

THE ROLE OF TELEVISION IN THE DESTIGMATIZATION OF FORMER CONVICTS: THE PERCEPTIONS OF INMATES FROM TIMIȘOARA PENITENTIARY

Diana-Maria MIHAI

West University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: This study analyzes the impact of television on the destigmatization process of former convicts, based on inmates' perceptions of how mass media can influence their social reintegration. The research is grounded in a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 10 questions, applied to a sample of 20 inmates from Timișoara Penitentiary, selected based on their prior participation in televised interviews or their viewing of programs addressing issues faced by former convicts. The findings suggest that the media can play a positive role in changing public perception, but the effectiveness of this process depends on the authenticity of the stories presented and the actual support from the community and employers.

Keywords: destigmatization, social reintegration, former convicts, television, public opinion

1. Introduction

In recent years, the reintegration of former convicts has received increased attention in many countries due to the importance of the destigmatization process. This is not merely a legal or administrative matter, but a complex process that requires both social support and a shift in public perceptions. It is well known that antisocial attitudes are not formed in isolation, but are adopted from one's reference group and the community in which a person grows up, through social learning and the imitation of behaviors observed in others (Studiu integrat privind cauzele recidivei, Septembrie-Decembrie 2023).

Stigmatization significantly influences self-perception and expectations regarding how one will be treated by others (Link et al., 1989; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Various international studies have shown that responses to stigma can impact individual functioning, leading to dysfunctional behaviors, mental health issues, and difficulties in social integration (Inzlicht, Tullett, & Gutsell, 2011; Livingston & Boyd, 2010). However, few studies have been conducted on inmates - a deeply stigmatized group, marginalized not only by the temporary restrictions of incarceration but even more so after release, particularly in employment (Pogorzelski et al., 2005). The structural barriers affecting the reintegration of offenders into society have been detailed in previous works (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008; Morani et al., 2011), yet the psychological responses of inmates to stigmatization are essential for understanding the post-release reintegration process. The stigmatization of offenders has been analyzed primarily through the lens of Labeling Theory (Scheff, 1966; Lemert, 1974), which argues that formal labeling as a criminal leads to the internalization of stigmatizing attitudes, withdrawal from conventional society, and the adoption of a deviant identity (Lemert, 1974). Empirical studies based on this theory often compare groups of convicted offenders to those whose charges were dropped, frequently showing that formally labeled individuals are more likely to reoffend than those who were not labeled (Chiricos et al., 2007; Worrall & Morris, 2011).

However, current research suggests that labeling does not automatically lead to negative outcomes; rather, differences in individuals' perceptions and expectations of future discrimination are what influence their level of functioning (Major & O'Brien, 2005). A greater perceived stigma toward offenders before release predicts poorer adaptation to the community, through anticipated stigmatization, this perception affecting the offenders' ability to reintegrate (Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2016).

In this context, the media, especially television, plays a crucial role in changing perceptions about former convicts.

International studies have shown that an accurate and authentic portrayal of former inmates' stories can contribute to shaping a more positive public image.

A study conducted in the United States examined how public attitudes toward currently or formerly incarcerated individuals and their reintegration into society are influenced by the consumption of information about these individuals (Dum, Socia, George, Neiderman, 2022). The respondents read materials about incarcerated individuals (informational texts and poems written by inmates). Those who read poems with a humanizing theme applied the lowest level of stigmatization toward currently or formerly incarcerated individuals (Dum et al. 2022).

Another American study (Denver, 2019) showed that rehabilitation evidence, such as positive recommendations and completion of programs, can improve the employment chances of former convicts.

It is proven that the public stigmatization of individuals with a criminal record hinders reintegration initiatives. Measurement methods vary from one study to another, with the development of a multidimensional scale tested on a sample of adults in the U.S., highlighting four main factors of stigmatization: (1) danger/mistrust, (2) dehumanization, (3) dispositional attributions of criminality, and (4) social/emotional distance (Shi, Silver, Hickert, 2022). The results show that public stigmatization is associated with the belief in intrinsic evil, racial resentment, and support for punitive policies, but it decreases among those with direct or indirect experiences of arrest and those who support rehabilitation policies.

Research in the field has rarely considered the psychological reactions of offenders to stigmatization; however, it should be noted that these reactions can significantly influence behavior after release from prison. A longitudinal study (Moore, Stuewig, Tangney, 2016), which assessed the perceived and anticipated stigmatization by inmates before release and one year after, indicated that the perception of stigmatization negatively affects community adaptation.

In Romania, where the stigma associated with a person's criminal past appears to be a significant barrier to their reintegration, although there are numerous studies on this subject, the issue of stigmatization of former convicts and the impact that the media can have on them has not been investigated. Our study aims to fill this gap in knowledge by exploring how inmates from Timișoara Penitentiary perceive the influence of televised programs on their chances of reintegration into society after release.

A national representative study (Integrated Study on the Causes of Recidivism, 2023) highlighted a variety of perceptions regarding the term "recidivist". The majority associated it either with reoffending (45%) or with the status of being a former inmate or someone with a criminal record, while others perceive recidivists as dangerous and threatening to society.

An experiment based on vignette scenarios (Overton, Fretwell, Weng, Dum, 2024) tested two mechanisms – signaling and role assumption – to assess how personal

narratives can reduce stigma toward former convicts. The results showed that autobiographical narratives can decrease the desire for social distance, particularly by increasing perceptions of warmth and humanity in the individual.

We also consider that the images and stories presented on TV can create real empathy among viewers. These programs can help dismantle stereotypes associated with "monsters" or "irreparable criminals," and viewers can come to understand that every individual has the potential to change and become a productive member of society if given a chance.

Additionally, television can become an educational platform where viewers are exposed to detailed information about criminal law, prison conditions, and rehabilitation programs available for inmates. Another important aspect of television's influence on destigmatization is the ability to create positive role models. When former convicts who have successfully reintegrated into society are interviewed and share their experiences, this can provide motivation for others in similar situations to change their lives.

2. TV Programs in Romania that Feature Interviews from Behind Bars

In Romania, the phenomenon of TV programs featuring interviews from behind bars has seen a slight expansion in recent years. Over the past decade, several shows have emerged that highlight life in prisons, providing a platform for inmates and former convicts to express themselves. A significant example is the program "Condamnății" (The Convicts), hosted by Adriana Stoicescu, broadcast on the national television channel B1, since September 2013.

The program consists of a series of interviews with incarcerated individuals from various Romanian penitentiaries, often accompanied by shocking narratives designed to keep the audience engaged.

Another relevant example is the program "După Grati" (Behind Bars), hosted by Diana Mihai, which has been broadcast on television and online since October 2014. These interviews focus on the success of rehabilitation and emphasize education and counseling as the main tools that have allowed convicts to overcome stigma and rebuild their lives.

The importance of these programs is not limited only to educating the general public but also to changing the inmates' own perceptions of their reintegration possibilities.

Many of the TV shows are watched by inmates during their periods of detention, and the stories presented can motivate incarcerated individuals to actively engage in the educational programs available in prisons.

3. Research Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative design with an exploratory purpose, aiming to analyze the impact of television on the perceptions of inmates and their reintegration process into society. In this method, we do not aim to measure quantitative variables, but rather to explore the meanings and interpretations assigned by inmates in relation to the media and televised programs.

Access to conduct the research at Timișoara Penitentiary was granted by the institution's management, including permission to use a voice recorder under strict security regulations. Interviews were transcribed using AI tools (TurboScribe, Whisper), and inmates participated voluntarily. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, with

interviews conducted in familiar settings to encourage honest responses. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the study's purpose and gave written consent. To ensure relevance, the research was registered as an official activity within the Education and Psychosocial Assistance Sector, with participants receiving three credits. Five copies of the final work will be donated to the Timișoara Penitentiary library. With management approval, interviews were conducted individually in a private, quiet classroom. The researcher built rapport through active listening and eye contact, maintaining engagement throughout the 20-minute sessions.

3.1. Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis assumes that television can help reduce stigmatization if inmates genuinely express a desire to change. The study explores the link between exposure to TV shows (viewing or participating) and inmates' perceptions of TV's role in destigmatization and reintegration, aiming to test whether media can shift public attitudes toward former convicts.

3.2. Research Objectives

The main objectives of the study are to assess the prisoners' perceptions of the role of television in changing society's mindset regarding former convicts and to identify the factors that may influence the effectiveness of messages conveyed through television in facilitating social reintegration.

3.3. Research Method

The research method applied in this case is a qualitative method, focused on semi-structured interviews, a highly useful qualitative tool in research involving the exploration of participants' attitudes and opinions, allowing for the subjective understanding of prisoners' experiences and perceptions regarding the influence of television on their destigmatization.

3.4. Interview Guide Structure and Participant Selection

The interview began with a brief introduction of the researcher and the study's purpose to encourage honest answers. Participants were informed about their rights, including the right to refuse answers and to finish the interview at any time. Questions covered demographics and views on television and reintegration.

The sample included 20 inmates from Timișoara Penitentiary, selected for having prior exposure to TV programs about prison life and reintegration - ensuring relevant perspectives on media influence. After collecting the audio-recorded interviews, the data was analyzed using an inductive, thematic approach. Key themes were identified in the inmates' responses, highlighting their perceptions of how television influences social reintegration and contributes to destigmatization.

3.5. Results

The interview guide used in this research included the following 10 questions:

Q1. How old are you and what education have you completed (primary, high school, university)?

Q2. What were you convicted for?

Q3. Have you had previous experiences with the prison system? Are you a repeat offender?

Q4. Have you felt treated differently by people, stigmatized, after they found out you were in prison?

Q5. Have you given interviews for a television or watched shows presenting the life stories of prisoners? Would you like to (continue to) participate? Why?

Q6. Are there TV programs that motivate you to change your behavior (documentaries, interviews, educational shows)?

Q7. Do you believe that TV programs made in prisons can change society's attitude toward convicts? How so?

Q8. Are prisoners treated differently (by prison staff or fellow inmates) after participating in TV shows? In a positive or negative way?

Q9. Do you think television can help in the social reintegration process of prisoners or, on the contrary, can media exposure harm their image?

Q10. Do you think there are other relevant aspects that we have not addressed in this interview? What are they?

The analysis followed a structure based on the mentioned questions and was organized around the respondents' profiles, type of conviction, criminal history, experiences with stigmatization, exposure to TV shows about prisoners, the impact of television on public perception, the influence of shows on prisoners, and the role of television in social reintegration.

The responses to Q1 provided information about the age and education level of the interviewed prisoners. Our sample consisted of adults, aged between 20 and 50 years. The majority of the interviewed prisoners have a medium or low level of education, with most having completed high school or vocational studies. A significant number of respondents (20%) have completed university studies, indicating diversity in the educational level within the incarcerated population. There are also cases of prisoners who began or continued their education in prison, which may suggest a desire for social and professional reintegration (Fig. 1).

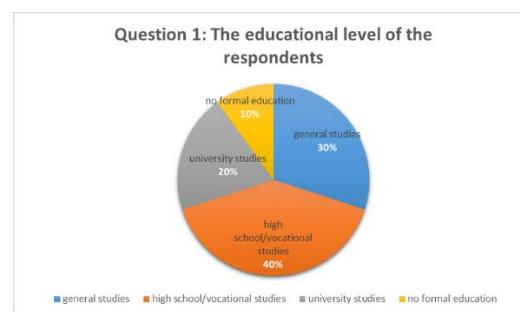


Fig. 1. Question 1

The responses to Q2 indicate the distribution of crime types among the prisoners interviewed in this study. The most common crimes in this sample are qualified theft (21%) and drug trafficking (21%). Next in rank are crimes related to human trafficking/migrant trafficking (16%), cybercrime (11%), smuggling (10%),

robbery/violence (11%), 5% represent manslaughter, and 5% are attributed to a case of poaching (Fig. 2).

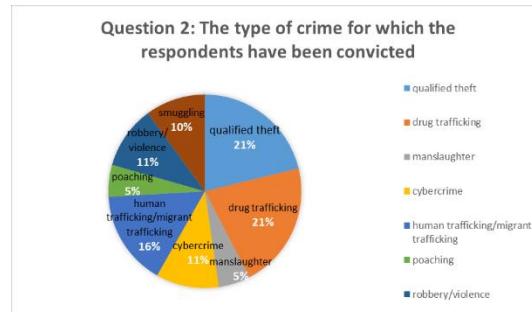


Fig. 2. Question 2

The study also aimed to identify the status of these respondents through the answers to Q3, which indicated that more than half are recidivists (Fig. 3).

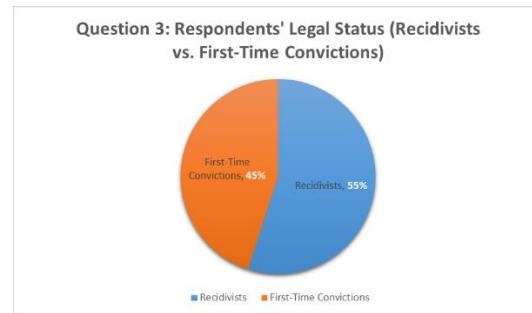


Fig. 3. Question 3

Regarding the perception of stigmatization among the interviewed inmates after incarceration, the responses to Q4 indicated that almost half of them felt stigmatized (Fig. 4).

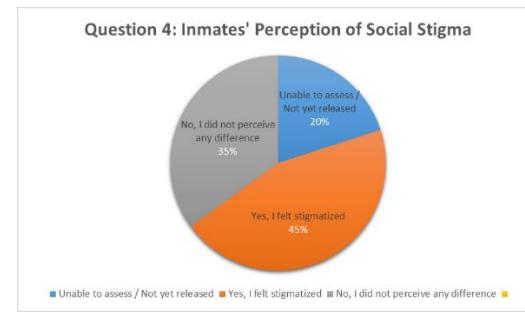


Fig. 4. Question 4

45% of the respondents stated that they felt stigmatized after being incarcerated, citing difficulties in relationships with family, community, or potential employers; 35% stated that they did not feel any change in the way they were treated by society; 20% claimed they could not assess, as they had not yet been released or had not had direct contact with society after their conviction. A brief qualitative analysis of the inmates'

responses regarding the perception of stigmatization showed that those who felt stigmatized faced prejudices or difficulties in reintegration.

Examples:

- Inmate 3: "I have never been employed with a work contract... society doesn't help you. Only on paper."

As for inmates with a mixed perception, they cannot clearly express their stance on stigmatization, as either they have not been released yet, or they anticipate being labeled in the future.

- Inmate 17: "I haven't been released yet, but it's clear that a label will be put on me when I ask for my criminal record."

Inmates who did not feel stigmatized state that they were accepted by those around them, especially by close ones, without feeling any difference in treatment.

- Inmate 4: "I was a child, no one took seriously what I did. I was also employed."

Regarding participation in TV shows, as reflected in the answers to Q5, a high level of openness toward public communication was observed. (Fig. 5).

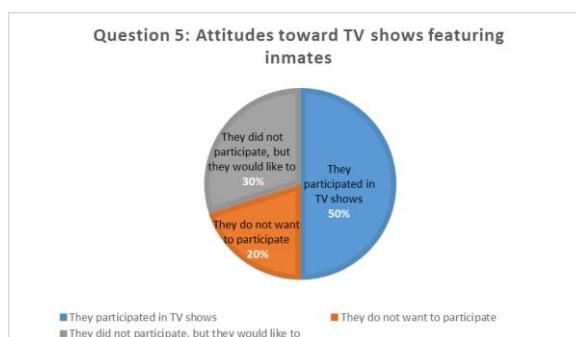


Fig. 5. Question 5

Half of the respondents stated that they have participated in TV shows or given interviews within them, which indicates hope that their personal story may positively influence others.

Inmate 4: "I gave an interview... to make a good impression on the committee."

Prisoners who have watched and would like to give interviews are open to participating in shows under conditions of honesty and control over the message they convey.

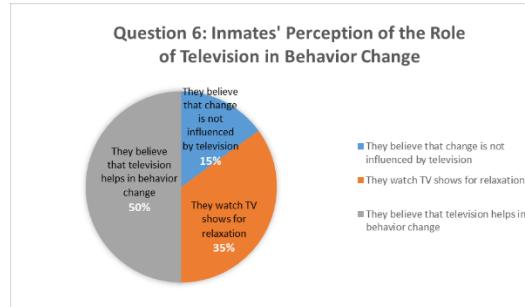
Inmate 15: "*So the world can know the truth about detention... to serve as prevention.*"

There is also the category of prisoners who watch the shows but refuse to participate due to reasons such as fear of exposure, the trauma of remembering arrest, social labeling, lack of trust in the media, or emotional sensitivity.

Inmate 7: "*I don't want people to see me... My children know I'm working.*"

This distribution shows that 80% of respondents are favorable to direct or indirect participation in such TV programs, while 20% are raising concerns about fair representation.

In response to Q6, we examined the types of TV shows that the respondents find motivating and the types of messages that influence them (Fig. 6).

**Fig. 6.** Question 6

Half of the inmates see TV as a real motivation, stating that certain shows (religious programs, news, documentaries about prisoners) have made them want to change their behavior.

Inmate 2: *"I took an example... to avoid doing what others did."*

35% of inmates see television as a form of relaxation or escape and believe it doesn't directly influence their behavior, but can offer emotional refuge.

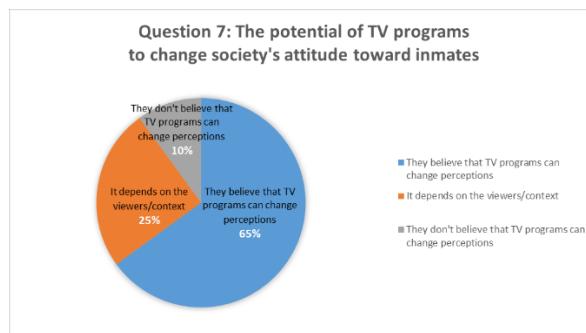
Inmate 14: *"TV is very good for my peace of mind. It helps you forget that you're behind bars."*

15% of inmates emphasize the role of family in behavior change, minimizing the influence of television or even considering that reality is distorted.

Inmate 10: *"The biggest motivation is family, not TV shows."*

Inmate 12: *"The shows are censored... they don't tell the truth."*

Q7 aimed to gather inmates' views on the potential of TV programs to change society's attitude toward convicts, with responses indicating a strong perception of this potential (Fig. 7).

**Fig. 7.** Question 7

65% of the inmates believe that TV programs can change public perception, being convinced that personal stories can raise awareness and foster empathy among the audience.

Inmate 2: *"A lot of people can take a good example, not do what we did."*

25% of the inmates emphasize that the impact of TV programs depends on the mentality of the public, their openness, and how the programs are received.

Inmate 19: *"It depends on how open the person is."*

10% of inmates believe TV programs cannot change viewers' perceptions, citing distrust in media authenticity and society's ability to empathize with inmates.

Inmate 8: *"It's not the programs that change people, it's only them."*

Q8 focused on the interviewees' perceptions of how inmates are treated by prison staff or fellow inmates after participating in TV programs. Over half of the inmates believe their TV appearances have no impact on behavior within the correctional environment (Fig. 8).

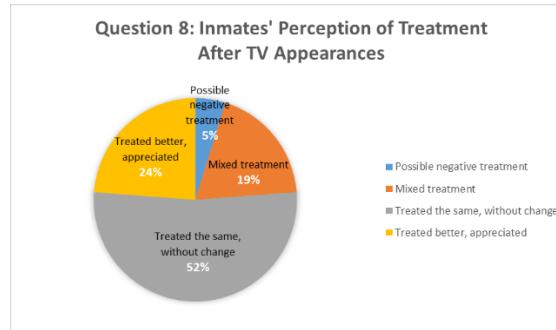


Fig. 8. Question 8

According to the chart above, over 52% of inmates say they have not noticed any difference in the behavior of prison staff or fellow inmates after giving interviews to TV stations.

Inmate 6: *"We are treated the same as before."*

24% of inmates report that participating in TV programs earned them appreciation and respect, particularly from prison staff, for their honesty.

Inmate 19: *"We are rather encouraged to give interviews."*

19% of inmates reported a mixed treatment (jokes, sarcasm, but also admiration or tolerance), especially from fellow inmates.

Inmate 5: *"The colleagues make jokes... pokes, but it doesn't bother me."*

5% mention the possibility of negative treatment and the risk that some inmates may be penalized if they expose issues in detention on TV.

Inmate 20 – *"If you talk about abuse, if sensitive topics are brought up, you receive threats."*

"For Q9, the majority of interviewees believe that television can aid in inmates' social reintegration, rather than harm their image (Fig. 9)."

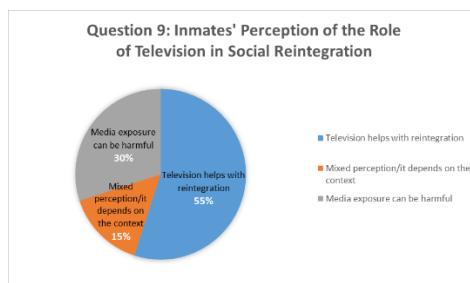


Fig. 9. Question 9

Based on the transcribed responses, opinions were grouped into three main categories:

Television helps reintegration – 55% of inmates

These respondents believe TV programs can positively impact social reintegration by offering public confession, serving as a preventive example, or humanizing the inmate's image.

Inmate 2: "It can definitely help, if it's clear that you don't want to go back."

Inmate 5: "Through the interview, many young people learn what they risk. Maybe I would've avoided what I did."

Media exposure can be harmful – 30% of inmates

These respondents believe TV appearances can harm an inmate's image, especially with employers, judges, or the community.

Inmate 8: "They look at you with pity, point fingers. It's worse."

Inmate 13: "It doesn't help. The judge sees you, and it's harder to get released."

Mixed perception / depends on context – 15% of inmates

These inmates believe the effect of television is subjective, depending on the message, the individual, or the audience's openness, emphasizing that impact varies with the program's quality, its message, and the viewers' cultural level.

Inmate 11: "For me, it doesn't help, but others might find inspiration in it."

Q10 gave participants the opportunity to express any additional relevant aspects not covered in the interview. The majority (over 65%) felt the questions were well-chosen, sufficient, and relevant, with no need to add further. However, some raised issues tangentially related to the study, such as frequent parole decision delays or the lack of post-detention support programs (Fig. 10).

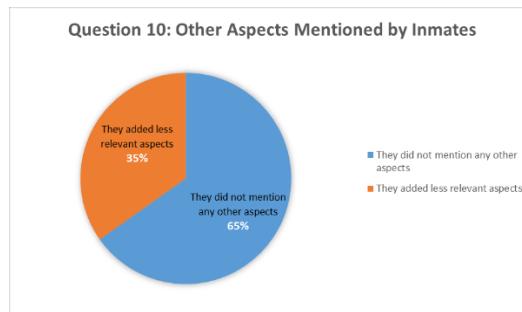


Fig. 10. Question 10

Among the 35% who added comments, some criticized the penitentiary and justice system, arguing that TV should highlight its injustices, not just inmates' stories, while others expressed personal frustrations.

Inmate 3: "My release got postponed for... I don't even know what anymore... I felt like ending my life."

Inmate 5: "Some people are marginalized. We're all equal, but we're not treated the same."

4. Limits of the Research and Recommendations

Although the methodology used provides valuable information, the study has significant limitations, such as the lack of national representativeness, the subjectivity of self-

reported answers, and the restrictions imposed by the unique context of conducting interviews in a single prison. However, the data obtained can highlight relevant patterns, which can be useful for future research extended to the entire prison system in Romania.

The media should promote constructive formats about life in detention, offering genuine space for expression, rather than just sensationalist content. Penitentiary institutions can collaborate with the media and NGOs on communication projects that support social reintegration, and public policies should support de-stigmatization campaigns, as well as employers willing to offer real opportunities for former inmates. Future research can expand the scope of analysis by including more diverse samples to better assess the media's influence on social and professional reintegration.

5. Conclusions

The research reveals that inmates' perceptions and experiences of television's role in destigmatization and social reintegration vary widely, influenced by factors such as education, criminal history, stigma perception, and media attitudes. Despite many having low to medium education levels - linked to recidivism and reintegration challenges—some show a genuine interest in education, reflecting openness to change and personal growth. In terms of stigmatization, nearly half of the respondents stated that they feel the negative label imposed by society, while the others either haven't yet directly faced social reactions or have received support from those close to them.

Interestingly, most respondents view both participating in and watching television programs positively. Around 80% are open to participating, seeing these formats as tools for public prevention and even personal therapy. Moreover, 65% of inmates believe that television has the potential to foster empathy and change society's negative perceptions toward people who have been incarcerated. However, some participants emphasize that this effect depends on the public's cultural level and openness, while others question the real effectiveness of the media in this process.

Even though the influence of television on treatment within the prison environment is seen as limited — aside from isolated reactions from staff or fellow inmates — about 55% of respondents believe that media can support reintegration after release. Nonetheless, nearly a third point to the risks of public exposure and potential reputational harm, reflecting a natural ambivalence toward a media environment often perceived as dominated by sensationalism.

In conclusion, television is perceived by a significant portion of inmates as a potential tool for change and social reintegration, capable of contributing to the rewriting of the narrative about former convicts — from "irrecoverable" individuals to people capable of reflection, change, and development. Although the media cannot replace institutional or familial support, it can play a valuable complementary role in the process of identity reconstruction, provided that the formats are created with responsibility, empathy, and respect for human dignity. Thus, in Romania, programs that present real stories from behind bars can become not only a mirror of the carceral reality but also a catalyst for social and attitudinal changes, helping to reduce stigmatization and support the genuine reintegration of former inmates.

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Online Resources:

1. <https://www.b1tv.ro/inregistrari/condamnati>
2. <https://www.facebook.com/teleeuropanovatimisoara/videos/dup%C4%83-gratii-cu-diana-mihai>