



***Laya ug Sugakod* (freedom and survival) holistic coping of older people behind bars:  
A phenomenological study**

**Marc Ryan V. Portuguez**

*Cebu Normal University, Philippines*

[marc.ryan520@gmail.com](mailto:marc.ryan520@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

Most research on prison life is concentrated on younger generations yet older prisoners are increasing in number in our provincial jails. This phenomenological investigation aimed to explore the lived experiences of older inmates and how they cope with aging behind bars. A purposive sample of elder offenders who are 50 years old and above and have been incarcerated for more than two years was utilized in this study. Data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews of nine key informants were analyzed using the Colaizzi's technique. Three major themes emerged: (1) *issues surrounding self*; (2) *threats to physiological integrity* and (3) *social structures*. Despite being deprived of liberty, older prisoners' feelings towards their families remain the same. Sub themes such as the acceptance of their aging bodies, their fear of rejection, the sense of being a burden, self-pity as a consequence of envy and fear of dying in prison add to their psychological struggles. Although still yearning for freedom, being productive is perceived as a vital requirement for reentering society. Spirituality was a means to cope. Restrictions in daily activities, environmental barriers, needs for intimacy, and their predispositions to diseases were considered as threats to their physiological integrity. The dilemma of role preservation versus discontinuance, convenience versus discomfort, and the critical role of discipline reflected how the social structures within the prison system affect the lives of older inmates. The current socioeconomic patterns within the penitentiary still regarded the older "*mayor*" as a source of wisdom. Findings suggest that the phenomenon of aging behind bars is multidimensional with two major goals: freedom or "*laya*" and survival or "*sugakod*." The family is the central concept in between and acts as the motivating force to attain freedom and survival. A holistic approach is recommended to improve the social conditions within the prison system.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Prison populations have consistently grown across nations such as Turkey, Argentina, Kenya, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, and China over the last ten years. Concurrently, the number of older prisoners has also had a disproportionate growth to countries like the United States where there is a 300% growth in the older inmate population (Enggist et al., 2015). In 2014, the Philippines held 120,076 inmates within its jails and penitentiaries with a recorded prison growth rate of 121% (World Prison Brief, 2015). There is no known data on the number of older inmates in the Philippines. Narag & Jones (2016) described Philippine jails as poor, corrupt, and lacking in resources. According to Preda Foundation Inc. (2014), the penitentiary system can be inhuman and unjust due to overcrowding, substandard meals, gang wars, and favoritism which can be risky to health and life as it breeds diseases, shatter discipline and intensity tensions. It no longer represents a system fostered for rehabilitation and reform in preparation for fruitful community re-entry. Wangmo et al. (2015) assert that prisons should mirror society. A feat that might be difficult in our current system.

Living in prison can be demanding, and it can be harsher for aging individuals (umaFellner, 2012). Kim and Peterson (2014) asserted that older inmates require special attention because of their vulnerability to victimization, chronic disease, and age-related impairments. Kingston et al. (2011) found that half of aging inmates had a diagnosable mental disorder that is left untreated or undetected. Trotter and Baidawi (2014) on one hand reported that a significant number of older adult prisoners required assistance with day-to-day tasks. Elder inmates were also more likely to feel socially disconnected and may suffer from various functional impairments. Older persons in prison experience accelerated aging as compared to that of community-dwelling older adults (Enggist et al., 2015). Despite these, O'Hara et al. (2014) describe the coordination of care for older prisoners as below optimal standards.

Many believe that despite being law offenders, aging prisoners are still humans who deserve all the fundamental rights including the right to health. The Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010 upholds the provision of a comprehensive health and rehabilitation mechanism for disadvantaged seniors (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2010). Enggist et al. (2015) believe that to provide better health care to older prisoners, administrators of jails must initially acknowledge the distinct needs of these special groups. To improve the quality of life of older prisoners, it is important to consider the values of humanity and the opportunity to promote positive identities (de Motte, 2015).

Nevertheless, in a society that boasts of values like respect for the elderly, to what extent do we know about elderly individuals behind bars? How does imprisonment affect the personal goals of successful aging? According to Ginn (2013), elder offenders are rarely the subject of most prison researches which usually focuses on younger inmates. Currently, there is also a known gap in the knowledge about the life of senior inmates (Kim & Peterson, 2014). Lumayag et al. (2014), however, stated that understanding the phenomenon of older adult prisoners will greatly benefit not only their conditions but also that of their families. The researcher supposes that understanding the conditions and experiences inside the prison in the context of an older adult inmate is necessary to develop programs that are grounded on information directly coming from the lens of elder offenders. It is for this reason that this phenomenological study was conceived to address this knowledge gap and better understand the experiences of elderly prisoners inside the country's jail system.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of older adult inmates. Specifically, this study sought the answers to the following questions:

1. What are their experiences as older adults inside the jail?
2. How do they cope with aging inside the prison?

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study utilized qualitative, descriptive phenomenological inquiry as an approach to understand the experiences of older inmates at the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center (CPDRC) in which it allows the exploration of the experiences lived and told by individuals through the essence of certain phenomenon (Dela Fuente, 2021). Subjective phenomena in this study were investigated with the viewpoint that critical truths about the reality of aging in prison are grounded in older inmates' lived experiences.

### **Participants**

Research participants included a purposive sample of nine older offenders aged 50 years and above who have been imprisoned for more than two years. Data saturation determined the number of key informants who underwent in-depth, semi-structured interviews using a researcher-made interview guide.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Interviews were audio-recorded but key informants were assured that no personal data will be displayed in all written outputs of the research. To abide by institutional policies, a jail guard was allowed to stay within the interview venue but was distanced from the interviewer and the informant to allow them to express their views and sentiments freely. The researcher was also not allowed to ask the exact crime or cause of imprisonment. No compensation was provided to the key informants but they have explained the significant impact of the results as the basis for action plans and programs. The minimal risk of joining the study was explained in detail by the researcher before obtaining consent. Key informants were assured that their views and opinions will not affect their adjudication process and incarceration.

### **Research Instrument**

The researcher was the primary instrument of the data collection. The interview guide only served as a reminder for trigger questions to guide the researcher. The list of questions was consulted by a group of experts in gerontology and phenomenology to ensure the accuracy of data. Probing allowed the researcher to obtain further details of the interview. To ensure that data will be the actual verbatim responses of the study participants, interviews were documented by audio recording and by taking detailed notes of the focal points of the conversation as well as physical expressions of the key informants. A research assistant was assigned only to make sure that technical issues of data collection such as the functionality of the audio recording device were addressed properly. Audio files and notes were labeled with an identification number only. Significantly, the researcher ascertained that legal, ethical, and safety issues are taken into utmost consideration.

### **Data Collection**

The locale of the study is a maximum-security prison facility managed and operated by the provincial government of Cebu with a capacity for 1600 inmates. It is located in Barangay Kalunasan, Cebu City, and has been famous in various media due to its dancing inmates program. Permission was sought from the Provincial Health Officer and the Jail Warden including the consent to bring materials such as a tape recorder, pen, and paper inside the prison. A list of inmates meeting the study's inclusion criteria was requested from the records section chief of the correctional facility. The researcher scheduled a visit to the facility where the elderly prisoners are present, accompanied by a jail guard to establish rapport with the key informants and to conduct an ocular inspection of the facility. Using the list, jail officers assigned to the prison visiting room were tapped to inquire from each of the qualified inmates if they would be willing to meet with the researcher to discuss the research study. Prisoners who expressed interest met with the investigator individually with a correction officer present.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of data followed Colaizzi's method. Initially, the researcher read all transcribed statements several times to acquire a feeling for them. Each transcription was carefully reviewed and significant statements with direct relevance to the phenomenon under study were extracted. Significant statements were documented in a table and

coded for tracking purposes. Spelling out the meaning of each statement followed and was documented in the table of formulated meanings. Care was observed to ensure that meanings are descriptions rather than interpretations of the experience. This was done by bracketing preconceived and prior views about the phenomenon to eliminate bias. Consequently, the researcher organized the formulated meanings into subthemes and clustering them into major themes. To validate the themes, the researcher referred back to the original statements, noting discrepancies among and between the key informants, and avoiding the temptation of ignoring a data or theme that do not fit. An exhaustive description of the phenomenon was generated to display a complete picture of the phenomenon of older persons behind bars. The researcher ensured that in formulating the comprehensive description of the phenomenon, efforts were geared towards describing it in as unequivocal a statement of identification as possible. This produced the fundamental structure by condensing the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captured just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon being explored. The final validating step was to ask the participants about the findings. This was done through a second interview.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Nine elderly prisoners participated in this phenomenological study. The oldest key informant was 77 years of age, while the youngest was 60. Five out of the nine prisoners were males. Only one of them is not yet married. Interviewee A holds the longest duration of incarceration at 15 years and Interviewee C and E had the shortest at 7 years. Among the respondents, only Interviewee I was incarcerated before the age of 50. Based on the conversations, the majority of the elderly prisoners claimed to be farmers, dressmakers, fishermen, and sari-sari store owners before they were taken inside the prison. They were coming from nearby towns and cities such as the town of Consolacion, Danao City, Mandaue City, and Cebu City. One hundred nineteen (119) significant statements were transcribed to create 51 formulated meanings. From these testimonies and meanings, 15 subthemes were clustered to come up with three major themes.

Life in prison for an aging offender connotes a rich experience of both challenges and inspiration. Serving time in prison while also coping as an older adult may be considered double jeopardy but these experiences have also made them more focused on the importance of family. Generally, their lives in prison are extremely vulnerable to depression, boredom and the threats to their health are everywhere. Furthermore, their experiences were described in terms of their multiple needs which range from the simplest such as the lack of basic commodities such as soap to the most complex such as their fear of dying and their fear of rejection within and beyond the walls of incarceration. Their usual daily routine includes saying their morning prayers, bathing, cleaning the surroundings, eating, and sleeping. This is interlaced with various tasks such as reading the bible and selling essential merchandise. Nevertheless, they appear to be hopeful about the idea of freedom and re-entry towards to free world. Perceptibly, the family is the precedent motive for their dreams about freedom. Their families are also the cause of why they need to cope with the challenges of prison life.

### *Theme 1: Issues Surrounding Self*

Older adults in prison have accepted the changes in their body structures brought about by aging. Their psychological struggles highlight the family as the main cause of the feelings of loneliness and imprisonment is seen as a barrier towards fulfilling household obligations. The term “*laya*” or the free world was almost always merged with family, as in the phrase “*Akong pamilya sa laya*” (My family outside prison). This is comparable to the findings of Lumayag et al. (2014) whereby they described the theme “missing picture” which focused on how imprisonment took away the older inmates’ chance to be with their families and witness the growth of each member.

In this study, the older adult senses himself as a burden towards younger peers and induces feelings of self-pity. In contrast, the Human Rights Watch (2015) cited that American older prisoners often have plenty of complaints about younger inmates. Filipino older inmates may be more engaged with their peers. Wangmo et al. (2015) recommended in their study that the old and the young should be combined in housing settings as it ensured generational exchange. This is also shown in the study. Social re-entry is perceived as a foreseeable crisis of rejection. This anticipated burden upon reentry is agreeable to the findings of Western et al. (2015) who stated that

most offenders re-entering society became unemployed, needed additional public assistance, and relied on other family members for lodging and financial support. According to Western et al. (2015), a stressful transition is created when material insecurity is joined with the adjustment to social life following imprisonment. Material insecurity can cause feelings of isolation. Self-pity is outlined as a result of envy towards other inmates who get regular visitations and towards family members who can enjoy life with loved ones. Likewise, older adults embrace certain preoccupations as fear of dying without having to see a loved one before passing away. Spirituality and the external practice of religious beliefs are effective strategies to cope with the experiences inside prison. This is also similar to what has been previously reported by Neddermen (2010) which stated that spirituality creates an impact for hope and thereby creating positive change for the individual prisoner. The following accounts were recorded which reflect these subthemes:

SS107: *Makaguol tan-awon ang mga tiguwang diri nga dili naman unta makadungag sa ilang sala kay hinay naman kaayo apan naa lang gihaapon dinhi.* (It's sad to see old prisoners who can no longer add to their crimes but are still here.)

SS1: *Wala koy tigdalaw diri kay naa ngadto sa Manila akong pamilya. Mao bitaw namatay akong anak nga wa ko kakuyog sa lubong.* (I have no visitors here because my family is in Manila. That's why my child died yet I was not able to attend the funeral.)

SS 110: *Kung tiguwang na gud ta di na kayo ta mapuslan sa mga trabaho kay hinay naman mao nang hadlok pod ning usahay di ta dawaton balik sa atong pamilya.* (Once we get old we don't get to become much productive because we are already weak and so it is also a worry that we might not be accepted back by our families.)

SS 2: *Usahay maluoy ko sa akong kaugalingon basta maghunahuna ko nga naa ko diri, nga dili ko pareho sa akong mga igsoon nga makakita sa ilang mga anak halos kada adlaw* (Sometimes, I pity myself whenever I think that I'm here inside prison and not like my siblings who can see their children almost every day.)

SS 101: *Nahadlok ko mapareho ko atong namatay diri nga wa man lang gani kakita sa iyang bag-ong apo.* (I am afraid to suffer the same fate as that inmate who died without having to see his new grandchild.)

### *Theme 2: Threats to their Physiological Integrity*

Environmental impediments such as the presence of stairs and extremes of the temperature inside prison cause problems on the performance of activities of daily living. According to the Human Rights Watch (2012) prisons are primarily designed for the younger persons and adds that it is difficult for older prisoners to live and function with dignity if there are barriers to an active independent life. De Motte (2015) agrees by stating that restrictions within the prison limits older adults' potentials and lowers their quality of life hence the need for the age-appropriate regime that highlights the positive aspects of wellbeing. In the study, there are formations of new relationships as well as the tacit acceptance of non-marital bonds as a result of lost connections with loved ones. Carcedo et al. (2010) found similar findings stating that low levels of loneliness and high quality of life were found among those with romantic relationships within the prison. The general view of disease and illness is that they were acquired upon entry to the facility and that it is more common among older prisoners as compared to the younger inmates. Cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal, sensorineural, and gastrointestinal problems were the most common. There are anecdotes related to lack of nutritious food, unsafe water sources, and the lack of physical activities. The use of illicit substances such as cigarettes, drugs, and alcoholic beverages is widespread. Despite these, medical and dental services are deficient. Similarly, Chiu (2010) claimed that older inmates are more likely to require frequent dental and periodontal work. The following statements exemplify this theme:

SS 118: *Maluoy ko aning mga tiguwang diri nga hinay na kaayo mulakaw pero ang selda naa sa second floor.* (I pity some elderly inmates who can hardly walk but their prison cell is on the second floor.)

SS 100: *Ang ubang mga tiguwang hinay na kayo. Tabangan pa maligo o malibang.* (Some elderly are too weak that they need to be assisted in taking a bath or defecating.)

SS 83: *Ang uban para mawala ang kamingaw mag uyab-uyab, magkabit-kabit diri.* (Others seek new relationships, some non-marital relationships, to ease the loneliness.)

SS 54: *Maayo unta ug mas masustansya ang mga pagkaon diri. Katulo mi mukaon diri pero permi isda, usahay naay manok pero bukobuko pod sa manok di man ang maayong klase.* (If only food here is more nutritious. We eat three times a day but they always serve fish. Sometimes they give us chicken but usually not the good parts.)

SS 38: *Daghan man ug bisyo diri – suyop-suyop, sigarilyo, inum. Naa man mga ginadili nga di matabang kay naay sindikato mamaligya og bino. Kasagaran batan-on pero naa mugamit nga tiguwang.* (There are a lot of vices here - drugs, cigarettes, alcoholic beverages. There are unavoidable illegal doings because there are syndicates selling wine/alcoholic beverages, usually among the young but there are older persons who use them too.)

### *Theme 3: Social Structures Behind Bars*

Older prisoners describe the clear demarcation line between the rich and the poor. Independence is the ultimate objective in having to earn money by selling stuff inside prison. Some older adults are appointed as “mayor” of their prison cell and their opinions are highly valued. Inmate leaders are an essential component of prison management as they can become an alternative to overcome the inadequacy of jail personnel (Narag, 2016). The older adults also recognize the abundant lessons in life learned while inside jail premises. They are faced to adapt with role discontinuance especially on issues of family decision making while some continue to perform previously assumed tasks. Discipline remains a significant part of daily life and punishment in the form of “padlock” and “bunal” (which means to strike) is used to ascertain that hostility is prevented and balance is preserved. Other issues include the inconveniences on legal matters, medical and dental check-ups, the delay in the provision of food, and the scarcity of soap. Conversely, some individuals feel more secured to be locked up behind bars as they received shelter and regular rations for food. The use of inmate leaders is an integral component of prison management. The use of inmate leaders is an integral component of prison management. The use of inmate leaders is an integral component of prison management.

SS 47: *Nagnegosyo ko ginagmay diri sa sulod. Mga prenda nga cellphone, alahas, relo, singsing, ug kwintas.* (I run a small business inside prison. I pawn a few cellular phones, jewelries, watches, rings, and necklaces.)

SS 14: *Ako’y kinatiguwangan sa akong selda. Usahay ako gyapon ilang pa desisyunon sa mga butang sama sa kinsay tig hugas karon.* (I am the eldest inmate in my cell. Sometimes they allow me to decide on things like who’s going to wash the dishes now.)

SS 18: *Kung makalaya ko manahi gyud kog balik. Gapanahi man gyapon ko diri ginagmay.* (Once I get freed I will go back to sewing. I still do a little of it here.)

SS 102: *Sauna akoy murag hari-hari sa balay pero pag-abot sa prisohan kung di ka mayor igu ra gyud ka musunod.* (Before I was the head of the household but in here if you’re not the mayor, you are bound to be a follower.)

SS 31: *Naa'y uban tiguwang diri ngil-ad ug batasan. Naa'y uban diri nga mapanghitas-on pero di man ko mag apil-apil nila mao wa gyud ko nakakitag away diri. Ang uban hasta kapila na ma-padlock.* (Some elderly here have a bad attitude, some are arrogant. But I do not meddle at others' business that's why I have never encountered conflict here. Others have been "padlocked" a lot of times.)

SS 40: *Wala man nuon manakit diri kay kung i-report nimu naa man bunal.* (No one abuses us physically here because once there is a report and we can get strikes)

SS 50: *Namatay akong asawa nga wala naabot sa hospital kay kung i-admit ka diri sa hospital daghan pa kaayo ug pananghiran, mga papeles nga i-submit. Hinuon kung magpa konsulta naa ra permi.* (My wife died without getting a hospital admission because if you need it, there are a lot of permissions to seek, papers to be submitted. However, consultations are available every time.)

SS 104: *Ang uban gusto mulaya pero naa po'y uban labi na tong wa nay pamilya mas malipay nga naa diri kay naa pa silay kaon ug atop.* (Some want freedom but some wish they are here because they don't have families anymore. In here, they have food and a roof.)

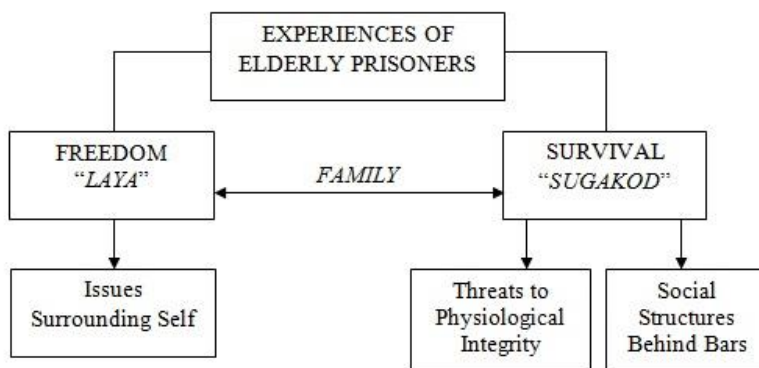


Figure 1. Exhaustive description of the phenomenon

The phenomenon of aging behind bars is multidimensional with two major goals: (1) freedom which is expressed as “*laya*” (freedom or free world) and (2) survival which is described as “*sugakod*” meaning “to cope.” The family is a central concept between the two goals and acts as the “fuel” to attain freedom and survival. The context of freedom is seen as a psychological experience on issues affecting the self of a senior offender or that which is related to his/her self-perception – appearance, values, beliefs, and behavior. These reflect how they accept, adapt, and view the changes in their lives as a result of incarceration. For the elderly to survive, in contrast, the individual is faced to overcome the threats to their physiological integrity and keep the balance in social conditions. Survival is a primary goal for themselves and secondarily for their families.

Acceptance of body image connotes positive life resolution yet there are a few older offenders who are still not confident and this may hide feelings of hopelessness. They become more focused on their emotions as they serve longer sentences and the family plays the most remarkable cause of feelings of loneliness. Productivity is viewed as a requirement for acceptance among fellow inmates and loved ones during social re-entry. Extraordinarily, if this foreseeable crisis is difficult for people behind bars it could be more demanding for older adults living freely outside of prison. The need for belongingness does not change over time or as people age. It is

felt more if the individual loses part of his or her independence. Self-pity as a result of envy may increase stress levels among the seniors and this can produce violence within prison. The fear of dying in prison conveys approval that death is inevitable and that time may be “too short” to not spend life with loved ones. As prisoners reach older adulthood, they become more reflective about life and its meaning. Spirituality becomes a source of hope for freedom, a means to cope, a therapeutic factor, and motivating energy.

Furthermore, the prison’s architecture has significant implications as it may not be fit for the needs of older people. Environmental impediments may increase the probability of disease or accidents. Physiologic problems such as cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, vision/hearing, and gastrointestinal may have been increased because of various conditions inside the prison. This may prevent older people from continuing basic tasks. Old age in prison does not also impede how people thrive in the companionship of a life partner and the need for intimacy is expressed in the formation of new relationships. The thoughts on intimacy and forming new relationships may signify inhibitions or projections of how they cope with loneliness behind bars.

The existing social conditions necessitate selling stuff within the prison which suggests their desire for independence. The presence of prohibited substances, however, may connote that prison staff is less cautious about incoming goods. Usage of such has direct effects on their health. Senior offenders being appointed as “*mayor*” showcases the respect for the wisdom and leadership of the old. Role continuance may imply an attempt to compensate for household obligations. The fear of “padlock” and “*bunal*” may stem from their desire for freedom because the fewer offenses you have the greater the chance for release. This may signify the importance of discipline in averting hostility. And while these inconveniences are at hand, some see imprisonment as convenient for their daily sustenance, which they may not likely to get beyond prison walls.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The study concludes that the lived experience of an older adult in prison takes on multiple factors with freedom (*or laya*) and survival (*or sugakod*) as major goals. Perspectives about the family were reflected on these two goals. Older adults describe freedom in the context of family as in the phrase “*Akong pamilya sa laya*” (My family in the free world). The hope for freedom was coupled with the will to cope and survive the challenges of prison. Statements like “*Gusto pa ko makakita sa akong mga anak sa di pako mamatay*” (I want to see my children before I die) provide an idea of their hopeful spirits. Religious activities and new relationships became a means to cope for some. Apart from their psychological struggles, there are multiple challenges from lack of resources to barriers in physical activity. Disease and age-related impairment are also common. Based on the findings, a holistic approach to promoting the well-being of older individuals behind bars is imperative. This means that interventions should be geared towards the improvement of the self, their physiological integrity, and social conditions among elderly prisoners. It is also recommended to revisit parole opportunities for elder inmates who are no longer fit to handle the prison environment.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Relevant implications were drawn from the findings of this study. In general, there is a need to strengthen the current prison management system through multiple programs that target the multifaceted needs of the older adults in prison. As prisoners age the more they become introspective about life. Findings suggest that older prisoners are at an increased risk for psychological and mental health issues that can exacerbate diseases. This provides more information on the need to strengthen the mental health program inside Philippine jails. The need for belongingness and intimacy does not fade over time. Instead, it becomes more intense when people are deprived of liberty. While the current practice with our jails provides intimate time for couples, there is perhaps a need to expand visitation hours and programs for older inmates. The prison system and physical structure of jails in the Philippines may be considered as unfit for the rehabilitative needs of older individuals. This provides implications for the improvement in our existing prison management architecture and system. Financial allocation, health programs, and better social conditions are all tenets of relevant concern. Providing elderly-friendly buildings will make a difference and the public health system must also provide more attention to the wellness needs of older prisoners. This is to say that public health programs should not exclude even those who have been deprived of liberty as this will improve both



the current healthcare system and reduce the cost of hospitalization for elder prisoners. This is also to fulfill the provisions of the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010 (RA 9994) which is founded on the basic belief that health is a fundamental right of every citizen. Furthermore, there is a stringent need to revisit the programs and policies on disciplinary management within our penitentiaries. Inhumane acts must be put to a halt and fundamental human rights must be upheld even for law offenders.

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