly inmates mostly attend meditation activities, with their health and abilities being distinct from those of general adult inmates. In this regard, some of the activities and training available cannot be undertaken by elderly inmates. Furthermore, the pre-release preparation programme provided to elderly inmates only constitutes three days, which is inadequate and unlikely to ensure appropriate adjustment for life post-release.

“This prison has provided vocational training for rehabilitation, but such training is unsuitable for me. I can select only meditation for rehabilitation. I know that

meditation is good for rehabilitation as it helps me to reduce my stress and negative emotions and to increase my patience. However, I sit on the floor when I practice meditation and feel pain in my legs and back afterwards. I consider that meditation is not a good fit for my health conditions” (An elderly inmate).

Informants from the Thai Ministry of Public Health also indicated that the activities and training provided in the rehabilitation programmes offered to elderly inmates must suit their (potentially deteriorating) health conditions. Consequently, strenuous activities and training must be avoided and light physical activity (such as drawing, music and reading) should be available.

“The activities for elderly inmates must focus on their health. Meditation practice is good, but such practice may not benefit all elderly inmates. There are other activities suitable for the elderly – such as reading, music and drawing. These activities are called ‘light physical activity,’ and elderly inmates do not require significant energy to participate. Also, these activities can assist inmates in rehabilitating their behaviours and mind” (Informant from the Thai Ministry of Public Health).

Elderly Inmates

Many of the elderly inmate participants failed to understand or comprehend the benefits of the pre-release programmes offered and thus seemed unconcerned about their participation.

“Elderly inmates do not understand the need to enter into the pre-release programme. The staff should explain and promote the importance of a pre-release programme to the elderly inmates” (Informant from the Thai Department of Older Persons).

Participation of Family and Community

Most of the informants indicated that the family and community of inmates should participate in the pre-release preparation process, namely, as the involvement of these parties is considered to be an essential factor the re-entry of elderly inmates into society. The informants further explained that when elderly inmates are released, they usually reside with their family and go back to their former community. Consequently, the families and communities of elderly inmates must understand the needs and contexts of such rehabilitated individuals—thereby being best positioned to ensure their physical and mental health is cared for. This can be achieved through the participation of families and communities in the pre-release preparation process.

“Community and families play an important role in assisting elderly inmates when they are re-released into society. Communities and families should thus know the nature of elderly inmates—such as their personality and their physical and mental health needs—before their release. This is because life in prison and life post-release is totally different. Participation in the pre-release preparation process will aid communities and families in better understanding inmates and will build a good bond among all parties”
(Informant from a not-for-profit organisation in Thailand)

Development of the Pre-Release Preparation Provisions for Elderly Inmates in Thailand

The informants overwhelmingly agreed that pre-release preparation programmes provided for elderly inmates in Thailand should be improved upon—both in regards to the prison management instituted and also in relation to the participation of families and communities. An urgent need was identified for prison management reform, namely, the Thai Department of Corrections is responsible for rehabilitating inmates during their incarceration and also for delivering the pre-release process, yet an inadequate number of correctional staff are available to provide this service to an adequate level, and inappropriate rehabilitation programmes are being offered to elderly inmates. Thus, the Thai Department of Corrections should increase the number of correctional staff available, as such is liable to reduce the workload burden faced and enhance the effort and specialised approaches needed in providing pre-release preparation provisions.

“If the number of officers available is increased and is suitable for the current workload faced, then prison staff shall not have to work over-time, will not be consistently exhausted and stressed and will be able to be more efficient in their control, rehabilitation and preparation activities”
(Informant from the Thai Department of Corrections)

Moreover, while the informants acknowledged that organising pre-release programmes for elderly inmates is difficult, it was nonetheless asserted that the Thai Department of Corrections should give effort towards providing a comprehensive programme that meets the needs of this population. In addition to offering meditation, the pre-release programmes available should contain various rehabilitation activities (such as those that pertain to learning about physical and mental health, providing recreation and encouraging reading). Various rehabilitation provisions in this sphere can enhance the achieving of behavioural correction. Furthermore, it was asserted by the participants that three days of training is insufficient for the pre-release preparation of elderly prisoners, so the Thai Department of Corrections should extend this.

The other training programmes provided, mainly focusing on vocational training, seem to be inappropriate for elderly inmates as they are liable to be strenuous and constituting hard training. In response, light physical activity and training programmes should be provided to elderly inmates – including in the areas of music, art, reading and creative work. The informants further identified that correctional staff should provide educational programmes designed to specifically address aging care and the re-entry of elderly inmates into society. This would assist an understanding being gained as to the primary care needs of the elderly, allowing the inmates themselves to observe and take care of their own health in an effort to minimise the burden placed on family members. If elderly inmates better understand the adjustments they shall need to make when re-entering society, their risk of recidivism will be reduced. Ultimately, the respondents noted that the duration of the pre-release preparation programmes provided to elderly inmates should be at least three months. [Figure 2](#) below, illustrates a feasible pre-release programme for elderly inmates.

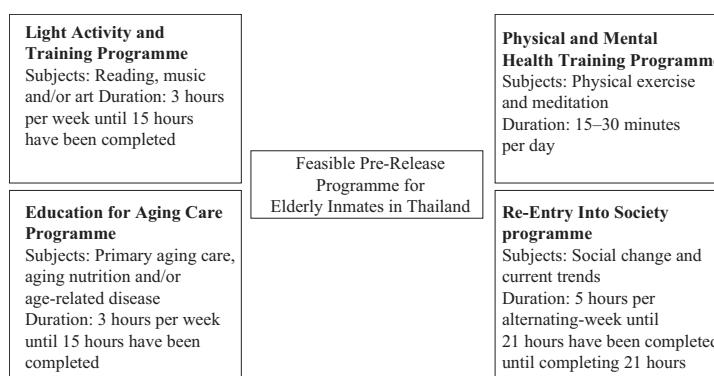


Figure 2 Feasible pre-release programmes for elderly inmates in Thailand

Figure 2 shows feasible pre-release programmes for elderly inmates in Thailand.

Furthermore, the informants conveyed that the participation of the family and community of elderly inmates is an essential factor in achieving an effective pre-release preparation process. As elderly inmates are likely to reside with their family and return to their former community post-release, such involvement can enhance the confidence and re-integration ability of these former prisoners. Ultimately, a better understanding will be held by all parties as to the needs faced while also reducing the stigmatisation of elderly inmates and eliminating the factors which contribute to recidivism. Through this, elderly inmates shall be able to live normal lives in society post-release.

“In some western nations, pre-release programmes or re-entry programmes allow the family of inmates and their community to be involved. This is good because such participation reduces the negative attitudes held towards former inmates while families and communities shall have a better understanding as to how they can provide new chances for elderly inmates to live in society” (Criminological scholar).

As the elderly inmate respondents conveyed a lack of understanding towards the importance of the pre-release preparation process, they are liable to face adjustment problems whereupon they return to live with their families and communities – which will be exacerbated when transitioning back into society following a long period of incarceration. Problems of this type are known to increase the risk of recidivism. Consequently, the Thai Department of Corrections and the agencies involved in providing elderly welfare should provide intensive public relations directed towards elderly inmates and their families to ensure those parties understand the importance of the pre-release preparation process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research, as has utilised the data collected from the responses of 64 informants, and has illustrated the current state of the pre-release preparation process provided to elderly inmates in Thailand and how this could be improved upon. The recommendations reached here are that improvements are needed in the prison management of Thailand and that the participation of the families and communities of elderly inmates in the pre-release preparation process should be ensured. Due to its essential role in this sphere, the Thai Department of

Corrections should establish standards, policies and practices that respond specifically to the short-term and the long-term rehabilitation needs of elderly inmates, therein giving due recognition to the health problems and physical deterioration liable to affect this prison population, that will manifest barriers to their successful reintegration into society. This research suggests a model rehabilitation programme through which this can be achieved.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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