

The Ecological Model of Prisons in Iran with Emphasis on Prisoners' Behavioral Reform (Case Study: Tehran Prisons Organization)

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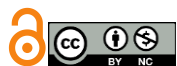
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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to design and analyze a comprehensive ecological model of prisons in Iran with a focus on behavioral reform of inmates, using Tehran Prisons Organization as the case study.

Methods and Materials: This research employed an exploratory mixed-methods design with a qualitative emphasis. The qualitative phase was conducted using a phenomenological approach through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 experts, including senior prison managers and academic faculty with lived experience in the prison system. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data analysis, based on six systematic stages involving open coding, axial coding, and theme development using ATLAS.ti version 9 software. The conceptual framework was refined based on insights from the interviews, literature review, and expert validation, resulting in a three-level thematic model.

Findings: hematic analysis of expert interviews led to the identification of five overarching dimensions and multiple sub-themes influencing inmate behavior reform: prison environment (including physical conditions, social atmosphere, and security), reformative and educational programs (including vocational and academic training, psychological counseling), social and familial support (including reintegration support and family contact), economic and occupational conditions (including employment opportunities and financial aid), and judicial and managerial systems (including legal procedures and decision-making processes). These themes were integrated into a conceptual ecological model that captures the multi-dimensional and systemic factors contributing to rehabilitation and behavioral transformation in prison settings.

Conclusion: The ecological model developed in this study provides a practical and theoretical foundation for understanding and improving inmate behavior reform through systemic and multidimensional strategies. It emphasizes the need for integrated interventions across environmental, educational, psychological, social, and legal domains to foster sustainable reintegration outcomes.

Keywords: *Ecological model, national prisons, behavioral reform, Tehran Prisons Organization*

1 Introduction

Today, prison, as one of the major state institutions, plays a significant role in maintaining social order and enforcing justice. Over time, with the evolution of perspectives and social values, there has arisen a need for a new approach to prison management and the prison ecosystem (Manesh & Malak, 2025). The ecological model can serve as an innovative strategy for prison management, aiming to improve prisoners' conditions, promote behavioral development, and create educational opportunities to support reintegration into society (Robinson & Fernhaber, 2024; Shokrzadeh Madieh & Kamkari, 2024). In the contemporary context, prison management refers to the positive and effective regulation of prisoner behavior toward reform and rehabilitation (Meena, 2024; Pahlewi, 2024). Designing an ecological model for prisons is crucial for enhancing the quality of life for inmates, fostering social skills, and reducing the likelihood of returning to society with maladaptive behaviors.

It must be noted that over 10 million individuals are incarcerated globally, and nearly 30 million are released annually (Fazel et al., 2016). Many are imprisoned for diverse reasons (Moradi et al., 2020). Approximately 225,000 Iranian prisoners are over the age of 18, of whom 3.91 percent are women. Juvenile offenders under 18 are held in correctional and rehabilitation centers (Gharavi et al., 2015). Prisoners are vulnerable to numerous challenges, exacerbated by the restrictions and deprivations inherent in prison settings (Aslani et al., 2016; Foster, 2017; Ghazanfari et al., 2023). They suffer from weak relationships and social rejection due to prison subcultures and isolation from family. Such challenges diminish both individual and social adjustment, as well as mental health and safety. Nonetheless, some inmates are capable and young, and they must be reintegrated into society after release (Aslani et al., 2016; Ghazanfari et al., 2023). Prison itself is a significant potential stressor contributing to the onset or exacerbation of inmates' psychological problems, including reduced psychological well-being (Amani & Betyari, 2023; Farsi, 2024; Fazel et al., 2016; Prakash et al., 2015).

This model is designed to improve inmates' conditions, enhance behaviors and interpersonal communication within the prison, reduce criminal tendencies, and prevent return to society with maladaptive behaviors. By creating educational and rehabilitative opportunities, fostering the development of social skills, and ensuring the preservation of human

rights, this model positively impacts inmates' lives during incarceration. Promoting constructive communication and establishing a collaborative and participatory environment inside the prison enhances not only prisoner-to-prisoner and prisoner-to-staff relationships but also leads to transformation in behaviors and attitudes (Aslani et al., 2016; Gharavi et al., 2015).

Research in this area plays a vital role in advancing theoretical frameworks in prison management and social criminology. These models not only contribute to the development of new managerial concepts but also update theories regarding society and human behavior. With an emphasis on enhancing precision and comprehensiveness in theorization and establishing integrated mechanisms, the ecological model of prisoner behavior plays a prominent role in advancing scientific knowledge in this domain and offers a novel path for comprehensive and effective prison management (Foster, 2017; Ghazanfari et al., 2023; Prakash et al., 2015).

Upon entering prison, an inmate enters a new environment compared to the past—losing some rights while gaining others. Respect for these rights, particularly behavioral rights at the initial point of incarceration, is crucial for helping inmates adapt to the new environment. However, disrespect or neglect of these rights by prison authorities or insufficient awareness of them may lead to high-risk behaviors. The right to peace, the right to guidance, the right to communicate with family, the right to expedited release, and the right to file complaints are among the rights that safeguard inmates' physical and mental health and must be respected throughout the legal process and the serving of sentences to prevent the escalation of risky behaviors and potential harm (Manesh & Malak, 2025). Improving prison conditions enhances both the physical and mental space for inmates. This leads to reduced tensions, improved psychological well-being, and the creation of an environment conducive to rehabilitation and education. It also helps reduce the costs of incarceration. Promoting constructive behavior and participation in educational programs decreases the likelihood of returning to society with maladaptive behaviors, subsequently reducing the costs associated with recidivism.

The prison ecological model operates as a preventive strategy for behavioral reform, helping reduce criminal behavior through educational and rehabilitative opportunities, transforming inmates into responsible and contributing members of society.

Given the role of prisons and prisoners in society and family systems, understanding the prison ecosystem holds particular importance. Today, the establishment and development of the prison ecosystem have become central concerns for the Tehran Prisons Organization, considered a fundamental contextual factor in inmate behavioral reform. This study aims to examine and analyze the ecological model of Iran's prisons to facilitate behavioral reform among inmates under the Tehran Prisons Organization. The core research problem is how this organization shapes its ecological model and what factors influence this ecosystem. There are still many ambiguities surrounding the prison ecosystem model. For instance, the dynamic approaches to prisoner behavior management, the psychological and social impacts on inmates' behaviors, and the role of various organizational components in forming the ecological model are all aspects that may be investigated. The variables examined in this research include several organizational and individual factors that influence the ecological model of prisons. These may include organizational elements (such as structural configuration, policies, and managerial strategies) and individual elements (such as inmate behaviors and characteristics).

The primary objective of this research is to identify the ecological model of Iran's prisons with the aim of reforming inmate behavior under the Tehran Prisons Organization. By analyzing and examining various factors, this study endeavors to identify the underlying patterns and requirements of this ecosystem. This research enables a better understanding and enhancement of the prison ecosystem to promote inmate behavioral reform in Tehran's prison system.

The motivation for selecting this topic may vary from the researcher's perspective. As a social study, this research may contribute to improving the conditions of inmates and the behavioral ecosystem within prisons. Inmates represent one of the most vulnerable segments of society, and a better understanding of their ecological models can help enhance prison conditions and broader societal dynamics. The concern also arises regarding how the behavioral ecosystem influences inmates' psychological well-being. This topic can lead to a deeper understanding of the mental health needs and psychological challenges faced by prisoners.

Conducting this research creates an opportunity to offer specific solutions and improvements for the prison ecological model to support inmate behavioral reform. These proposals may serve as guidance for reform initiatives and structural changes within the Tehran Prisons Organization.

In light of the above, prison management in the contemporary era represents a critical challenge in both social and managerial domains. Changing perceptions and approaches toward incarceration and prisoner rehabilitation necessitates the introduction of innovative models and strategies within the behavioral ecosystem. The behavioral ecosystem, as a comprehensive, goal-oriented, and effective system, seeks to improve inmate conditions, develop their skills, and reduce the risk of recidivism. The aim of this model is to bring about constructive changes in behaviors and communication within the prison, with a focus on improving inmates' quality of life and safeguarding their human rights.

Within this framework, this study delves into the depths of the ecological model of prisoner behavior and presents an analysis of its strengths and challenges as an innovative managerial strategy for improving the prison system.

2 Methods and Materials

The research method is one of the most essential scientific foundations that contributes to the production of new scientific knowledge and, in fact, serves as a link between the theoretical framework and data analysis. In other words, research methodology represents the integration of the researcher's subjective and objective approaches to achieve the outcomes of the study.

In general, research methods can be classified based on two criteria: (a) the purpose of the research and (b) the method of data collection. Accordingly, since the present study aims to develop a model related to the ecological system of the country's prisons to reform prisoners' behavior within the Tehran Prisons Organization, the research is categorized as "applied-developmental" in terms of its objective. In terms of data collection, the research is "descriptive-analytical," and in terms of methodology, it adopts an "exploratory mixed-methods" design. The exploratory mixed-method design is a type of scientific research used to provide a model for representing the phenomenon under study. This study applies a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods commonly used in behavioral sciences. Mixed-methods research is an approach in which the researcher combines elements of both quantitative and qualitative strategies to reveal the underlying aspects of the research and to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena.

Qualitative research refers to any type of research that yields findings not obtained through quantitative methods.

Some data may be quantitatively presented, but their analysis is conducted qualitatively. This research method often utilizes both inductive and deductive explanations. Qualitative research typically refers to techniques used to obtain subjective data. In essence, qualitative research leans toward understanding the natural world and is inherently interpretative. In this part, the research progresses from a holistic existence to detailed components. Its aim is not to emphasize causal relationships through the falsification of null hypotheses but rather to identify multifaceted interpretations of human experience and recurring patterns within social and cultural systems.

The qualitative phase of this study uses an exploratory method. In this approach, the researcher initially collects qualitative data, which are subsequently analyzed using quantitative methods. The qualitative part of this research is phenomenological. Phenomenology, linguistically, refers to the study and description of phenomena in terms of how they appear before any value judgment, interpretation, or evaluation. From another perspective, if phenomenology is seen as semantics, the meanings that emerge in human life form a semantic system. This system is shaped by incorporating existence into time and place, and its identification also arises through this path — that is, knowledge shaped by the lived experience. This type of research belongs to the category of qualitative methods where the researcher seeks to explore the lived experiences of participants in relation to the variables under study.

Given the research topic — "The Ecological Model of Prisons in Iran for the Purpose of Prisoners' Behavioral Reform" — the statistical population and sample for qualitative interviews consist of university faculty members and senior managers, aligning with the phenomenological approach based on lived experiences.

The research population consists of experts, i.e., practitioners and specialists including university faculty members and senior managers of the Tehran Prisons Organization with full familiarity with prison populations. The participants were selected from active professionals within the Tehran Prisons Organization who possess extensive knowledge of inmates. The key criterion for selecting experts was their experience with the deep lived experience of prisoners and a profound understanding of the prison environment. The present study included 12 participants, selected using purposive (theoretical) and snowball sampling methods. In theoretical sampling, the researcher selects samples concurrently with research progress, conceptual categorization, and the formation of

theoretical categories (Jalali, 2016). Data collection continued until theoretical saturation, meaning no new significant data could be obtained, and sampling was continued until this point, after which the required data were gathered.

The number of interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The selection and sampling method in the qualitative section was snowball sampling, and based on the aforementioned criteria, participants were chosen. The sample size in the qualitative phase was determined by the level of data saturation, meaning the researcher continued interviews until no new insights were being generated and existing data became repetitive — indicating sufficient understanding of the concept, its components, and its implementation.

Criteria for sample selection included the following conditions:

- Possessing knowledge of ecological and behavioral domains
- Work experience within the Tehran Prisons Organization and familiarity with inmate behavior
- Interest in conducting scientific research

In this study, interviews were used as the data collection method for the qualitative section. Types of interviews in qualitative research include structured, semi-structured, and unstructured formats, which serve as the main tools for data collection. Interviews, whether conducted in person or remotely, are used to gather data from individuals or groups. It is essential that the interview questions are pre-designed and predetermined. What classifies interviews into different types is the level of flexibility and the manner of execution. Interviews are considered one of the most effective methods of obtaining responses because the interviewer can prompt the respondent and clarify ambiguities through further explanation.

It is essential that interview questions are predetermined. The classification of interviews is based on their level of flexibility and execution method. Interviews are deemed a powerful data collection technique because they allow for probing responses and clarifying ambiguities in real-time.

Generally, when greater attention is directed toward personal attributes, quantitative analysis methods may not be applicable. In qualitative analysis, the data collected are primarily qualitative, although some may include empirical quantitative data, which should be analyzed within a qualitative logic framework.

In the qualitative phase, following the transcription of the discussions, the process included: open coding (line-by-line

reading of the data, extraction of main concepts and statements, formation of initial categories), axial coding (categorizing data, identifying subcategories, forming final categories). After this stage, no selective coding was performed.

In qualitative research, the researcher can analyze data using deductive and inductive reasoning, analogy and metaphor, sign interpretation, abstraction, contrast and differentiation, comparison, etc., all of which are grounded in rational thought and logic. In this study, the qualitative analysis method employed is *thematic analysis*.

Thematic analysis is a method within qualitative research that focuses on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) in qualitative data. A theme is the key unit of analysis in this method and refers to specific meanings derived from words, sentences, or paragraphs. Themes do not occupy a fixed space — a sentence may contain multiple themes, and multiple paragraphs may be unified under a single theme.

Thematic analysis is a recursive process, involving movement back and forth between stages. Additionally, it is a temporal process conducted over time.

Stage 1 – Familiarization with the data:

To grasp the depth and breadth of the content, the researcher must immerse themselves in the data. This immersion typically involves repeated readings of the data and actively reading to identify meanings and patterns. In the present study, the researcher read through all interview transcripts before initiating the coding process. At this stage, note-taking and highlighting meanings that would be used in later stages also began.

Stage 2 – Generating initial codes:

This stage begins once the researcher is familiar with the data. It involves generating initial codes from the data. Codes are features of the data that the researcher finds interesting. Coded data differ from themes, which are broader units of meaning.

Miles and Huberman (1994) regarded coding as the raw material for analysis. This step is fundamental for organizing information into meaningful categories. It involves segmenting sentences or paragraphs and assigning labels to them. Essentially, coding simplifies and reduces data, clustering them into more general categories.

Boyatzis (1998) proposed three approaches to code development: theory-driven (based on specific theories and hypotheses), prior research-driven (utilizing prior knowledge), and inductive (derived directly from collected

data). In stage two, each line is assigned a code developed through one of these three methods.

Coding can be done manually or using software programs. Manual coding may involve annotating texts or color-coding using pencils. Codes can be assigned and then matched with data summaries that represent them. It is crucial that all summarized data are coded and organized within each respective code.

Stage 3 – Searching for themes:

This stage involves grouping different codes into potential themes and organizing all summarized, coded data accordingly. At this point, the researcher begins analyzing how different codes can be combined into overarching themes. Some initial codes may form main themes, others may form subthemes, and some may be discarded. For codes that do not fit elsewhere, a “miscellaneous” theme may be created. In this study, following initial coding, different codes were grouped into primary themes.

Stage 4 – Reviewing themes:

This stage begins when the researcher has generated a set of themes and starts reviewing them. It involves two sub-stages: first, reviewing coded data extracts; second, considering the validity of themes in relation to the entire data set. If the thematic map works well, the researcher proceeds to the next stage. If not, they return to recoding until a satisfactory thematic map is developed. By the end of this stage, the researcher must clearly understand the different themes, how they interrelate, and what story they tell about the data.

Stage 5 – Defining and naming themes:

This stage begins once a satisfactory thematic map has been established. The researcher defines and refines the themes for analysis and identifies the data that fall within each theme. By defining and refining, the researcher determines the essence of what each theme represents and what aspect of the data it captures.

Stage 6 – Producing the report:

This final stage begins when the researcher has fully refined themes. It involves the final analysis and the writing of the research report.

It is noteworthy that in this stage of the study, ATLAS.ti version 9 qualitative software was used to optimize the research process.

3 Findings and Results

The researcher analyzed the collected data using a qualitative research approach, tested the research questions,

and ultimately derived conclusions. Data analysis is a multi-stage process that involves summarizing, coding, and categorizing data. This process creates the foundation for various types of analyses and interrelations among the data to evaluate research objectives. Additionally, at this stage, data are refined both conceptually and empirically, and diverse analytical techniques play a significant role in inferences and generalizations. Data analysis is considered a core component of research methodology and a fundamental pillar of any scientific study. It ensures that all necessary activities of the study are directed and controlled toward achieving a conclusive result. In this phase, the researcher applies various analytical techniques to address the formulated problem and make decisions regarding the intended research objectives. After importing the transcribed interviews, the researcher read through the texts and, based on coding principles, assigned a code to each quotation in the software in accordance with the research aim and existing literature. Naturally, similar concepts were assigned identical codes. Following the coding process, the result led to the extraction of a model identifying the factors influencing media consumption.

The qualitative analysis method in this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis follows a six-stage process, which is implemented in this chapter. These six stages are described below.

Interview Planning

Based on the conceptual model held by the researcher and to collect expert opinions on influencing factors, interview requests were sent to 20 specialists to invite their participation in this research. Ultimately, 16 individuals accepted the research group's invitation and participated in the interview sessions. Before the sessions, the interview protocol was developed, and questions along with necessary explanations were sent to the participants in advance to ensure their preparedness. During the interviews, a recording device was used to document the content. It is noteworthy that the interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation occurred by the 13th expert interview, but for further assurance, interviews continued with three additional experts, reaching a total of 16 participants.

Expert Profile Information

Regarding demographic data, it should be noted that a total of ---- individuals participated in this study. In other words, saturation was reached with the ----th expert, and to confirm this, interviews continued with ---- additional experts. The average age of participants was --- years. The

average work experience of experts in the industry was --- years. The highest academic qualification among participants was a doctoral degree. The total duration of expert interviews was ---- hours, and the average interview time was 20 minutes.

Following the initial review of the texts and the identification of topic-relevant statements, a preliminary list of ideas and noteworthy points was created. Initial codes were then assigned to these segments. The coding framework used had well-defined and explicit boundaries.

At this stage, the interview texts were carefully examined, and as shown below, initial coding was carried out. The portions of the interview texts relevant to the study topic were identified and assigned appropriate codes.

Familiarization with the Text

At this stage, the researcher used expert interviews and the literature review as the main data sources for analyzing and gathering information. After reviewing all the interviews and the collected literature, it became evident that a combination of both sources should be considered. Since thematic analysis requires repeated review of data, the entire dataset was read multiple times prior to coding. During this process, several patterns and ideas were identified.

Given that the interviews were recorded, the researcher listened to each recording once and then transcribed the content into a Word document. In the second round, the transcribed interview was reviewed by the expert. In the third round, the researcher edited all transcribed interview texts. In the fourth round, the edited texts were reread.

After completing the various stages of interview analysis, the transcribed texts and recorded audio files were meticulously examined. The main goal of this stage was to thoroughly review all details and information in the interviews so that no recorded element was overlooked. Once the accuracy and quality of the interview content were verified, the refinement process began. This included correcting potential grammatical errors, ensuring logical sentence structure, and enhancing vocabulary diversity and richness. The goal of refinement was to create a coherent, comprehensible, and analysis-ready text. This process allowed the researcher to gain a broader perspective for continuing the thematic analysis. At this point, the researcher had become thoroughly familiar with the interviews.

Searching and Identifying Themes

In the table, the data were coded, leading to a list of distinct codes. To analyze the data, the initial codes were examined and combined to form coherent concepts. Through repeated review and further refinement, the categories were

made sufficiently specific, non-redundant, and broad enough in scope. After merging and removing duplicate or similar indicators, the primary impactful themes were constructed.

The table below, derived from software output, shows the codes from the initial coding phase and their frequency.

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Quotation Content	Codes
In conclusion, I must say that the mental health of prisoners should be our central focus, and therapeutic and counseling programs must be seriously pursued. I hope our efforts in this regard will contribute to the improvement of inmates' psychological conditions.	Therapeutic programs for psychological disorders, psychological and social counseling, individual and group counseling
Educational and therapeutic programs should be comprehensively designed. These programs must adequately address various prisoner needs and help reform their behavior. For example, skills training and vocational courses can support the development of positive behaviors in the future.	Reformative and educational programs
Considering the importance of employment and economic activities in prisons, there are various opportunities for work that can positively impact prisoners' rehabilitation. These include production, service, and educational activities that enable inmates to acquire new skills and utilize their time productively.	Employment opportunities inside prison
Attention to inmates' mental health is of great importance. Counseling and mental health programs can help prevent more serious issues and improve psychological conditions. Cooperation between prisons and social organizations can enhance inmates' quality of life and improve prison conditions.	Therapeutic programs for psychological disorders, psychological and social counseling
One of the important items is continuous monitoring and evaluation of prison conditions, which prevents the emergence of new problems and contributes to the ongoing improvement of the prison environment.	Security and monitoring, monitoring prisoners' behavior and preventing security issues
To reform inmate behavior, there is a need for consistent and organized programs that improve the physical and social environment of prisons. Enhancing positive interactions among inmates and establishing group programs can reduce issues and foster a better social atmosphere.	Security and monitoring, group activity programs, interactions between staff and inmates, physical conditions, social atmosphere and inmate relationships
The mental health of prisoners must be prioritized. Inmates face many psychological and emotional challenges that require effective supportive and therapeutic programs. Development and implementation of these counseling and therapy programs should be tailored to individual needs to prevent more severe psychological issues.	Therapeutic programs for psychological disorders, psychological and social counseling
The mental health of prisoners must be prioritized. Inmates face many psychological and emotional challenges that require effective supportive and therapeutic programs. Development and implementation of these counseling and therapy programs should be tailored to individual needs to prevent more severe psychological issues.	Therapeutic programs for psychological disorders, psychological and social counseling
Vocational training in prison should enable inmates to acquire practical skills that improve their chances of employment post-release.	Vocational training, skills and professional courses, employment opportunities inside prison
As a result, work opportunities within prison not only improve prison conditions and reduce related problems, but also help inmates acquire new skills and increase their knowledge, making them more hopeful and prepared for life after release.	Employment opportunities inside prison
Educational and vocational programs must help inmates reintegrate with society after release and benefit from their learned skills. Continuous assessment of prison education programs improves their quality and effectiveness. Collaboration with professional and educational institutions outside prison can enhance training quality and better prepare inmates.	Academic education, vocational training, reformative and educational programs, skills and professional courses, employment opportunities inside prison
Development and improvement of educational programs must be ongoing and tailored to inmates' needs to maximize effectiveness. Designing programs to match individual needs can improve quality and post-release success. Yes, social and familial support plays a crucial role in improving prisoners' conditions and easing rehabilitation. Contact with family is a vital part of this support. Visits and phone calls allow inmates to stay connected and feel less isolated. Such connections maintain morale and strengthen inmates' motivation for reintegration. Many prisons have special programs to facilitate visits and phone calls, including scheduled times, suitable environments for calls, and even video communication technologies, all aimed at enabling continuous family contact, thereby reducing psychological and emotional stress.	Reformative and educational programs
Yes, social and familial support plays a crucial role in improving prisoners' conditions and easing rehabilitation. Contact with family is a vital part of this support. Visits and phone calls allow inmates to stay connected and feel less isolated. Such connections maintain morale and strengthen inmates' motivation for reintegration.	Family contact, social and familial support, visits and phone calls
Many prisons have special programs to facilitate visits and phone calls, including scheduled times, suitable environments for calls, and even video communication technologies. The goal is to ensure inmates maintain regular contact with their families, which helps reduce psychological and emotional stress.	Family contact, family relationship restoration programs, visits and phone calls

Programs supporting prisoners' families are also essential. These include family counseling, support groups, and training for families to cope with the challenges of having an incarcerated family member. Family relationship restoration programs can improve inmate-family relationships and establish a stronger foundation for healthy post-release interactions.

In my opinion, social and economic support plays a key role in improving prisoners' conditions and facilitating their rehabilitation. One essential aspect is financial and economic aid, which may cover inmates' basic needs like food, clothing, and necessities. Such aid may also extend to their families, reducing the financial burden of incarceration.

Social services and counseling are also part of this support, helping inmates with rehabilitation through individual and group counseling. These services aid inmates in overcoming psychological and emotional challenges and learning new life skills. Social services also provide guidance to access public resources and services like education and employment, aiding reintegration. In my view, our work does not end within the prison walls — post-release support programs are critical. These may include ongoing counseling, financial assistance to start a new life, and social services to support successful reintegration. Offering educational and job opportunities post-release helps inmates achieve financial and social independence and reduces recidivism.

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Attention to inmates' psychological and emotional needs must be continuous and aligned with other reformatory programs to improve their behavior. Creating a supportive and encouraging prison environment helps reduce mental and behavioral issues and provides a better living space for inmates.

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Rehabilitation programs must be designed to enable inmates to reintegrate with society and access available opportunities. Cooperation with supportive and social organizations can improve the mental condition of inmates and their families and reduce stress. Addressing inmates' individual needs in psychological and social programs can improve their behavior and conditions and produce more positive outcomes.

Vocational rehabilitation programs are critical in helping prisoners return to society and succeed post-release. These programs allow inmates to acquire new skills and become job-market ready. One core element of these programs is professional training, which may include specialized courses in fields such as IT, handicrafts, and equipment maintenance. These trainings aim to provide inmates with practical and technical skills essential for securing suitable employment and succeeding in the job market.

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One core element of vocational rehabilitation programs is professional training. These may include specialized courses in IT, handicrafts, and equipment maintenance. The goal is to familiarize inmates with practical and technical skills necessary for finding suitable jobs and succeeding in them.

Prison management and supervision should simultaneously ensure security and inmate welfare. Effective oversight can prevent potential problems and tensions. To improve prisoner behavior, special attention must be paid to their mental and social health. Creating a secure and supportive environment can help reduce behavioral issues. Rehabilitation programs must include accurate assessments and individual counseling to identify and address each inmate's specific needs and problems. Building a positive social environment in prison through group programs and joint activities can improve inmate relationships and reduce tensions.

I believe that social and economic support for prisoners and their families plays a key role in improving inmate behavior and reducing recidivism.

Continuous evaluation of legal and management systems in prisons can help identify problems and necessary improvements.

Ensuring prisoners' rights and creating a fair environment in prison can reduce tensions and improve inmate behavior.

Legal procedures must be designed to properly uphold prisoners' rights and prevent injustices.

Legal support must include counseling and advocacy for inmates at all legal stages to ensure their rights are fully protected.

Transparency in managerial and legal decision-making in prisons helps reduce problems and tensions and improve prisoner behavior.

Family contact, family relationship restoration programs, support programs for prisoners' families

Social and economic assistance, financial aid and economic support

Social services and counseling, social and economic assistance

Post-release support programs for prisoners, social and economic assistance, financial aid and economic support

Therapeutic programs for psychological disorders, psychological and social counseling

Therapeutic programs for psychological disorders, psychological and social counseling

Rehabilitation programs, reintegration programs, post-release psychological and social support

Rehabilitation programs, vocational rehabilitation programs

Academic education, vocational training, reformatory and educational programs, rehabilitation programs, vocational rehabilitation programs

Security and monitoring, monitoring prisoners' behavior and preventing security issues

Social and economic assistance, financial aid and economic support

Planning and performance evaluation in prisons, managerial decision-making, appeals and review processes

Prisoners' legal rights and access to justice, legal and judicial procedures

Prisoners' legal rights and access to justice, legal and judicial procedures

Prisoners' legal rights and access to justice, prisoners' legal rights and responsibilities, judicial procedures

Managerial decision-making

After completing the refinement process, the initial interview codes were extracted from the finalized text and organized into a table corresponding to various themes.

These codes serve as semantic and thematic indicators in the interview analysis and facilitate subsequent stages of data interpretation.

In the first stage of coding, considered an intermediate step, a total of 171 codes were generated. During this stage, some codes that were less relevant to the research topic were removed, others were merged or rearranged, and several were revised and renamed based on consultation with the

academic advisor and subject matter experts. After this review, adjustment, and consultation, the initial codes were refined into the final codes for this study.

Below is a three-level thematic categorization table organized according to the classifications you provided:

Table 2

Three-Level Thematic Categorization

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Prison Environment	Physical Conditions	Hygiene and cleanliness Dormitory quality and sanitary facilities Public and private spaces
	Security and Monitoring	Protective and security measures Monitoring inmate behavior and preventing security issues Staff-inmate interactions
	Social Environment and Inmate Relationships	Social groups and group structures Tensions and interactions among inmates
Reformative and Educational Programs	Vocational Training	Group activity programs Skills and professional training courses
		Work opportunities within prison Links to the job market and transferable skills
	Academic Education	Educational and academic courses (schooling, diploma, higher education) Literacy and basic skills improvement programs
	Psychological and Social Counseling	Educational counseling and guidance Individual and group counseling Treatment programs for psychological disorders
Social and Familial Support	Family Contact	Family and social counseling Visits and phone calls Support programs for inmates' families
	Rehabilitation Programs	Family relationship restoration programs Reintegration programs Psychological and social support post-release
	Socioeconomic Assistance	Vocational rehabilitation programs Financial and economic support Social services and counseling
Economic and Employment Conditions	Job Opportunities in Prison	Post-release support programs for inmates Jobs and economic activities inside prison
		Wages and working conditions Impact of employment on inmate behavior
	Financial Support	Financial assistance for inmates' families Post-release financial aid for inmates Financial planning for rehabilitation
	Post-Release Programs	Job and educational opportunities after release Post-release support and counseling programs Support for reintegration of released inmates
Judicial and Managerial System	Judicial Procedures	Legal and trial processes Handling of violations and offenses Legal rights and responsibilities of inmates
	Managerial Decision-Making	Managerial decisions and activity oversight Planning and performance evaluation in prisons Coordination with other institutions and organizations
	Legal and Procedural Processes	Appeals and review procedures Legal rights of inmates and access to justice Legal support and counseling

Mapping the Theme Network

The fourth step begins when the researcher proposes a set of themes and aims to refine them. The identified themes become the primary source for constructing thematic networks. During this phase, it is determined that some of the proposed themes are not valid themes in themselves.

This stage began when a collection of indicators was identified and refined. The identified themes served as the primary foundation for the construction of the conceptual model. During this process, the indicators were further refined, and in some cases, merged or split.

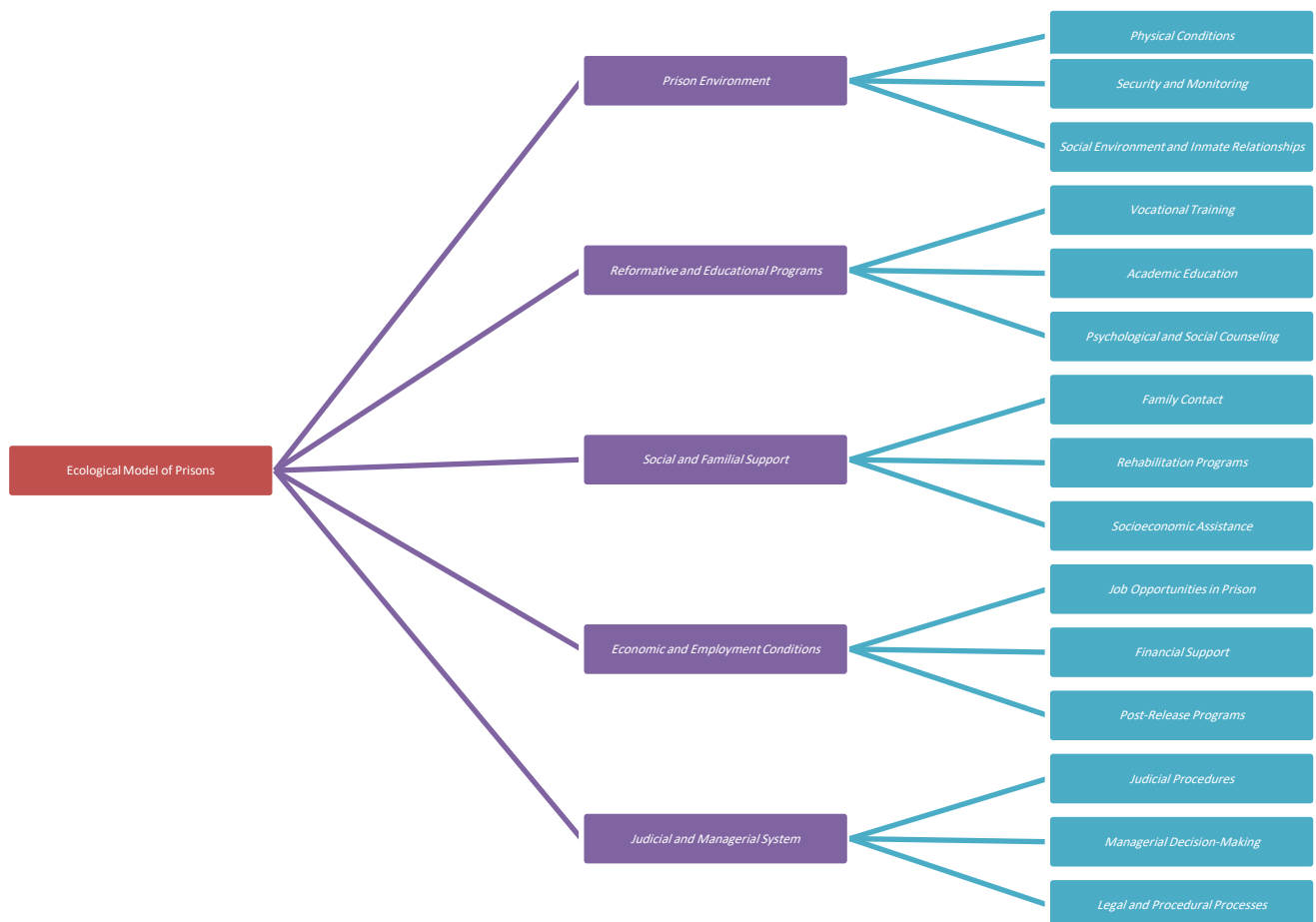
In parallel, the qualitative data in this study also included a comprehensive literature review. Data collection regarding

the theoretical foundations and literature review was carried out through library resources, journal articles, books, periodicals, and online databases.

Considering the literature review and research background, relevant models and key indicators of the topic, the preliminary conceptual model of the research was influenced by theorists' perspectives, expert interview insights, and the researcher's interpretations. This formed the core elements, dimensions, and indicators of the study, presented in the following figure. It must be noted that the final model of the qualitative section is shown in the figure below.

Figure 1

Final Conceptual Model



4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this research, based on a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with prison experts, administrators, and academic specialists, led to the

development of a comprehensive ecological model of prisons in Iran with a focus on the behavioral reform of prisoners. The model identified six major dimensions influencing behavioral change: (1) the prison environment, including physical, social, and supervisory conditions; (2) reformatory and educational programs; (3) social and familial support mechanisms; (4) economic and occupational conditions; (5) judicial and managerial systems; and (6) post-release reintegration initiatives. These dimensions align with international standards and contribute to the broader understanding of how environmental and systemic variables shape prisoner outcomes.

The results emphasize the critical role of the prison environment—both in terms of physical conditions (such as cleanliness, dormitory infrastructure, and personal space) and security oversight. Participants consistently noted that when physical standards were inadequate or when security mechanisms relied too heavily on coercion without humanized interaction, prisoners exhibited heightened stress and aggressive behavior. These findings are consistent with (Fazel et al., 2016), who highlighted that poor prison conditions exacerbate mental health issues and hinder rehabilitation. Similarly, (Amani & Betyari, 2023) and (Prakash et al., 2015) found that chronic environmental stressors in prison environments were closely associated with psychological decline, including depression, anxiety, and aggression.

The social climate of the prison, including interpersonal dynamics among prisoners and between prisoners and staff, also emerged as a major factor influencing behavior. Group-based activities and supportive relationships were seen to promote prosocial behavior and reduce recidivism risk. These findings echo (Aslani et al., 2016), who noted that social rejection and isolation within prison environments, exacerbated by negative subcultural norms, diminish inmates' psychological well-being and reduce their ability to reintegrate into society. The recognition of social cohesion and group programming as catalysts for positive change is also supported by (Foster, 2017), who argued that therapeutic prison environments must include peer support and structured group activities.

A major dimension of the ecological model involves reformatory and educational programs, especially vocational training, academic education, and psychological counseling. The interviews revealed that structured skill-building courses not only provide tangible opportunities for post-release employment but also promote a sense of agency and hope among inmates. Programs such as literacy

development, technical training, and individual or group counseling were widely acknowledged as integral to rehabilitation. This finding aligns with (Moradi et al., 2020), who emphasized that many prisoners in Iran lack adequate education and employment experience prior to incarceration, which in turn makes their post-release social integration difficult without targeted programming.

Notably, the role of psychological and social counseling was emphasized repeatedly. Many participants stressed that unless underlying emotional and psychological problems are addressed—such as trauma, low self-esteem, or emotional dysregulation—other reforms are unlikely to succeed. This is consistent with the argument made by (Ghazanfari et al., 2023), who demonstrated that mental health interventions have a direct impact on reducing prison misconduct and recidivism. Similarly, (Aslani et al., 2016) found that well-implemented psychological services within prison foster improved emotional regulation, especially when combined with family therapy and systemic support.

The support of prisoners' families—through communication, visitation, and social services—emerged as a foundational theme across all levels of the model. Prisoners with strong familial ties demonstrated higher levels of engagement in educational and reformatory programs and exhibited more resilience in coping with incarceration. These findings parallel those of (Farsi, 2024), who emphasized that prisoners with ongoing emotional support from family members had better mental health outcomes and lower rates of disciplinary infractions. The ecological model proposed in this study confirms that systemic mechanisms such as family visitation schedules, communication technologies, and counseling for inmates' families are indispensable in supporting inmates' emotional stability.

The economic and occupational conditions within the prison also received attention. Participants described work opportunities, especially in production units or service departments, as motivating and identity-reinforcing. Inmates who engaged in meaningful labor were more cooperative, less aggressive, and more future-oriented. This observation is corroborated by (Fazel et al., 2016), who noted that meaningful engagement and a sense of productivity are vital for psychological well-being in prison. Moreover, access to wages or financial support for inmates and their families reduced tension and stress, especially for prisoners who were primary earners before incarceration.

In terms of judicial and managerial structures, participants emphasized the necessity of transparent decision-making processes, fair treatment, and accessible

legal support. Inmates who perceived the system as unjust or arbitrary were more likely to display oppositional behaviors, while those who had access to procedural justice—such as appeals, legal representation, and grievance redressal—were more compliant and emotionally regulated. This aligns with (Foster, 2017), who underscores the importance of procedural fairness in correctional settings for maintaining legitimacy and promoting behavioral reform.

Another critical element identified in this study was the post-release phase, which often determines the long-term success of the prison rehabilitation process. Participants stressed that without sustained post-release support—including psychological counseling, financial assistance, and job placement—many inmates relapse into criminal behavior. The research confirmed that a lack of continuity in support services was a major barrier to reintegration. These findings are in agreement with (Ghazanfari et al., 2023) and (Prakash et al., 2015), who found that structured reentry programs significantly reduce recidivism by equipping released prisoners with coping strategies, resources, and social capital.

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Collectively, the themes and sub-themes identified in this ecological model provide a holistic understanding of the factors that influence prisoner behavior and reform. The model illustrates that prisoner rehabilitation is not a linear or isolated process but rather an interactive system influenced by environmental, psychological, social, economic, and structural dimensions. The alignment of these findings with prior literature enhances the model's validity and applicability to the broader context of prison management in Iran and similar settings.

Despite the depth of analysis and the value of the emergent ecological model, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size, although adequate for a qualitative design, was restricted to selected experts from the

Tehran Prisons Organization and university faculty, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to other provinces or national institutions. Second, prisoners themselves were not directly interviewed, which means the model is based on secondhand insights rather than lived experiences. Third, cultural and political constraints may have influenced the openness of participants, especially regarding sensitive issues such as abuse, corruption, or systemic inefficiencies. Finally, the reliance on manual thematic analysis, although assisted by qualitative software, still carries risks of subjective interpretation.

Future studies could extend this work by incorporating the perspectives of prisoners and their families to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ecological system. Longitudinal designs that follow inmates before, during, and after incarceration would also offer valuable insights into the dynamics of behavioral change. Additionally, comparative studies across provinces—or even between countries with similar socio-political contexts—could enhance the external validity of the model. The integration of quantitative methods alongside qualitative analysis could also refine the model's predictive capability and applicability in correctional policy development.

Correctional authorities should prioritize improving physical and social conditions in prisons as foundational elements of rehabilitation. Reformative and vocational training programs must be expanded and tailored to inmates' individual needs. Psychological and family counseling services should be systematically integrated into prison programs. Efforts must also focus on building strong post-release support systems, including housing, employment services, and continued counseling. Furthermore, prison management practices must be transparent, fair, and responsive, with robust channels for grievance and feedback. Investing in such a multidimensional, ecological approach will enhance both inmate reform and public safety.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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