SOCIAL SCIENCE

Transitioning from Insurgency to Reintegration: A Meta-Synthesis of the Lived Experiences of Rebel Returnees

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Abstract

Leaving an armed movement does not automatically guarantee a safe or sustainable return to civilian life. Former members may continue to experience economic instability, disrupted relationships, stigma, fear, and precarious access to support. This meta-synthesis integrated qualitative evidence concerning pathways into armed movements, experiences during membership, disengagement, and reintegration. The study employed the three-stage thematic synthesis approach of Thomas and Harden (2008): line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes. Nine qualitative studies from the Philippines, Uganda, and Colombia were included following screening and appraisal using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (2017). Findings were extracted using the JBI qualitative data extraction tool. The synthesis identified structural vulnerability, coercion, social networks, ideological mobilization, and unmet psychosocial needs as influences on involvement. Life inside armed movements was characterized by insecurity, deprivation, psychological distress, restricted autonomy, disrupted family ties, and complex bonds among members. Disillusionment, family responsibilities, safety concerns, and the prospect of civilian assistance contributed to disengagement. Reintegration was constrained by persistent poverty, stigma, mutual distrust, security concerns, and gaps in institutional service delivery. Three enabling themes were identified: relational connectedness and community acceptance; personal agency, resilience, and reconstruction of civilian life; and integrated institutional and community support. Reintegration is therefore a continuing, multidimensional process rather than a single act of surrender. Sustainable outcomes require coordinated, long-term interventions that address psychosocial, relational, economic, and structural needs.

Keywords: rebel returnees; reintegration; armed conflict; qualitative evidence synthesis; thematic synthesis; Philippines

1 Introduction

Armed conflict and lingering insurgency affect not only national security but also the social and economic conditions of communities and the life trajectories of individuals. In the Philippines, the continuing presence of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), has been associated with longstanding concerns about rural poverty, inequality, landlessness, limited access to services, political grievances, and community security. Understanding why individuals become involved in armed movements—and what happens when they leave—requires attention to the interacting structural, political, relational, and personal circumstances that shape their decisions.

Government policy has sought to address local communist armed conflict through a combination of security, development, and reintegration measures. Executive Order No. 70 (2018) institutionalized the Whole-of-Nation Approach and established the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict. Administrative Order No. 10 (2018) provided a framework for assistance to former members of the CPP, NPA, and National Democratic Front and their immediate families, subsequently implemented through initiatives including the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP). Proclamations Nos. 403–406 (2023) further established amnesty mechanisms for specified offenses associated with political beliefs. These policy measures underscore the importance of supporting disengagement and civilian transition; however, the existence of a formal program does not by itself establish that reintegration is complete or sustainable.

Qualitative studies have documented different aspects of former rebels' experiences, including recruitment, armed-group life, disengagement, and return to family and community life. Such studies are commonly bounded by particular locations, populations, and political contexts. Their findings can therefore remain dispersed. A qualitative evidence synthesis can bring these accounts into conversation, identify recurring patterns, and develop interpretations that extend beyond any single study.

This study synthesizes qualitative research on the experiences of former members of armed movements and individuals formerly associated with armed conflict, with particular attention to the Philippine context and comparative evidence from other settings. It asks: What are the lived experiences documented in selected qualitative studies, and how do individuals navigate the transition from armed-group involvement to civilian life?

1.1 Research questions

1. What factors influence individuals to become involved in armed groups?
2. What experiences characterize life during participation in armed movements?
3. What circumstances contribute to disengagement from armed movements?
4. What social, economic, institutional, and security challenges are encountered during reintegration?
5. What personal, family, community, and institutional factors support the transition to civilian life?

2 Methods

2.1 Design and synthesis approach

The study used qualitative evidence synthesis guided by the thematic synthesis method of Thomas and Harden (2008). The method involves three iterative stages: (1) line-by-line coding of findings from the included studies; (2) grouping related codes into descriptive themes that remain close to the primary studies; and (3) developing analytical themes that offer an interpretive account across studies. This approach was selected because the purpose was to integrate findings from qualitative investigations rather than statistically pool outcomes.

2.2 Search strategy and information sources

Google Scholar was the principal search platform and the University of Southern Philippines Foundation Graduate School as a source of grey literature. Searches were conducted between 14

September and 13 October 2026. There were seven (7) studies retrieved through Google Scholar and two grey-literature studies from the graduate-school (Table 1).

Table 1. Search strategy, documentation, and inclusive dates

Database	Search String	Number of Articles Retrieved	Date Ranges of Search
Google Scholar	Search String 1	18	9/14/2026-10/10/2026
University of Southern Philippines Foundation Graduate School	Search String 2 (Grey Literature)	2	10/12/2026-10/13/2026

2.3 Eligibility criteria

Studies were eligible when they used a qualitative design—including phenomenology, case study, document review, or biographical analysis—and examined experiences related to recruitment, armed-group participation, surrender or disengagement, and reintegration. The source report further specified contexts with more than 20 years of rebellion or insurgency and a legitimate surrender process within an institutionalized reconciliation or reintegration program. Published research and grey literature, including theses and dissertations, were considered. Quantitative studies, studies involving participants who had not voluntarily surrendered, and evaluations focused solely on an amnesty or reintegration program were excluded.

2.4 Study selection and quality appraisal

There were nine (9) studies included: seven from the Philippines and two from other countries. Study quality was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research. The JBI qualitative data extraction tool was used to organize study characteristics and findings. Figure 1 presents the modified PRISMA flow diagram.

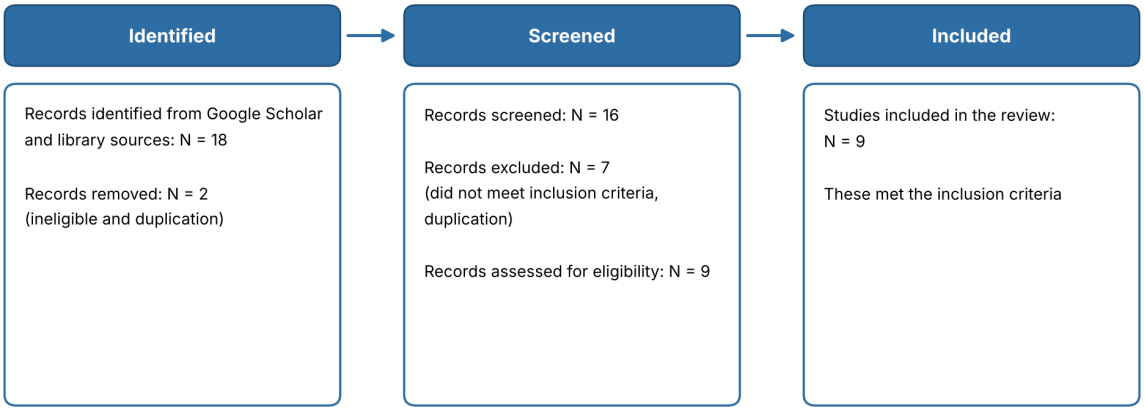


Figure 1. Modified PRISMA flow diagram

2.5 Data extraction and synthesis

Data were organized in a thematic synthesis matrix across five domains: reasons for joining; life inside the movement; reasons for leaving; challenges in reintegration; and factors that helped reintegration. Findings and author interpretations were coded line by line, grouped into descriptive

themes, and then interpreted to generate higher-order analytical themes. Similarities and differences across settings were considered while retaining the contextual meaning of the primary studies.

2.6 Reflexivity

The researcher is a professional social worker with more than 20 years of direct practice experience and approximately 20 years of academic and research engagement. Prior academic supervision of qualitative studies on rebel returnees informed the researcher's interest in the topic. The researcher recognized that a social-work orientation could privilege socioeconomic explanations for involvement in armed movements. Reflexive engagement and deliberate bracketing were therefore used to remain attentive to political, ideological, relational, coercive, and psychosocial explanations, including findings that challenged prior assumptions.

2.7 Ethical considerations

The synthesis used findings from existing studies and did not involve new recruitment or direct data collection from human participants. The gray literature from the Graduate School underwent review from the university ethics committee prior to primary data gathering. Appropriate permissions and accurate attribution were not requisites as there were no direct quotations obtained from the research participants. Quotations or substantial text from source studies were properly cited and referenced.

3 Results

3.1 Characteristics of included studies

Nine (9) qualitative studies were included. Seven were conducted in the Philippines and two in other national contexts, identified in the report as Uganda and Colombia. The studies used phenomenological, case-study, longitudinal, process-oriented, biographical, and related qualitative approaches. Populations and study foci varied. Importantly, the included evidence was not entirely homogeneous: one Philippine study concerned children formerly involved in armed conflict, while another examined former terrorist combatants in Mindanao. Accordingly, the synthesis is best understood as evidence concerning former rebels and people formerly associated with armed conflict, rather than as evidence exclusively about adult CPP-NPA returnees. The phenomenon under study does not consider age in its inclusion criteria.

Table 2. Characteristics of the included studies

Study	Setting / design (as reported)	Focus / population
Annan et al. (2009)	Northern Uganda; qualitative interviews	Young people formerly associated with the Lord's Resistance Army, plus family/community informants
Boulanger Martel (2022)	Colombia; longitudinal, process-oriented qualitative research	Former M-19 combatants and post-demobilization trajectories
Bautista (2025)	Isabela, Philippines; phenomenological	Rebel returnees and key informants
Lodangco (2022)	Casiguran, Sorsogon; case study	Experiences and status of rebel returnees
Lee (2026)	Camarines, Philippines; phenomenological	Rebel returnees

Study	Setting / design (as reported)	Focus / population
Tangging & Yeo (2023)	Mindanao, Philippines; case study / field-based evidence	Former terrorist combatants and reintegration
Ybanez & Tabudlong (2025)	Bukidnon and Misamis Oriental; life-course approach	Twenty rebel returnees
Lerios (2024)	Bohol, Philippines; hermeneutic phenomenology	Rebel returnees and reintegration
Perez (2026)	Leyte, Philippines; case study	Children formerly involved in armed conflict

3.2 Pathways into armed-group involvement

The synthesis identifies multiple and intersecting pathways into armed movements. First, structural vulnerability—including poverty, social marginalization, unmet basic needs, land-related difficulties, family disruption, and limited access to government support—could make individuals receptive to promises of change or improved circumstances. Second, recruitment was not always voluntary: some accounts described abduction, intimidation, threats, and other forms of coercion, particularly involving young people. Third, family ties, friendships, romantic relationships, and exposure to armed actors across generations could normalize involvement and provide recruitment pathways.

Ideological persuasion and perceived injustice also shaped participation. Grievances involving government, experiences interpreted as injustice, and exposure to narratives promising protection or social transformation influenced some individuals. For others, the movement appeared to offer belonging, emotional connection, recognition, safety, education, opportunities, or a means of helping their communities. These findings caution against reducing recruitment to a single cause: coercion, structural conditions, social networks, ideology, and personal aspirations intersected in different ways.

3.3 Life inside armed movements

Accounts of life inside armed movements described persistent insecurity and exposure to violence, including fear of death, arrest, capture, and pursuit. Physical conditions could involve food scarcity, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, poor health, and limited access to personal necessities. Participants' accounts also indicated sadness, anxiety, homesickness, isolation, uncertainty, and psychological distress.

Membership could involve restrictions on freedom, privacy, and personal decision-making. Separation from biological families produced loneliness, while relationships with comrades sometimes developed into strong bonds of solidarity and surrogate family. These connections could provide emotional support and collective identity, even as organizational discipline and unequal power relations constrained autonomy. Some accounts also documented gendered exploitation and abuse, including experiences involving children. Finally, discrepancies between ideological promises and lived realities contributed to moral conflict and disillusionment.

3.4 Reasons for disengagement

Disengagement was associated with a combination of changing priorities and accumulated negative experiences. Family reunification and responsibilities, particularly among members with spouses or children, strengthened the desire to return to civilian life. The wish to protect one's life, live safely, and pursue a more ordinary and meaningful future also influenced decisions to leave.

Disillusionment arose from unfulfilled promises, abuse, exploitation, loss of identity, and the contrast between movement ideals and actual experiences. Physical and psychological exhaustion from prolonged hardship further weakened commitment. Spiritual beliefs shaped how some individuals interpreted survival and departure. Government assistance and reintegration opportunities could make disengagement appear more feasible, although such assistance was one factor among several rather than a uniform explanation.

3.5 Challenges during reintegration

Returning to civilian life did not automatically restore security, relationships, or economic stability. Persistent poverty, limited employment, restricted access to land and livelihood opportunities, and dependence on farming constrained economic independence. Stigma, negative labels, rumors, and community rejection affected social identity and participation. Former members and receiving communities could experience mutual fear and distrust, including concerns about retaliation, renewed violence, and the possibility of returning to armed activity.

Rebuilding family relationships and adjusting to civilian responsibilities could be difficult even when reunification was welcomed. Institutional barriers included delayed processing, unequal or incomplete access to promised assistance, limited continuity of services, and pressure on local resources. These patterns indicate that reintegration is shaped not only by the readiness of former members to return but also by the capacity and willingness of families, communities, and institutions to support that return.

3.6 Factors supporting reintegration

Family acceptance, trusted friendships, peer support, and assistance from barangay officials and other local actors helped reduce isolation and facilitate re-connection. Community-based organizations and culturally responsive approaches could build trust and support social re-entry. The use of less stigmatizing terms, such as “returnees” or “rescued friends,” was described as one way of encouraging acceptance.

Personal determination, resilience, coping strategies, faith, and the ability to draw on previously acquired knowledge, skills, values, and social networks also supported adjustment. Livelihood assistance and government reintegration programs, including E-CLIP, provided important material and institutional support. However, the evidence characterized such assistance as a stabilizing mechanism rather than a complete solution. Sustained and coordinated support remained necessary.

3.7 Analytical themes

The synthesis generated three overarching analytical themes concerning the conditions that support civilian reformation:

3.7.1 Theme 1: Relational connectedness, community acceptance, and social belonging as foundations of reintegration

Reintegration requires more than physical return to a place of residence. It involves restoring relationships, rebuilding trust, negotiating a civilian identity, and regaining a sense of belonging. Family acceptance and supportive social networks provide emotional security and practical assistance, while inclusive communities and culturally sensitive local interventions can reduce stigma and enable participation.

3.7.2 Theme 2: Personal agency, resilience, and the reconstruction of civilian life

Former members are not merely recipients of assistance; they exercise agency in redefining their identities and rebuilding their lives. Determination, coping capacities, faith, transferable skills, prior knowledge, and social networks can become resources for civilian participation. Yet personal agency operates within material and social constraints and should not be treated as a substitute for adequate institutional support.

3.7.3 Theme 3: Integrated institutional and community support for sustainable social and economic reintegration

Sustainable reintegration depends on coordinated action across families, communities, local governments, civil society, and national institutions. Assistance must extend beyond initial incentives or short-term financial support to include accessible services, livelihood development, psychosocial support, protection, and continuity of care. Institutional commitments become meaningful only when implementation capacity, resources, coordination, and community participation translate policy into reliable support.

4 Discussion

The findings portray involvement, membership, disengagement, and reintegration as connected but distinct phases in a changing life trajectory. Entry into an armed movement cannot be explained through poverty alone. Structural deprivation and exclusion were important in some accounts, but coercion, social networks, perceived injustice, ideological narratives, unmet psychosocial needs, and aspirations also shaped pathways into membership. The presence of abducted or intimidated young people is especially important because it challenges interpretations that treat all participation as an autonomous or ideologically committed choice.

The experiences reported during membership reveal a tension between belonging and constraint. Armed groups could provide camaraderie, identity, and a sense of purpose, while also exposing members to violence, deprivation, restrictions, and unequal power. This duality helps explain why leaving may involve both the loss of a familiar social world and the pursuit of safety, autonomy, and family life. Disillusionment was not simply ideological change; it could emerge from accumulated contradictions between promised and experienced conditions.

The transition out of armed-group membership should therefore be understood as a turning point rather than the endpoint of the process. Family responsibilities, recognition of danger, exhaustion, and the desire for a different future contributed to disengagement. Government assistance could reduce the practical barriers to leaving, but the synthesis does not support treating financial incentives as the sole or universal cause of surrender.

The reintegration findings highlight the interaction between individual agency and the social environment. Former members may be motivated to rebuild their lives, but stigma, fear, weak livelihood opportunities, and institutional delays can restrict their choices. Community acceptance is not merely an attitudinal concern: it affects access to relationships, participation, security, and potentially economic opportunities. Likewise, institutional support must be assessed not only by the existence of a policy but by its accessibility, timeliness, adequacy, coordination, and continuity.

The three analytical themes together suggest a relational, capability-oriented, and ecological understanding of reintegration. Social connectedness supports belonging and access to resources; personal agency enables individuals to pursue new life directions; and coordinated institutions and

communities create the conditions in which those efforts can become sustainable. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Individual resilience cannot compensate indefinitely for structural poverty or service gaps, just as material assistance alone cannot repair stigma, fractured relationships, or insecurity.

4.1 Implications for policy and practice

- For policymakers: strengthen long-term reintegration policies that address economic, psychosocial, relational, and security needs, and ensure equitable access to benefits.
- For program implementors and local governments: improve timeliness, inter-agency coordination, case management, follow-up, and continuity of livelihood and social services.
- For communities and civil society: develop inclusive, culturally responsive initiatives that promote trust, reduce stigmatizing labels, and support meaningful participation.
- For families: provide opportunities for safe reunification, communication, acceptance, and relationship repair, while recognizing that adjustment may take time.
- For social work practice: use strengths-based, trauma-informed, family-centered, and community-based interventions that recognize both personal agency and structural barriers.
- For researchers: examine long-term reintegration outcomes, gendered experiences, children and youth formerly associated with armed groups, and differences across regional and conflict settings.

5 Conclusion

This meta-synthesis indicates that the transition from armed-group involvement to civilian life is a complex and continuous process. Pathways into armed movements reflected intersecting structural, social, ideological, coercive, and psychosocial influences. Life inside movements involved insecurity, deprivation, emotional distress, constrained autonomy, and complex relational bonds. Disengagement was shaped by family responsibilities, safety concerns, disillusionment, exhaustion, spiritual meaning, and the availability of civilian alternatives. After departure, persistent poverty, stigma, mutual distrust, and institutional gaps could undermine reintegration. Sustainable civilian reconstruction depends on the interaction of personal agency, supportive relationships, community acceptance, and coordinated long-term institutional assistance. Surrender should therefore be treated as the beginning of reintegration, not evidence that reintegration has been completed.

6 Limitations

The synthesis is limited by the small number of included studies, the predominance of Philippine sources, and the heterogeneity of settings and populations. The included studies do not all concern adult CPP-NPA returnees; some address former members of other armed groups or children formerly associated with armed conflict. Findings are therefore transferable only with attention to context. The study synthesis relied mainly on primary-study authors' findings and interpretations rather than reproducing first-order participant quotations. The search was centered on Google Scholar and two graduate-school grey-literature sources, which may have missed relevant studies.

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