Psychosocial perspective on the integration of individuals deprived of liberty: a lexicometric analysis

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Abstract

Objective While some aspects of the prison system are documented, the psychosocial experiences of individuals during incarceration and their reintegration after release remain relatively underexamined and poorly understood by the broader public.

Methods This qualitative research explores the perceptions of 16 former people deprived of liberty from Gran Canaria, Spain, focusing on their reintegration process. Semi-structured interviews provided direct and personal insights, analyzed using IRAMuTeQ software to identify key themes. Two main subcorpora emerged: one addressing the experiences within the penitentiary system and the other focusing on the challenges post-release.

Results Results revealed significant barriers, such as limited resources in prison, persistent stigma, and difficulties in securing employment and housing. The role of the Social Educator was identified as critical, providing emotional, educational, and social support during incarceration and facilitating connections with community services post-release.

Conclusions These findings emphasize the importance of addressing both psychological and social dimensions to promote successful reintegration and highlight the potential of socio-educational programs to foster resilience, self-efficacy, and social integration.

Keywords Psychological integration, Social education, Emotional resilience, Lexicometry, Social representations, Social support

Introduction

The penitentiary system must be understood as a complex system that interacts with various other systems and contexts, according to systems theory, which posits that systems are composed of interdependent elements working together to achieve specific goals [1]. In the case of the penitentiary system, these elements include prisons, correctional staff, health services, educational programs, and reintegration initiatives, all of which interact and impact the overall functioning of the system. From a systems perspective, the penitentiary system does not operate in isolation but is closely linked with the judicial and legal system, which defines the laws and norms governing incarceration. Reforms in the Penal Code can alter the length of sentences and thus influence rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for people deprived of liberty [2]. Additionally, the penitentiary system must collaborate with the health system to address the physical

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and mental health needs of people deprived of liberty, as conditions of overcrowding and lack of medical resources can exacerbate pre-existing issues [3]. The relationship with the educational and labor systems is equally crucial, as the availability of educational and vocational training programs within prisons is essential for the successful reintegration of people deprived of liberty. The lack of these resources and their disconnection from the labor market present significant challenges [4]. Furthermore, the social reintegration of individuals deprived of liberty requires effective collaboration with external community services, such as employment agencies, housing services, and psychological support programs, as the absence of a solid support network and social stigmatization can significantly complicate this process [5].

From a psychosocial perspective, the reintegration process also involves addressing the emotional and psychological dimensions of individuals who have experienced incarceration. Incarceration often leads to feelings of isolation, shame, and loss of self-efficacy, which can persist long after release and hinder successful reintegration [6, 7]. Social Education programs play a pivotal role in mitigating these challenges by fostering emotional resilience, promoting self-confidence, and providing tools for social and occupational reintegration [8, 9].

This study aims to investigate the specific challenges faced by individuals who have been in the penitentiary system and how they managed their transition to life outside of prison. By focusing on this population, we address the gap in understanding the obstacles these individuals encounter as they navigate towards social integration. The research problem centers on identifying key areas of coping, needs, and challenges faced by these individuals upon existing the penitentiary system. The central research questions guiding this study are: What institutional improvements within the prison system could enhance the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society? What are the primary barriers encountered by formerly incarcerated individuals during their post-release reintegration process? What essential social services are perceived as insufficient or unavailable by formerly incarcerated individuals upon release, and how do these impact their ability to reintegrate successfully?

To address these issues, the study employs a qualitative approach using structured interviews with a sample of 16 individuals who have been in the penitentiary system. The methodological framework includes thematic analysis using IRAMuTeQ software to identify and interpret key patterns in the data. This study aims to provide insights into the areas where these individuals face significant challenges and to suggest improvements in support systems from the perspective of Social Education.

Review of scientific literature

Deprivation of liberty is a mechanism of social control that involves the detention of individuals as a punitive and corrective measure, affecting their social integration and fundamental rights [10, 11]. Historically conceived as a measure of isolation and punishment [12, 13], this practice has evolved towards an approach that aims not only at security and order but also at the rehabilitation and social integration of people deprived of liberty [14]. However, the reality of correctional facilities remains largely unknown to the public. Many preconceived notions about these facilities are accepted by society, despite lacking empirical evidence [15].

Legal framework and incarceration trends in Spain

Deprivation of liberty is defined as the confinement of a person who has violated the law in a correctional facility. In such a facility, the person will remain for the duration stipulated by their sentence, under a controlled regime of life and treatment [16].

Such developments must be examined considering theoretical contributions to prison sociology. Sykes [17] conceptualized incarceration as a set of "pains of imprisonment"—including the deprivation of autonomy, liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, and security—that deeply affect people deprived of liberty' psychosocial well-being and identity. These deprivations continue to resonate in contemporary penal systems. Building upon this foundation, Crewe [18, 19] introduced the concepts of "depth," "weight," and "tightness" to capture the lived experiences of modern incarceration. These concepts highlight not only the institutional severity of prison regimes but also the nuanced psychological and emotional burdens borne by incarcerated individuals. His work suggests that the character of imprisonment has evolved but remains deeply punitive and often incompatible with the stated goals of rehabilitation and reintegration.

Currently, in Spain, the system of custodial sentences is oriented towards the re-education and social reintegration of the convicted, as established by the Spanish Constitution of 1978. However, various studies by the Ministry of the Interior indicate that Spain has the highest incarceration rate in Europe [20], despite having the third-lowest crime rate, with 44 crimes per 1,000 inhabitants. According to the ROSEP report [15], the incarceration rate has experienced a dramatic increase, rising from 23 in 1975 to 133 in 2015, representing a 500% increase. This growth is partly attributed to reforms in the Penal Code that have extended the duration of sentences and made it more difficult to implement alternative reintegration measures [21].

Additionally, Fernández [22] has underscored the structural limitations of the Spanish penitentiary system,

including overcrowding and a lack of adequate educational and occupational programs, which further hinders the reintegration prospects of people deprived of liberty. This disconnects between policy goals and institutional realities reinforces the need to reevaluate both penal practices and public perceptions regarding imprisonment and rehabilitation.

Psychosocial impact of incarceration

From a psychosocial perspective, incarceration also imposes significant emotional and psychological challenges [6]. Research indicates that incarceration often results in feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and anxiety, which can negatively impact mental health and hinder the reintegration process [7, 23, 24]. For example, the loss of autonomy and the stigma associated with being labeled as a "former inmate" frequently lead to reduced self-esteem and difficulties in forming social connections upon release [7]. These effects are compounded by what recent literature describes as status fragility—a precarious social identity where individuals recently released from prison experience persistent vulnerability due to the instability of their rehabilitative and social status [25, 26]. This fragile status often exposes them to renewed social exclusion, undermining reintegration efforts even further. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive and nuanced support programs that address both psychological and social dimensions, helping individuals restore a stable sense of identity and belonging [13]. However, it is essential to avoid simplistic or overgeneralized calls for intervention. As Stevens et al. [27] warn, the proliferation of well-meaning programs may lead to "interventionitis," a condition in which individuals are subject to overlapping, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory services that dilute effectiveness and increase administrative burden. Furthermore, Guiney et al. [28] concept of pathway dependency highlights how institutional systems can inadvertently entrench individuals in rigid post-release trajectories that limit autonomy and reinforce marginalization. Therefore, rather than assuming that any intervention is inherently beneficial, support mechanisms must be evidence-based, person-centered, and attentive to the structural constraints and lived realities of formerly incarcerated individuals [29].

Although Spanish prison legislation has been recognized for its progressive approach, the lack of resources and effective strategies for social reintegration is evident [30]. Legal reforms in this area have tended to focus on punitive aspects rather than promoting resources and programs that truly meet the constitutional goals of re-education and reintegration, such as permits and scheduled releases, which are essential for the reintegration of people deprived of liberty [15]. According to Montero [31], the emphasis on punishment over rehabilitation

in Spanish penitentiary policy has limited the effectiveness of reintegration programs. Añaños et al. [32] argue that insufficient collaboration between correctional institutions and community services hinders successful reintegration.

Life within prison presents a set of complex dynamics and structural challenges. Incarceration itself produces dissocializing and disintegrative effects that hinder social integration [33]. People deprived od liberty often face overcrowding, violence, and a lack of adequate resources, which can exacerbate preexisting mental health and addiction issues [34, 35]. The implementation of rehabilitation programs within prisons varies significantly, impacting on the people deprived of liberty' ability to acquire skills and receive the necessary support for reintegration [36].

The transition from prison life to external society involves a series of structural and psychosocial obstacles that can significantly complicate the reintegration process. One of the most prominent challenges is the persistent stigmatization and discrimination that former people deprived of liberty face in the labor market, which often results in precarious employment or long-term unemployment [37]. Schreeche-Powell [25] explores this in depth, emphasizing how the concept of status fragility manifests in post-carceral contexts, where individuals experience chronic instability in social and occupational identities. This fragility is not merely an individual psychological response but a reflection of systemic barriers and societal reluctance to reassign full citizenship status to those previously deprived of liberty. These dynamics highlight the importance of policies that not only provide access to employment but also actively challenge the structural stigmas that hinder sustainable reintegration.

The lack of a solid support network and access to basic services such as housing, education, and healthcare further complicates their reintegration [38, 39]. Additionally, many experience physical and mental health issues [40, 41]. One of the major obstacles to reintegration is the absence of effective post-release assistance within the Spanish penitentiary system [31], as well as the lack of continuous follow-up, which exacerbates reintegration difficulties [42]. In fact, nearly 75% of individuals who have been released from prison reoffend within five years [43].

Therefore, deprivation of liberty is futile if it does not include psychosocial and educational interventions that facilitate genuine processes of change and provide increased social support [44]. This support emerges as a key factor for the reintegration of these individuals into their communities. Those with higher levels of social support experience, lower levels of hostility [45], better psychological well-being [46], and higher employment levels [47], among other benefits. There is a need to shift

towards an intentional, direct, and tailored approach to facilitate such change. Reintegration is not possible without prior educational processes, nor can educational interventions be effective without a directed social reintegration component [48]. Education within prisons must be comprehensive and tailored to the individual needs of people deprived of liberty to promote genuine rehabilitation and social reintegration [49]. The social integration of individuals deprived of liberty is a multifaceted challenge that requires the collaboration of various professionals, including social educators, psychologists, social workers, and prison staff. Each actor is crucial in creating an environment that fosters learning and personal development, which are fundamental elements for successful integration [50].

The role of social education in reintegration

Social education is distinguished by its holistic approach and its capacity to intervene in various aspects of a person deprived of liberty's life, offering continuous support that transcends mere educational boundaries [51]. It is a discipline that is considered a fundamental right for all citizens and has an educational purpose [52]. Its ethical code establishes that its purpose is the construction of healthier, more inclusive, and just societies [53]. In prison, each person deprived of liberty is assigned to a Technical Team (ET), which includes an educator [8]. These professionals address the specific issues of each individual and their subsequent reintegration into society [9]. They are designed to address multiple dimensions of people deprived of liberty' lives, ranging from basic literacy and vocational training to socio-familial guidance and support. Not only does it contribute to reducing recidivism, but it also significantly improves the quality of life for people deprived of liberty during their incarceration, promoting a more humane and constructive environment within prisons [54, 55]. After release, the support from these social educators facilitates connections with community services and essential resources, acting as a bridge between prison life and external society [56]. The social support they provide helps individuals who have been released from prison to have better opportunities for finding employment, housing, and obtaining necessary information [57].

It is important to utilize comprehensive and coordinated approaches for the social integration of former people deprived of liberty. Programs that combine psychological support, vocational training, and the development of interpersonal skills are more effective in reducing recidivism and promoting long-term stability [58, 59]. Furthermore, vocational training and emotional education are essential components that should be integrated into penitentiary programs to ensure an effective transition to life outside [60].

Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to explore the perceptions of individuals who have been deprived of liberty regarding their social reintegration processes, to identify how Social Education can address these challenges and opportunities, and to offer improved support to these individuals as they reintegrate into society.

Materials and methods
Study design
This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative narrative inquiry with quantitative lexical analysis. The qualitative component is grounded in a narrative research design, which involves collecting and interpreting the personal stories of individuals to understand how they experience and give meaning to certain events or social phenomena. It focuses on the sequence of lived events and how people make sense of their experiences through storytelling. This approach is especially useful for exploring the complex and subjective dimensions of reintegration after imprisonment, and it contributes to identifying strategies for social improvement [61, 62]. Qualitative research allows for the collection of rich, descriptive data—primarily through participants' words and actions. It also enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences from their own perspectives [63].

This research is anchored in the theory of social representations, originally conceptualized by Moscovici [64], which refers to organized systems of socially shared knowledge. These representations help individuals make abstract concepts tangible and navigate everyday communication [64–66]. In this study, the framework allows us to explore how people who have been imprisoned perceive their experiences and social reintegration, revealing shared meanings and common attitudes [67–69]. The use of this theory provides insight into how individuals process, communicate, and internalize the stigma and challenges associated with incarceration.

This study utilizes a lexicometric approach to analyze textual data, which falls within the broader field of content analysis but focuses specifically on the statistical patterns of language use. Lexicometry examines the frequency, co-occurrence, and structure of words within a corpus to reveal latent meanings and shared cognitive frameworks.

A key method used here is the Reinert Method, a form of lexical analysis that assumes words are not used in isolation but as part of structured systems that reflect ways of thinking. This method helps identify recurring lexical patterns and associations that reveal underlying social representations. It is particularly effective in analyzing the "before," "during," and "after" aspects of personal narratives about prison life [70].

Participants

The study involved 16 individuals, of whom 10 were men and 6 were women, all with experience of incarceration on the island of Gran Canaria, Spain. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample, indicating that the majority of participants are men (62.5%), followed by a smaller percentage of women (37.5%). The average age of the participants is 45.13 years.

Instrument

For this research, a structured interview was used, designed to facilitate a deep and meaningful interaction with the participants, allowing for the collection of detailed information and revealing nuances in both verbal and non-verbal language [71]. The interview script used in this study was specifically designed for this research and is available in Supplementary File 1 (see Supplementary File: S1 Structured Interview Script). The interview consisted of two sections. The first section focused on the categorization variables of the discourse, covering aspects such as age, gender, length of incarceration, number of children, and number of previous incarcerations. The second part included open-ended textual questions aimed at exploring the specific objectives of the research. The total number of questions in the structured interview script is eight; however, for this analysis, and because they directly address the main objective of the study, the following three questions have been analyzed: *What improvements do you think should be made in prison to better prepare for life after release? What are the main obstacles you have encountered after leaving prison? And upon your release from prison, what services are lacking or non-existent that you need to improve your life in society?*

Procedure

First, the interview was designed and then conducted directly, with fieldwork carried out from April 8 to April 30, 2024. Participants were informed about the objectives of the research, the preservation of anonymity, and the use of their contributions solely for research purposes. They were also asked for consent to audio-record the interview, with their consent being freely given. The study strictly adhered to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration and obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with reference number CEIH-2024-09.

Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were tabulated to identify both sociodemographic and textual variables. The final corpus consisted of 16 interview texts, which were divided into 308 text segments, that is, smaller units of discourse such as sentences or phrases that express a single, coherent idea. These segments facilitate the analysis of meaning within and across interviews. The entire corpus contained 10,757 occurrences, meaning every instance a word appears, and 1,792 different forms, which refer to unique words (i.e., the vocabulary without repetition). Among these, 979 were hapaxes, meaning they appeared only once in the corpus. Hapaxes are often words that reflect very specific or personal experiences and can indicate unique themes or concepts.

Two subcorpora were created: one to determine what improvements should be made in prison to better prepare for life outside (53 text segments with 1,955 occurrences of 591 forms), and the other to identify the main obstacles faced after leaving prison and the services that are lacking or non-existent and need improvement to enhance life in society (76 text segments, 2,725 occurrences of 728 forms).

Data analysis

First, the characterization of the sample was conducted through a frequency and distribution analysis of sociodemographic variables, using SPSS software (version 25) [72]. This initial step is essential for understanding the specific characteristics of the participants and accurately contextualizing the subsequent findings [73].

For this study, the textual analysis support program IRAMuTeQ - *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*– was used in its version 0.7 alpha 2. This open-source software, based on R, supports multidimensional statistical analysis and enables the in-depth examination of large textual corpora [74]. IRAMuTeQ also uses lemmatization, which is the process of grouping different inflected forms of a word so they can be analyzed as a single item (e.g., "educates," "educating," and "educated" are grouped under "educate"). A form refers to a unique word used in the dataset.

During the procedure, the first step was to determine the characteristics of the study sample through the

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the study sample

Variables	Categories	%/ [$\bar{x}$, SD]
Age (years)		[45.13, 11.3]
Sex	Men	62.5% ($n=10$)
	Women	37.5% ($n=6$)
Time in prison	0 years	6.3% ($n=1$)
	1–4 years	68.8% ($n=11$)
	5 years and up	25.0% ($n=4$)
Number of children	0 children	25% ($n=4$)
	1–2 children	50% ($n=8$)
	3 or more children	25% ($n=4$)
Several times in prison	Yes	50% ($n=8$)
	No	50% ($n=8$)

Source: Own elaboration. (%) percentage in categorical variables or ($\bar{x}$) mean and (SD) standard deviation for continuous variables

analysis of frequency and distribution of sociodemographic variables. Additionally, the study of social representations was carried out using the Reinert method, performing a lexical analysis of the subcorpora. As noted by Larruzea-Urkixo et al. [75], this analysis is based on the idea that every discourse is expressed through a system of lexical worlds, which organize a logic and provide coherence to what the participants express. The aim of the software algorithm is to reveal, through the analysis of situations, thoughts, and emotions, the lexical worlds or social representations commonly shared by the participants.

For the analysis, both Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) and Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) were employed, considering nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs as lemmatized words. Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) divides the corpus into smaller units called text segments—which typically correspond to sentences or short paragraphs—and groups them into categories known as lexical classes. These classes are formed based on patterns of word co-occurrence, meaning which words tend to appear together. The software uses statistical tests, such as chi-square (χ^2), to identify which words are most strongly associated with each class. This allows for the discovery of key themes and the structure of the discourse [74].

Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) provides a visual map of the relationships between the lexical classes identified by DHC. It uses a Cartesian plane a two-dimensional graph with horizontal and vertical axes—to show how themes and key words are distributed and interrelated, helping to interpret semantic connections across the data [76].

Results
The data obtained was used to create two subcorpora to address the research objective. The first subcorpus analyzes the situation of individuals within the prison, through the question: *What improvements do you think should be made in prison to better prepare for life after release*? The second subcorpus examines the obstacles, as well as the needs of individuals once they leave prison. This was addressed through two questions: *What are the main obstacles you have encountered after leaving prison? And upon your release from prison, what services are lacking or non-existent that you need to improve your life in society?*

Subcorpus "improvements in prison for subsequent release"
Similarity analysis
Similarity analysis is a technique that identifies and visualizes the co-occurrence of words within a textual corpus. In this case, it was applied to participants' responses

using Iramuteq software, producing a co-occurrence graph that maps the frequency and co-presence of lexical items. Words that frequently appear together in the same text segments are represented in proximity, forming thematic clusters.

The primary clusters identified in the analysis include "Work and Social Life," "Prison and Treatment," and "Reintegration and Programs." The "Work and Social Life" cluster features central words such as "work," "social," "job," and "life," highlighting the importance of employment and social integration for people deprived of liberty (Fig. 1). Associated words like "worker" and "job" indicate a clear need for job opportunities and social support both during and after incarceration. In the "Prison and Treatment" cluster, central words include "prison" and "treatment," suggesting that conditions within the prison and the treatments received are crucial aspects that require improvement. The word "inside" reflects the internal conditions of the prison that affect people deprived of liberty' lives. The "Reintegration and Programs" cluster is characterized by central words such as "reintegration" and "program." Reintegration is a recurring theme, strongly connected to specific programs that facilitate this process. Words like "leave" and "month" suggest a focus on the timing and specific stages of the transition.

The detailed analysis of lexical relationships shows that the word "person" is at the center of the map, indicating that individuals and their experiences are the central focus of discussions regarding improvements within the penitentiary system. Significant connections include the relationship between "work" and "life," which highlights the link between obtaining employment and having a meaningful life post-incarceration. There is also a notable connection between "prison" and "treatment," demonstrating the importance of appropriate treatments within the prison environment. Additionally, the link between "reintegration" and "program" underscores the need for specific and structured programs to support reintegration.

The results of the similarity analysis reveal that individuals who have been incarcerated clearly identify the need to enhance job opportunities and social support, as well as improve living conditions and treatment within prisons. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of reintegration programs that facilitate a smoother and more effective transition to life outside of prison.

Factorial analysis
Factorial correspondence analysis (FCA) is a statistical technique that reduces the dimensionality of categorical data, graphically representing the relationships between key terms. In this study, the FCA (Fig. 2) helps
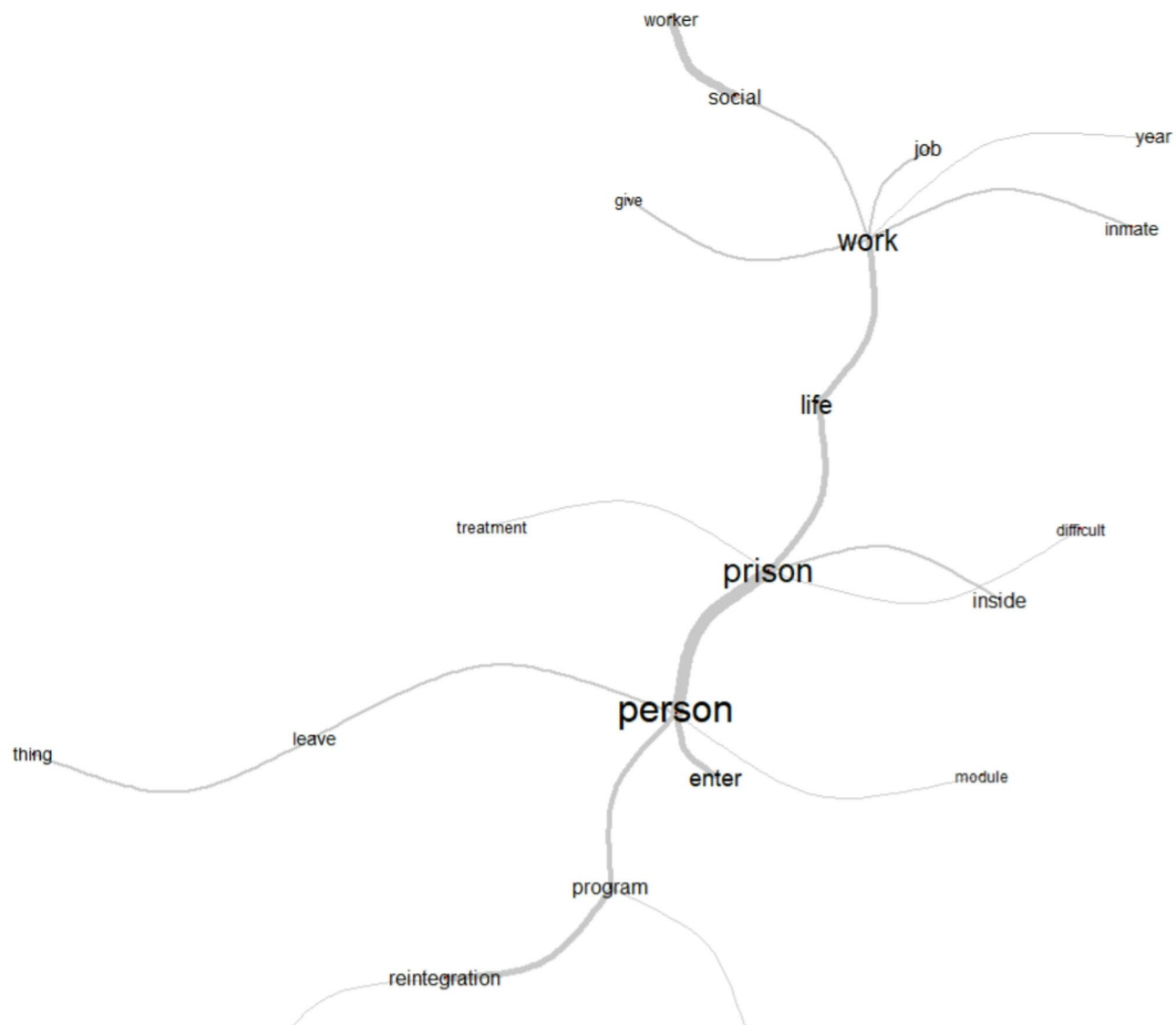
Fig. 1 Similarity analysis. The graph visualizes the co-occurrence of words within text segments. Node proximity and edge thickness indicate the frequency and strength of associations between terms. Central terms such as *person*, *prison*, and *work* reflect core themes in participants' discourse

to conceptualize how themes are organized in the perceptions of individuals.

The graph displays two main factors that account for a significant proportion of the variability in the responses. Factor 1, which explains 33.4% of the variance, appears to be associated with reintegration programs and support services, while Factor 2, which accounts for 25.9% of the variance, seems to be related to psychological and educational support.

In the upper left quadrant, the terms "find," "hard," "job," "prison," and "difficult" are clustered, indicating that finding employment after leaving prison is perceived as a considerable challenge. This grouping suggests that former people deprived of liberty view the process of securing a job as arduous and closely related to the difficulties experienced within the prison.

In the lower left quadrant, terms such as "leave," "improve," "give," and "opportunity" are grouped together. This reflects the perception that it is crucial to provide opportunities and improvements within the system so that people deprived of liberty can exit prison with better prospects. The term "give" is strongly associated with "opportunity," highlighting the need to grant more opportunities to these people to facilitate their transition to life outside prison.

In the upper right quadrant, the words "psychologist," "educator," "social," and "worker" are clustered, indicating the importance of professionals in the reintegration process. This group suggests that the presence and support of psychologists, educators, and social workers are viewed as essential elements for the successful reintegration of former people deprived of liberty.
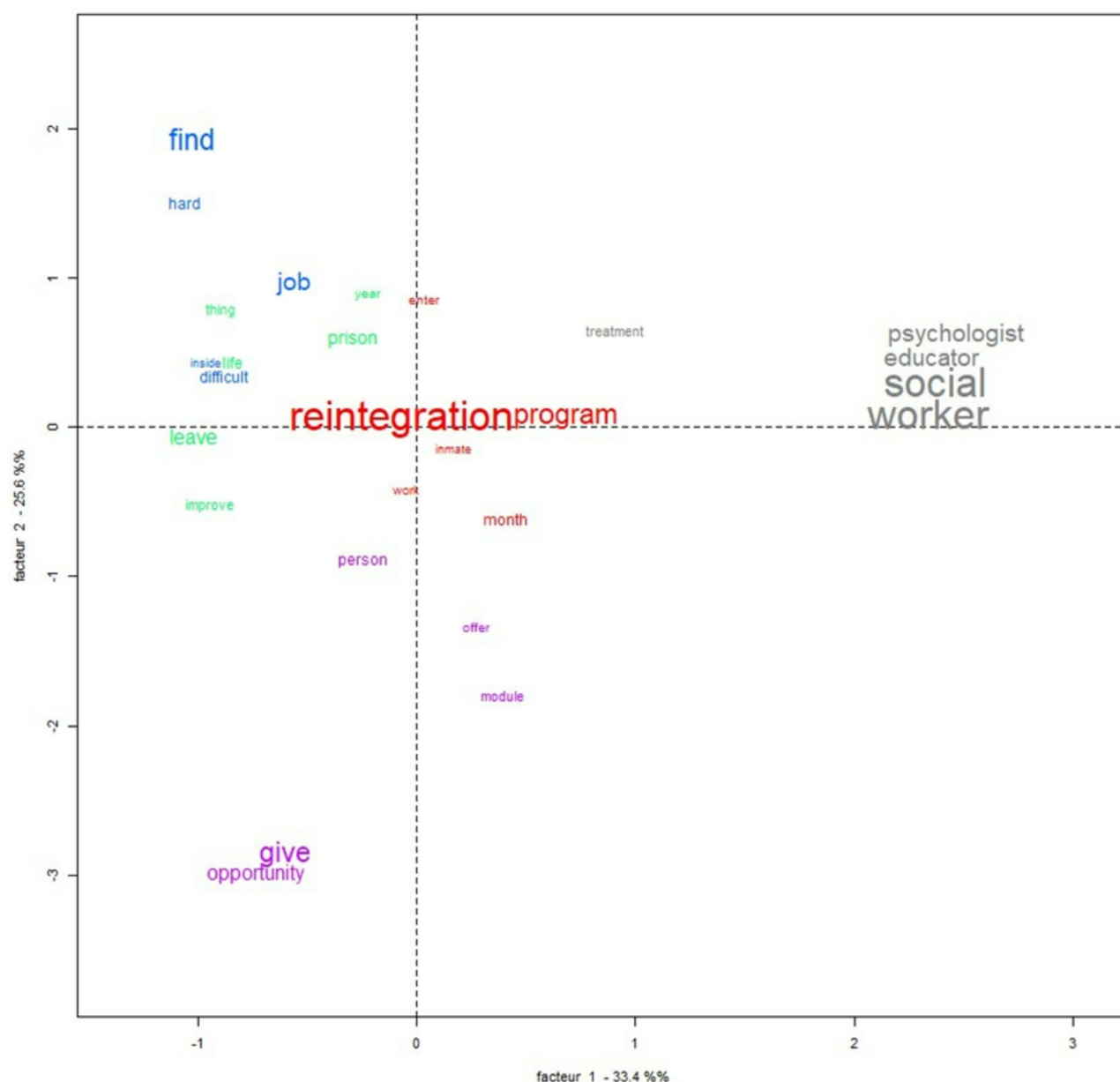
Fig. 2 Factorial analysis. Two principal factors represent thematic dimensions in participants' discourse. Factor 1 (33.4%) relates to reintegration and programmatic support; Factor 2 (25.9%) reflects psychosocial and employment-related aspects. Word proximity indicates co-occurrence frequency and thematic clustering

In the lower right quadrant, terms such as "month," "offer," "module," "pripri," "work," and "person" are clustered around "reintegration" and "program." This indicates that specific programs designed for reintegration are viewed as crucial, and these programs should be offered in a structured and continuous manner. The relationship between "month" and "offer" suggests that reintegration programs need to be available immediately upon release from prison and continue during the critical initial months of reintegration.

The factorial correspondence analysis also shows that the term "reintegration" is centrally positioned, reinforcing its crucial role in discussions about necessary improvements within the prison system. The proximity of "program" to "reintegration" underscores the need for specific and well-designed programs to support this process.

These results indicate that individuals who have been incarcerated perceive finding employment as one of the greatest challenges they face upon release. They also highlight the need for enhanced opportunities and

improvements within the prison system, as well as the importance of professional support from psychologists, educators, and social workers. Additionally, they emphasize the necessity for structured and continuous programs that facilitate reintegration, particularly during the initial months following release.

Hierarchical descending classification

The dendrogram shown in Fig. 3 illustrates the results of the Hierarchical Descending Classification (HDC), This method classifies text segments based on the co-occurrence and distribution of words within the corpus, allowing the identification of homogeneous lexical classes. Each branch of the dendrogram represents a class, i.e., a group of text segments that share similar vocabulary and thematic content.

The numbers in parentheses (e.g., χ^2 = 81.31) correspond to the values of the chi-squared test for the most representative words in each class. The chi-squared statistic indicates the strength of association between specific words and their corresponding class: the higher the chi-squared value, the more strongly the word characterizes that class. Only terms with statistically significant associations ($p < 0.05$) are reported, meaning there is a high probability that their distribution is not random and that they meaningfully define the thematic content of that class.

The Hierarchical Descending Classification analysis of the improvements that should be made within prisons to address life outside them classified 41 out of 53 text segments (77.36%) into six classes (see Fig. 3). Two main dimensions were identified. On one hand, the first dimension, represented by Class 1, encompasses the experiences of incarceration, while the other dimension includes the remaining classes, which pertain to actions that can be taken within the prison.

The first class, labeled "Time spent in prison" (12.2% of the text segments), is characterized by considerations such as: "There should be more focus on reintegration and rehabilitation, with these programs starting from within the prison and addressing emotions, which often lead to drug use due to poor emotional management" (χ^2 = 81.31); "Reintegration should be addressed from within the prison, social exclusion should be tackled from within, and rehabilitation programs should be created from within" (χ^2 = 75.39).

The second class, with a higher percentage than the previous one (17.1%), was designated as "Productive use of free time." Contributions associated with this category include: "There should be more vocational training courses and greater motivation for people inside because they have too much free time and too much time to think" (χ^2 = 59.39); "Treatment in prison is sometimes nonexistent; based on time served, treatment is prioritized for those with longer sentences. Instead of increasing security, more psychologists should be employed" (χ^2 = 56).

The third class was defined as "Opportunity for Change" (17.1%), including statements such as: "Leave with clear goals, knowing what you want in life, and trying not to revert to old habits" (χ^2 = 29.79); "It is very difficult to enter prison as one person and leave as the same person. It is hard to be in a unit with various types of people and not adopt the same behaviors, whether good or bad" (χ^2 = 22.91%).

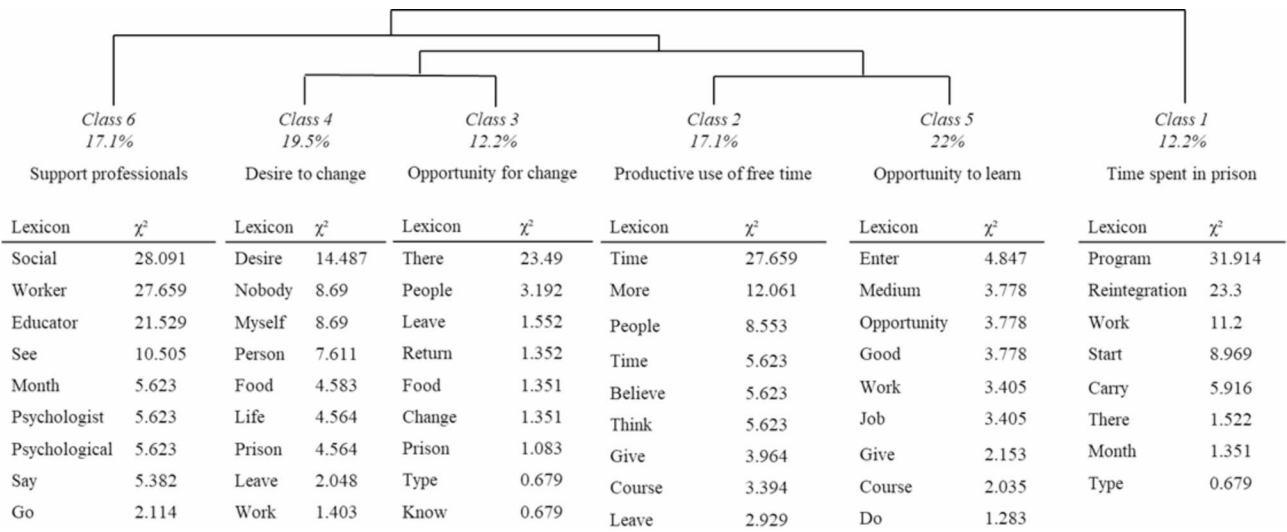| Class 6 17.1% Support professionals		Class 4 19.5% Desire to change		Class 3 12.2% Opportunity for change		Class 2 17.1% Productive use of free time		Class 5 22% Opportunity to learn		Class 1 12.2% Time spent in prison	
Lexicon	χ^2	Lexicon	χ^2	Lexicon	χ^2	Lexicon	χ^2	Lexicon	χ^2	Lexicon	χ^2
Social	28.091	Desire	14.487	There	23.49	Time	27.659	Enter	4.847	Program	31.914
Worker	27.659	Nobody	8.69	People	3.192	More	12.061	Medium	3.778	Reintegration	23.3
Educator	21.529	Myself	8.69	Leave	1.552	People	8.553	Opportunity	3.778	Work	11.2
See	10.505	Person	7.611	Return	1.352	Time	5.623	Good	3.778	Start	8.969
Month	5.623	Food	4.583	Food	1.351	Believe	5.623	Work	3.405	Carry	5.916
Psychologist	5.623	Life	4.564	Change	1.351	Think	5.623	Job	3.405	There	1.522
Psychological	5.623	Prison	4.564	Prison	1.083	Give	3.964	Give	2.153	Month	1.351
Say	5.382	Leave	2.048	Type	0.679	Course	3.394	Course	2.035	Type	0.679
Go	2.114	Work	1.403	Know	0.679	Leave	2.929	Do	1.283		

Fig. 3 Dendrogram of the Hierarchical Descending Classification of Improvements to be Made Within Prisons to Facilitate Better Subsequent Reintegration, Including Words Whose Relationship Criterion with the Class (χ^2) Was Significant ($p < 0.005$). Note: (χ^2) Chi-Square; only those with a significance level $p < 0.05$ are reported. The dendrogram illustrates lexical classes derived from participants' responses. Each branch represents a cluster of text segments sharing thematic vocabulary. The χ^2 values indicate the strength of association between terms and their respective classes ($p < 0.05$)

The fourth class, termed "Desire to Change," is the second largest category by percentage (19.5%) and includes statements such as: "People need to understand that if they enter prison, it is to learn; there are things set up to help them change, depending on the crime committed, so that they can receive assistance to avoid returning" (χ^2 = 26.68); "There are many people in prison; one must understand the reality as there are many types of people, and improving requires understanding the types of people and why they are there" (χ^2 = 26.68).

The fifth representation, which holds the greatest weight in terms of the number of segments (22%), is labeled "Opportunity to Learn". Associated contributions to this representation include: "They should provide real job opportunities and genuine courses, not the fictitious courses they currently offer, which are ineffective" (χ^2 = 11.38); "Everyone inside should be given the opportunity to work because when you're working, your mind stays occupied and you don't overthink. If you don't have a job, no family visiting you, or someone depositing money for you, it's very difficult" (χ^2 = 10.60).

Finally, the sixth and last class of this subcorpus was defined as "Support Professionals" (12.2%), including statements such as: "There are social workers, educators, and psychologists, and I believe they are doing their jobs, but I don't see their impact reflected in the prisoners on the street" (χ^2 = 104.40); "If the purpose of prison is to re-educate and reintegrate, this is not being achieved" (χ^2 = 84.77).

The analyses conducted on this subcorpus highlight the perspectives of former people deprived of liberty regarding the internal conditions of the prison system and their impact on reintegration. Across the similarity analysis, factorial correspondence analysis, and hierarchical descending classification, recurring themes emerged such as the critical role of employment, the value of structured reintegration programs, the necessity of psychological and educational support, and the importance of meaningful vocational activities. Participants consistently emphasized the need for interventions that begin within the prison and continue after release, particularly those involving multidisciplinary professionals. These findings point to a strong consensus on the inadequacy of current prison systems in preparing people deprived of liberty for post-incarceration life and the urgent need for systemic reforms that prioritize social inclusion, skill development, and personal transformation from within the penitentiary setting.

Subcorpus: "needs outside of prison and improvements"
Similarity analysis
The similarity analysis of the second subcorpus, which explores the obstacles faced by individuals upon leaving prison and the services they perceive as deficient or nonexistent for improving their societal integration, provides a detailed view of perceived difficulties and unmet needs. The graphical representation in Fig. 4 illustrates how key terms cluster around central concepts, revealing significant lexical relationships and predominant challenges faced by former people deprived of liberty.

In the figure, "prison" and "person" are central terms, indicating that the discussion focuses on individual experience and the prison context. Several clusters of terms emerge from "prison," reflecting different aspects of the transition from incarceration to society.

The first relevant cluster is located at the top, where the terms "work," "case," "apartment," "live," and "start" are grouped. This suggests that one of the primary perceived obstacles is the search for employment and housing. The connection between "work" and "case" indicates that legal and administrative issues are also significant barriers to securing employment and beginning a new life outside prison.

In the lower left, terms such as "family," "home," "place," and "need" are clustered around "person." This reflects the importance of family support and home stability as critical factors for successful reintegration. The need for a safe place and emotional support from family members is essential for former people deprived of liberty to rebuild their lives.

In the center, near "prison," terms such as "drug," "street," "obstacle," and "life" are clustered together. This grouping highlights the immediate and tangible challenges faced by ex-individuals deprived of liberty, such as the temptation to revert to destructive habits and the difficulty of avoiding the environment that contributed to their incarceration. The presence of "drug" and "street" suggests that substance abuse and the lack of a supportive environment are significant obstacles.

In the lower right quadrant, terms like "time," "return," "tell," "pass," and "month" form another cluster. This indicates that managing time and perceiving progress are significant concerns for these people. Uncertainty about the future and a lack of long-term guidance may hinder successful reintegration.

Finally, on the far right, the terms "social," "worker," "job," and "find" are grouped together, underscoring the need for ongoing professional support. The presence of social workers and appropriate employment programs is seen as essential for helping ex-individuals deprived of liberty find and maintain employment.

This similarity analysis reveals several key obstacles faced by individuals upon leaving prison, including the search for employment and housing, familial support, struggles with substance abuse, and the need for continuous professional support. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of addressing these challenges through comprehensive services that include legal and administrative
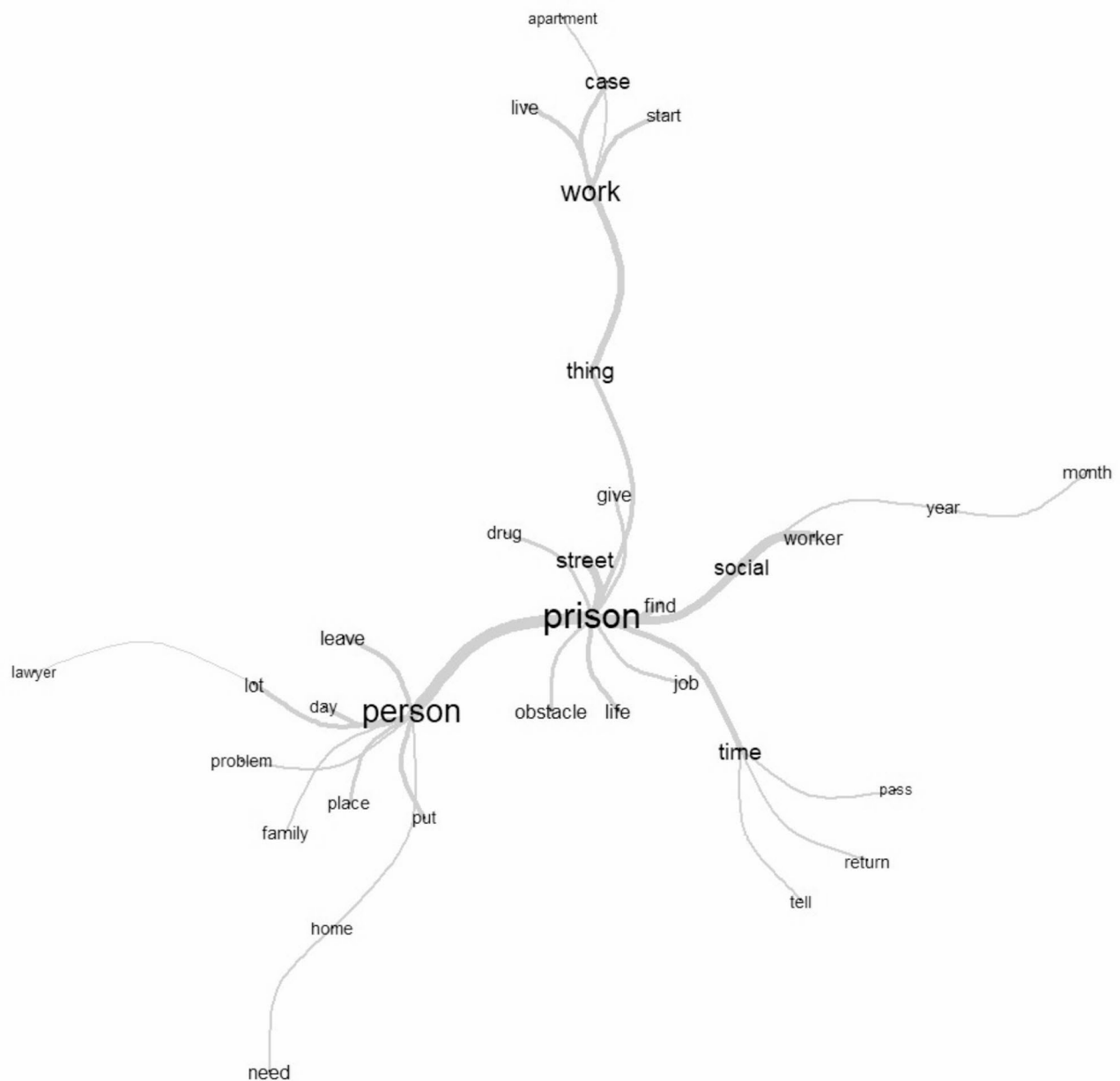
Fig. 4 Similarity analysis. Graphical representation of lexical co-occurrence showing semantic proximity between terms. The size and thickness of connections indicate frequency and strength of associations. Central terms like "prison" and "person" reflect the thematic core of participants' discourse

assistance, employment programs, family and community support, and long-term guidance.

Factorial analysis

The correspondence factorial analysis provides a detailed view of the relationships between key terms and the underlying structure of responses from former individuals deprived of liberty. This technique reduces complex textual data into a visual representation, where patterns of co-occurrence among words are projected onto a two-dimensional space. The graphical output in Fig. 5 allows for the identification of primary dimensions and clusters of terms that characterize the participants' perceptions and needs.

In this analysis, two main factors emerged, which together explain a substantial proportion of the inertia, or total variability, present in the contingency table of word occurrences. Specifically, Factor 1 accounts for 39.24% of the total variance, representing the dimension that primarily organizes terms related to reintegration and employment opportunities. Factor 2 explains 35.96% of the variance, reflecting the dimension that captures themes related to social support and professional assistance.
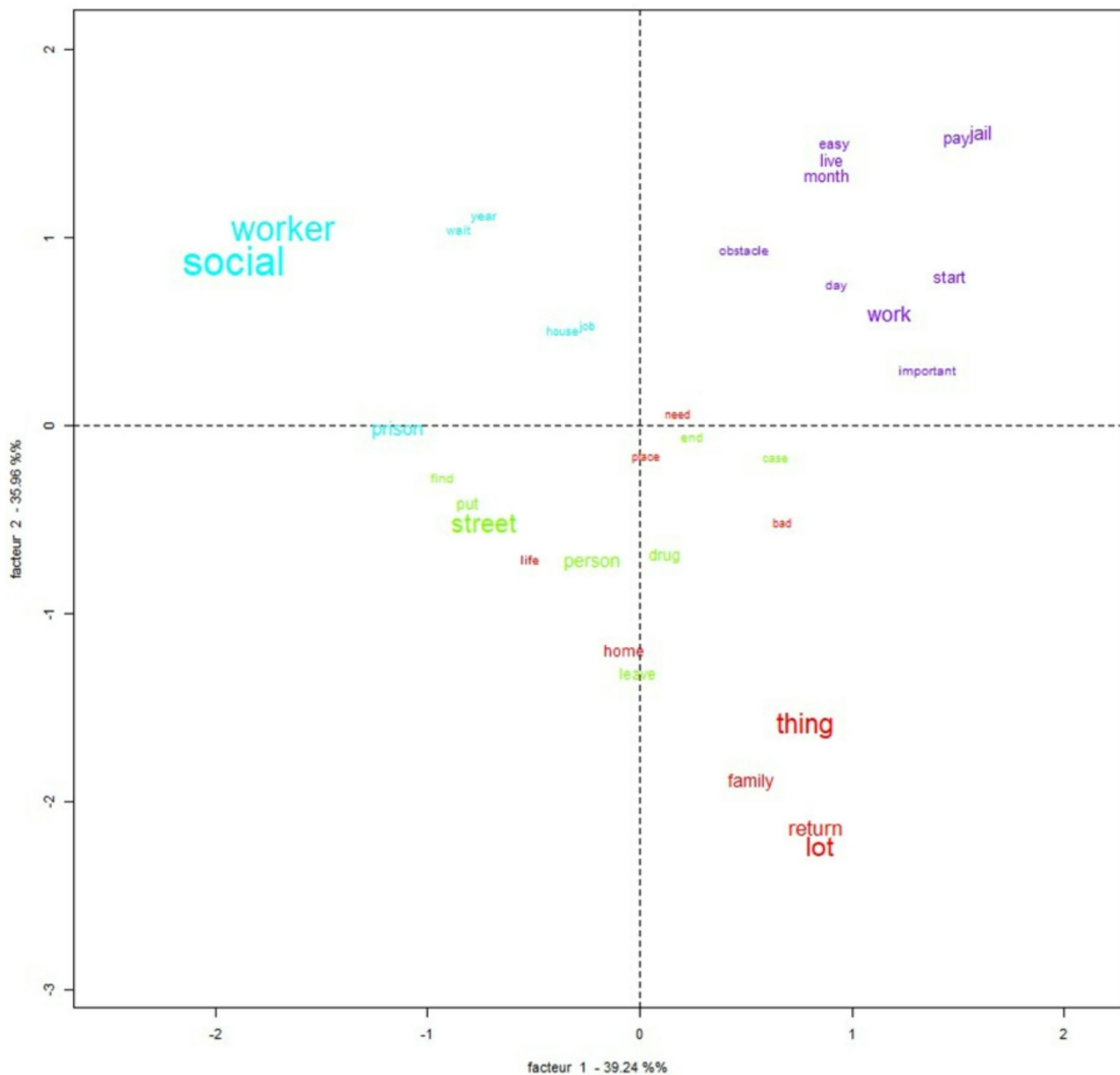
Fig. 5 Factorial analysis. The map shows the distribution of lexical terms across two factors (F1 = 39.24%, F2 = 35.96%). Clusters reflect thematic dimensions such as social support (top left), employment (top right), and emotional or material needs (bottom quadrants)

In the upper right quadrant of the graph, terms such as "work," "start," "day," and "obstacle" are clustered together. This grouping elucidates the challenges faced in readjusting to societal life, daily routines, and the job search.

In the center of the graph, the terms "place" and "need" are closely associated. This reinforces the notion that individuals who have exited prison require not only a physical place to stay but also a sense of belonging. The central positioning of these terms underscores that reintegration and programs designed to facilitate this process are deemed crucial by the participants.

In the upper left quadrant, terms such as "worker," "social," and "house" appear. This clustering suggests that participants emphasize the importance of support professionals in their reintegration process and in the search for housing.

In the lower left quadrant, terms like "street," "person," and "life" are grouped together, indicating that participants perceive themselves as being on the streets, lacking resources, yet still as individuals in need of rebuilding their lives.

In the lower right quadrant, terms such as "thing," "family," "return," "lot," and "bad" are clustered. This
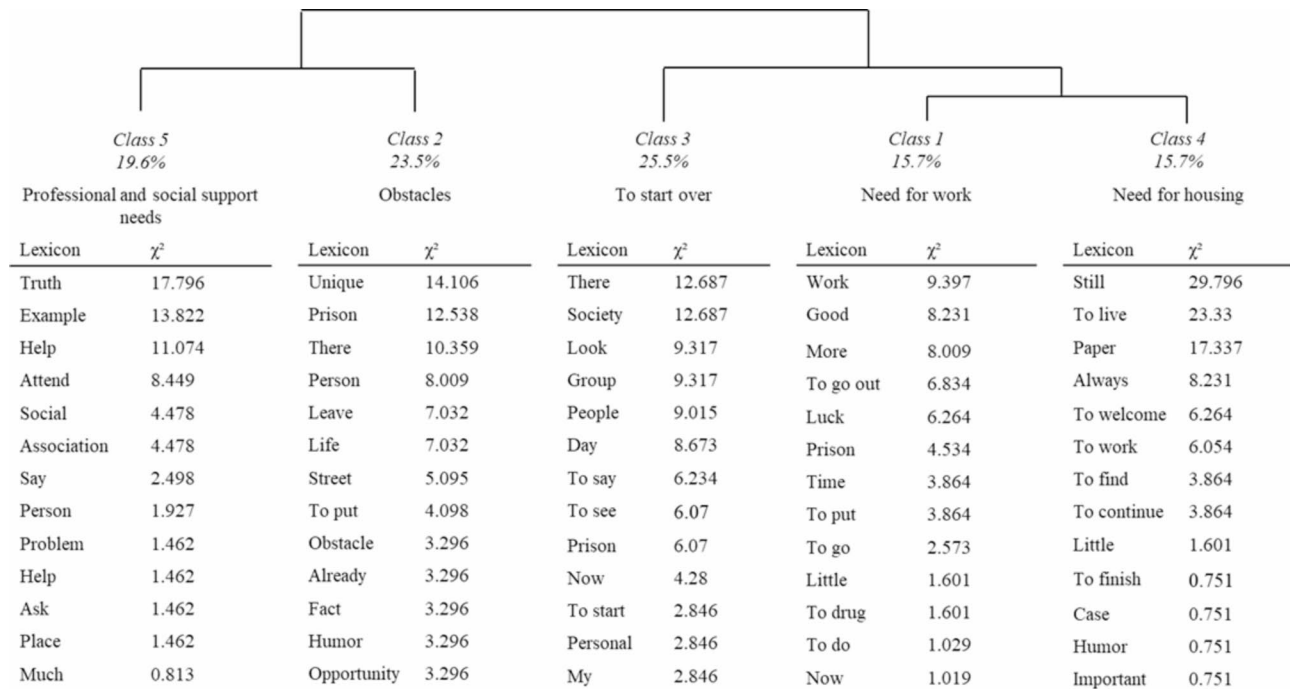
Fig. 6 Dendrogram of the hierarchical descending classification of obstacles, needs, and services to be improved upon leaving prison, including words whose relationship criterion with the class (χ^2) was significant ($p < 0.005$). Note: (χ^2) Chi-Square; only those with significance $p < 0.05$ are reported. The dendrogram identifies five thematic classes based on lexical co-occurrences in participants' narratives, highlighting dimensions such as employment, housing, professional support, reintegration challenges, and lack of follow-up

suggests that participants recognize the need to reconnect with their families, even though this may be perceived as a negative aspect after leaving prison.

The factorial analysis reveals several key dimensions in the perceptions of former people deprived of liberty regarding the obstacles they face and the services they require. Terms related to professional support, employment search, personal improvement, and the provision of structured opportunities are prominent in the responses.

Hierarchical descending classification

The Hierarchical Descending Classification focused on the main obstacles encountered upon leaving prison identified five classes (see Fig. 6) and classified 51 out of 76 segments (67.11%). This classification is divided into two dimensions, like the previous analysis: one dimension encompasses the transition from the security of prison to the uncertainty of the street, while the other dimension addresses the loneliness experienced outside of prison.

The first class was labeled "Need for work" (15.7% of the text segments) and is characterized by considerations such as: "When you leave prison, it's not easy to find a job; I was lucky, but I think they should be more involved" ($\chi^2 = 28.20$); "There should be more job placement programs so that people can find work and, once they achieve stability, they can leave" ($\chi^2 = 19.98$).

The second class, with the second highest percentage (23.5%), was termed "Obstacles" and included statements such as: "There is no follow-up for people who leave prison; they are given no assistance, just placed at the street door and told to fend for themselves. There are people at risk of exclusion who reoffend because they have nothing" ($\chi^2 = 47.13$); "Once you are put out on the street, that's it; once they put you at the door, your life is yours. You find yourself with nothing" ($\chi^2 = 39.09$).

The third representation, which holds the largest proportion of segments (25.5%), was named "To start over" and includes statements such as: "In my case, it was about facing people, socializing, because you come from a place where you are constantly on edge, cautious about what you say and how you are perceived by others. It's challenging because you are used to one thing and then have to readapt to society" ($\chi^2 = 48.09$); "We have had no services after leaving prison, none at all" ($\chi^2 = 47.91$).

The fourth class (15.7%) was designated "Need for Housing." Contributions associated with this representation include: "My concern was always about where I would live and where I would work because, for me, the most important thing is that as long as I am working, everything is fine. If I don't work, I can't pay rent" ($\chi^2 = 54.95$); "What I needed most was to find a home because my situation is a bit different from others. My biggest problem was the paperwork, and I couldn't receive any

assistance, so I needed help to have a place to live" (χ^2 = 44.53).

The fifth and final class was identified as "Professional and Social Support needs" (19.6%), incorporating testimonies such as: "There should be something available where you can go when you have a problem, for example, when you have negative thoughts, a free place where you can talk about what's happening and that person can help you" (χ^2 = 35.94); "I once asked for financial help and received it, but they told me it was the last assistance they would provide. So, it's true that I have received no help on the street, and although I have asked for little, I have never been helped; I was always given excuses" (χ^2 = 31.37).

This subcorpus explores the main difficulties individuals face after leaving prison and the support services they perceive as lacking or insufficient for successful reintegration. Through similarity analysis, factorial correspondence analysis, and hierarchical descending classification, the results show a consistent pattern of unmet needs across structural, emotional, and social dimensions. One of the most prominent issues is the difficulty in accessing employment and housing, which participants describe as essential for achieving stability. The lack of structured job placement programs and legal or administrative support is frequently cited as a barrier to starting over. Emotional needs also emerge strongly, particularly the absence of safe spaces, family support, and guidance during the transition period. Factorial analysis reveals two key thematic dimensions: one related to reintegration through work and stable routines, and another linked to the need for professional support, including social workers and mental health services. The centrality of terms like "place," "need," and "reintegration" underscores the importance of belonging and structured opportunities post-incarceration. Finally, the hierarchical classification identifies five thematic classes: need for employment, general obstacles, psychological adaptation, housing difficulties, and lack of accessible professional help.

Overall, the data highlights the urgency of developing coordinated, person-centered reintegration services that combine material resources with emotional and psychosocial support.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of individuals who have been incarcerated regarding the importance of social education in their reintegration process, as well as the challenges and opportunities they encounter both within and outside the prison system. Reintegration into society after incarceration can be difficult for many individuals, as they face various personal and social challenges [77, 78].

Regarding the internal aspects of the prison system, the results underscore the importance of providing greater educational and employment opportunities, as well as adequate professional support. The penitentiary environment should adopt a socio-educational perspective, evolving into an educational, formative, and cultural space where various socio-educational, labor, and cultural interventions are carried out to facilitate reintegration [79]. Enjuanes and Morata [48] highlight that educational actions in prison should be approached in three main areas: environmental group, which facilitates changes at both individual and collective levels; individual, improving the personal skills of people deprived of liberty; and social, promoting an appropriate transition process to prevent social exclusion.

Regarding socio-educational interventions, there is a limited range of programs and activities (courses, workshops, lectures) that follow a traditional approach. Currently, the training alternatives within prisons are limited and do not meet the demands of the labor market [80]. However, formal education in prison plays a significant role in the lives of people deprived of lliberty, and educational services must be tailored to the specific characteristics of the prison population [81].

From a psychosocial standpoint, the study reveals that incarceration deeply impacts on the emotional well-being of people deprived of liberty, creating challenges such as decreased self-esteem, anxiety, and a sense of social isolation [7, 23]. These findings underscore the need for support mechanisms that address both educational and psychological needs during and after incarceration. However, it is important to move beyond superficial acceptance of intervention-based models. Stevens et al. [27] warn of the risk of interventionitis—an over-reliance on fragmented, short-term programs that often lack coherence and sustainability. Simultaneously, Guiney's notion of pathway dependency [28] cautions against rigid reintegration trajectories that fail to accommodate the diverse and evolving needs of individuals after release. These critiques emphasize the importance of developing holistic and adaptable support systems that are responsive to individual agency while also challenging the structural and institutional barriers that perpetuate marginalization. In this regard, community engagement and public education initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and fostering social reintegration should be embedded within broader systemic reforms.

People deprived of liberty have also emphasized the importance of having employment opportunities within prison, which allows them to utilize their time effectively and keep their minds occupied. As Caro [49] notes, work is essential for penitentiary treatment, aimed at teaching these people the normal conditions of work in freedom, and contributing to their emotional well-being by helping

them avoid negative thoughts and bad company, and by making them feel useful [82]. Penitentiary work is an indispensable tool for the reintegration and reeducation of people deprived of liberty.

One of the most advocated aspects is professional assistance within prison, which is either scarce or non-existent, with limited training provided to professionals. The function of prison, as previously mentioned, and the tasks that professionals must perform within prison, are the reintegration and reeducation of people deprived of liberty [31]. However, security personnel focus on tasks related to control and surveillance, without establishing a personalized relationship with the people deprived of liberty, which generates distrust, decreases self-esteem, and contributes to a loss of identity [83].

It is crucial to initiate reintegration and reeducation within prison, as it is considered a significant opportunity for comprehensive personal growth and development, which can reinforce protective factors for the social integration of people deprived of liberty [80, 84]. However, it is essential to continue this process outside prison, as one of the main obstacles to reintegration is the lack of post-penitentiary assistance. This process requires continuous help and support, not only within the prison but also after release, including economic assistance, job placement, and professional support [31].

Individuals who have been incarcerated experience avoid upon completing their sentences, facing challenges such as lack of employment, housing, and opportunities, in addition to the traumatic experiences of social discrimination [85]. Reintegration and re-education from a professional perspective should be divided into three stages: entry into prison, during the sentence, and during social reintegration after release, allowing people deprived of liberty to receive support and manage their emotions [86]. In these three phases, the role of the Social Educator is crucial; however, it is necessary to understand the situation of social educators both within and outside the prison system.

Within the Spanish penitentiary system, Catalonia is the only autonomous community that formally recognizes the role of social educators within prison institutions. While other regions in Spain acknowledge the presence of educators in the correctional context [31], there remains a pressing need to enhance the specialization and visibility of this professional profile. In Catalonia, social educators assume a broad range of responsibilities that include designing treatment programs and individualized interventions, analyzing people deprived of liberty' personal and social problems, making improvement proposals to the Treatment Board in relation to training and activity plans, and evaluating the objectives and outcomes of treatment programs. They are also actively involved in providing professional guidance and facilitating socio-labor integration for people deprived of liberty [87].

Moreover, the importance of social educators extends beyond the prison setting, especially in the critical phase of reintegration into the community. Their role is fundamental in supporting former people deprived of liberty through rehabilitation processes, assisting with job placement, securing housing when necessary, offering financial assistance, and, above all, ensuring ongoing professional support that fosters social inclusion and prevents recidivism [85]. The penitentiary and post-penitentiary realities present numerous obstacles, and the role of the Social Educator is fundamental throughout this process. It is necessary to extend the specialization of this role across the entire Spanish Penitentiary System so that, alongside other social professionals, improvements in social reintegration can be achieved [85, 87]. Therefore, the penitentiary system should be understood as a system, interacting with other systems and contexts. The relationship between the individual and the penitentiary system, as well as with external social and community systems, is crucial for effectively addressing reintegration. The penitentiary system must evolve to become a space that not only punishes but also educates and prepares people deprived of liberty for a successful reintegration into society.

Limitations and further remarks

Despite the findings obtained, this study presents a series of limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results.

Firstly, the sample size may influence the generalizability of the conclusions. While the qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of individual experiences, the limited number of participants restricts the extrapolation of the results to a broader population. Future studies could expand the sample to include a greater diversity of profiles, thus enabling a more representative analysis.

Secondly, the underrepresentation of women in the sample may have influenced the results. Given that reintegration experiences may vary based on gender, it would be relevant to conduct additional research focusing on the specific challenges faced by women upon their release from prison.

Additionally, the geographical context in which the study was conducted must be considered, as prison policies and reintegration support services vary across regions and countries. Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the framework of the specific reality of the analyzed population, and comparative studies in different sociocultural settings are recommended.

Another potential limitation concerns data collection. Since the interviews were conducted retrospectively,

some participants may have faced challenges in recalling certain experiences, or their narratives may have been shaped by their current circumstances. This temporal distance could introduce bias into the interpretation of their past experiences. However, beyond methodological considerations, the findings themselves require critical reflection. Several participants expressed a sense of abandonment upon release and described fragmented or insufficient support mechanisms. When viewed through the lens of interventionitis [27], these testimonies may reflect systemic shortcomings where reintegration efforts are reduced to isolated, short-term programs lacking coherence and follow-up. Likewise, the presence of rigid reintegration trajectories, as suggested by the concept of pathway dependency [28], may restrict individual agency and limit adaptive responses to diverse reintegration needs. These dynamics suggest that, rather than merely filling service gaps, a more transformative approach is needed—one that challenges the underlying structural conditions and promotes integrated, long-term, person-centered strategies. Future studies could incorporate longitudinal designs to better capture these evolving needs and assess whether current systems truly support sustainable reintegration.

Despite these limitations, we believe this study provides valuable insights into the challenges of social reintegration for former people deprived of liberty, laying the groundwork for future research and the development of more tailored policies and support programs. For instance, future research should expand the sample to include other autonomous communities in Spain and international contexts to better understand the role of Social Education outside of the penitentiary system. Additionally, future studies should explore the experiences of more diverse demographic groups—such as women, youth, or individuals from minority backgrounds—and implement longitudinal designs to track the reintegration process over time. Such approaches would offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of post-incarceration trajectories and the long-term impact of social education interventions.

Conclusions

This study offers relevant insights into the reintegration process of people deprived of liberty, emphasizing the main challenges they face and the forms of support that may facilitate their social adaptation. The findings underscore the critical importance of social, educational, and institutional resources in easing the transition from prison to society. Participants highlighted significant obstacles—including stigma, limited access to employment and housing, and the lack of post-release support services—which point to the need for more individualized and comprehensive reintegration strategies.

Importantly, future interventions should not only reinforce psychosocial and institutional frameworks but also consider the potential of digitally mediated family relationships as a means to counteract social disconnection. Strengthening these digital ties may serve as a complementary tool to foster emotional support and reduce the risk of isolation during the reintegration process.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that policymakers and support agencies should prioritize interventions that address both economic dimensions and the psychosocial needs of formerly incarcerated individuals. Tailored programs—particularly for vulnerable groups such as women or individuals with extended incarceration histories—could contribute to improved reintegration outcomes and a reduction in recidivism.

Although some progress has been made, the role of Social Educators remains insufficiently recognized across the penitentiary system. Yet, these professionals are essential in supporting the reintegration process, both within and beyond prison walls. A coordinated approach is required—one that combines educational and vocational programming during incarceration with sustained professional support after release. This integrated model may prove critical in enabling a more sustainable and effective transition to life outside prison, ultimately fostering both personal recovery and social inclusion.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03068-2.

Supplementary Material 1: S1 Structured Interview Script

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Research Committee of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with reference number CEIH-2024-09.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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