

Community-Empowerment Healing and Resilience: A Systematic Literature Review of Bibliotherapy for Depression among Remand Prisoners in Malaysia

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Abstract

Studies show a very high incidence of significant mental disorders in prison populations worldwide, with up to a third of remand prisoners experiencing depression while incarcerated. Bibliotherapy has emerged as a prospective intervention in response to rehabilitation needs and to alleviate depressive symptoms among inmates. The systematic review evaluates the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in treating depression among remand prisoners in Malaysia. Using the PICo framework to formulate the research question with the PRISMA guidelines for the review process, Scopus and Google Scholar were searched for these studies. Six studies were identified, and bibliotherapy was found to have a small but significant effect in the treatment of depression among prisoners in Malaysia. However, the small number of studies and possible publication bias may affect the generalizability of results and the short time periods in which they were conducted. Despite these limitations, bibliotherapy presents a comforting and accessible intervention for addressing mental health challenges in prisons settings and establishing tailored bibliotherapeutic programs for optimum benefit for this vulnerable group.

Keywords: *Community, Resilience, Bibliotherapy, Depression, Remand Prisoners, Systematic Literature Review (SLR).*

Introduction

Remand prisoners, defined as individuals detained while awaiting trial or sentencing (Andrade et al., 2022), which is represent one of the most vulnerable yet systematically overlooked populations within carceral systems worldwide. In Malaysia, as in many jurisdictions, this group faces what may be termed a dual burden: the profound psychological stress of legal uncertainty and pre-trial isolation, compounded by their frequent exclusion from rehabilitative programs designed for sentenced inmates (Heard & Fair, 2019; Ifa Sirriu et al., 2021). Studies consistently report that up to one third of remand prisoners experience clinically significant depression during incarceration, a rate notably higher than that observed in the general prison population (Fazel & Seewald, 2012; Mariamdaran, 2016).

Such environments often lack structured mental health support, underscoring the need for accessible, low-threshold interventions that can be self-administered, as recommended in mental health guidance for prisoners (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). This disparity is not incidental but structural, arising from a confluence of stressors unique to pre-trial detention. These include acute uncertainty regarding legal outcomes, enforced separation from familial and social supports, severely restricted autonomy, and often sub-optimal living conditions that collectively erode mental well-being (Bedaso et al., 2020; Gunenthira Rao et al., 2018).

Within the Malaysian penal context, the situation of remand prisoners is further complicated by operational and cultural factors. The country's remand facilities frequently operate at or beyond capacity, with mental health services historically under-resourced and security paradigms often prevailing over therapeutic ones (Johari, 2020). Remand periods can be protracted due to case backlogs, creating a state of legal limbo that exacerbates hopelessness and psychological distress. Yet, despite their heightened vulnerability, remand prisoners remain largely invisible in Malaysia's prison rehabilitation discourse. This oversight carries significant ethical, clinical, and social implications.

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In response to this pressing need, bibliotherapy emerges not merely as a therapeutic option but as a strategic intervention uniquely suited to the constraints and opportunities of the remand environment. It is defined as the guided use of written and other media for therapeutic purposes, and narrative identity work through engagement with literature, poetry, scripture, and visual media (Shechtman, 2009; Rafedzi et al., 2024). Its advantages are particularly salient in resource-limited settings. Internationally, bibliotherapy has been explored as a feasible intervention in correctional settings, with studies highlighting its role in fostering literacy, empathy, and psychological relief among prisoners (Csorba-Simon, 2014). It is low-cost, scalable, and minimally dependent on specialist staffing, and can also be adapted for individual or group use. Furthermore, bibliotherapy has demonstrated efficacy in reducing mild to moderate depressive symptoms among incarcerated populations. It offers a form of self-administered psychological support that empowers users within a disempowering system (Pardini et al., 2014; Krolak, 2019).

In Malaysia, bibliotherapy is occasionally integrated into Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), but its systematic application within prisons, and especially for remand populations, remains virtually unexplored. Preliminary studies suggest that prison libraries could function as informal therapeutic spaces, with reading materials serving as tools for relief, reflection, and resilience (Rafedzi et al., 2016; 2024). However, the existing literature is fragmented and lacks a cohesive focus on depression outcomes for remand detainees.

Therefore, this systematic literature review addresses a critical dual gap: the gap scarcity of mental health interventions for remand prisoners in Malaysia, and the absence of synthesized evidence regarding bibliotherapy's role in mitigating depression within this group. By systematically evaluating available studies, this review aims to achieve three objectives. First, it will assess the current evidence base for Bibliotherapy in Malaysian carceral settings. Second, it proposes a contextually adapted framework for bibliotherapy tailored to the remand experience. Third, it identifies priority areas for the future research and policy development.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: "To what extent is bibliotherapy an effective and feasible intervention for reducing depression among remand prisoners in Malaysia, and how might it be optimally implemented within existing penal infrastructures?."

Methods

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, utilizing predefined keywords to gather relevant research data. The SLR approach ensures a structured and comprehensive evaluation of existing literature, facilitating critical insights (Paul et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2015). It also provides clear and thorough evidence on the topic (Shaffril et al., 2021; Al-Zubidy & Carver, 2019). The review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) guidelines, a validated framework for conducting SLRs (Kamal Azmi et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021).

PRISMA was selected for its reliability in deriving answers from formulated research questions (Page et al., 2021). It includes a 27-item checklist to filter and select relevant articles systematically. According to Okoli (2015), PRISMA enhances the quality of sourced works, streamlines the search process using keywords, and provides a transparent, replicable research pathway. The framework comprises four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021; Shaffril et al., 2021). These stages guided the search for relevant studies on bibliotherapy and depression among prisoners, particularly remand inmates, using Scopus and Google Scholar.

Systematic Search Strategy

(a) Identification

The search began with two databases: Scopus and Google Scholar. Keywords included "Bibliotherapy," "art therapy," "music therapy," "cognitive and behavioral therapy," "depression," "mood disorder," "mental health," "prisoner," and "Malaysia." Initial searches yielded 639 results from Scopus and approximately 33,700 from Google Scholar. After applying the "Malaysia" filter and limiting to articles and reviews, the results narrowed to 10 from Scopus and 7, 120 from Google Scholar. Boolean operators logic was used to refine searches, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Search String for Database Queries

| Database | Keyword |
|-----------------------|---|
| Scopus | TITLE-ABS-KEY ("bibliotherapy") OR ("art therapy") OR ("music therapy") OR ("cognitive behavioral therapy") AND ("depression") OR ("mood disorder") OR ("mental health") AND ("prisoner") AFFILCOUNTRY ("Malaysia") |
| Google Scholar | bibliotherapy OR "art therapy" OR "music therapy" OR "cognitive behavioral therapy" AND depression OR "mood disorder" OR "mental health" AND prisoner AND Malaysia |

(b) Screening

Articles were screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). The focus was on peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024, within relevant subject areas (Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Psychology and Health Sciences). While the country is only focusing on Malaysia and language in English. After screening, 10 articles from Scopus and 249 from Google Scholar remained.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

| No. | Criterion | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|-----|------------------|---|--|
| 1. | Publication Year | 2014 - 2024 | Published before 2014 |
| 2. | Subject Area | Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Psychology, Health Sciences | Other disciplines |
| 3. | Country | Malaysia | Studies outside Malaysia |
| 4. | Language | English | Non-English publications |
| 5. | Study Type | Empirical research, systematic reviews | Editorials, opinion pieces, non-research reports |

(c) Eligibility

Eligibility was assessed by reviewing titles, abstracts, and methodologies (Shaffril et al., 2020). The PICo framework (Population/Problem, Interest, Context) was used to formulate the research questions (Lockwood et al., 2015). The framework elements were:

Table 3. PICo Questions

| | |
|----------------|--|
| P (Population) | Remand prisoners with depression or depressive disorders. |
| I (Interest) | The implementation and outcomes of bibliotherapy intervention. |
| Co (Context) | Prison settings in Malaysia. |

(d) Inclusion

After removing duplicates and screening titles/abstracts, full texts of 22 articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Six studies ultimately met all criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram adapted (Figure 1), from Page et al. (2021).

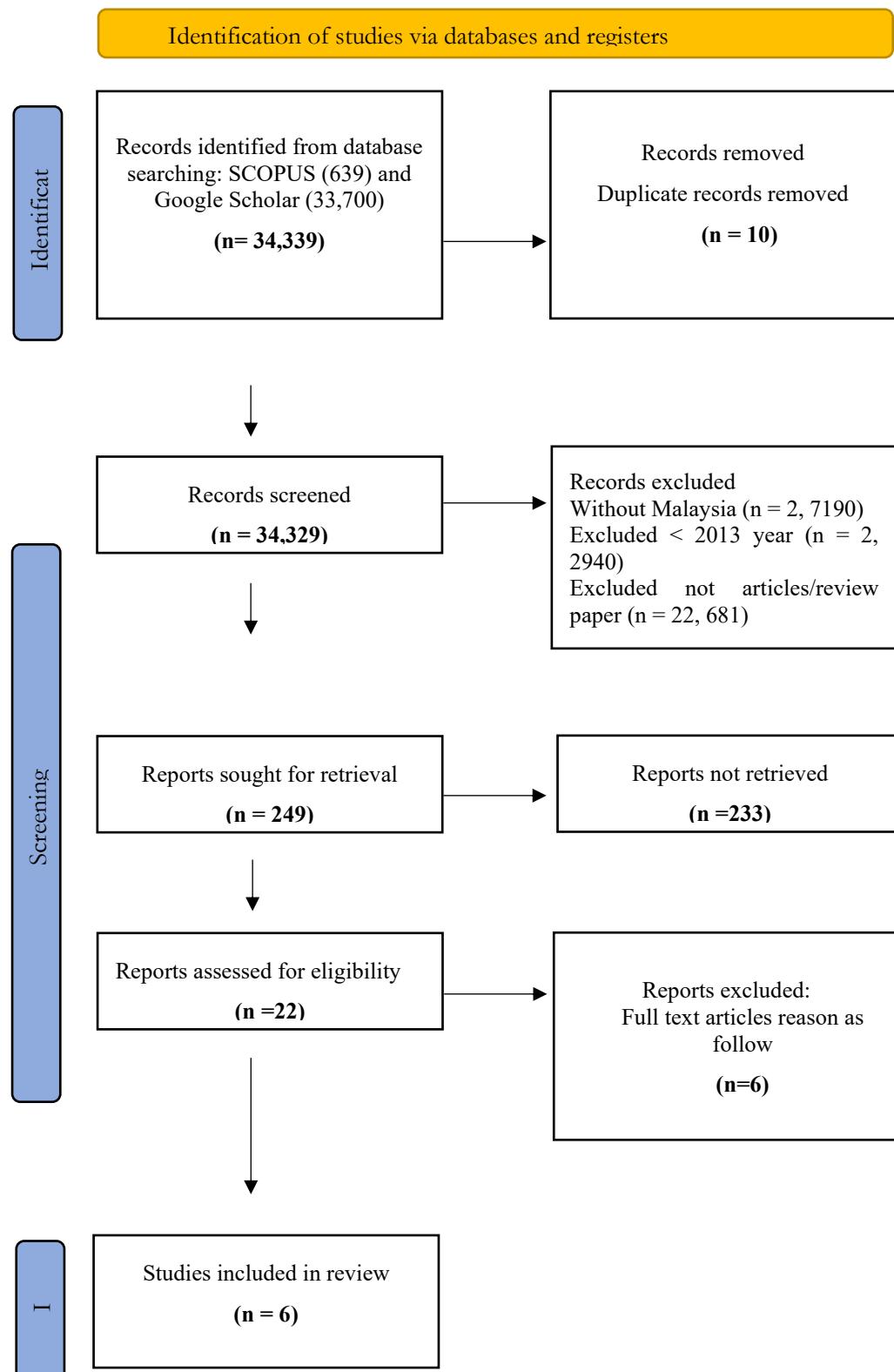


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection

(Note: A flow diagram would be inserted here visually depicting the process from 34,339 identified records to 6 included studies, showing stages of screening and exclusion.)

Results

Six articles met the inclusion criteria. A thematic synthesis was conducted, with key data extracted concerning authors, sample characteristics, methodology, and primary findings related to bibliotherapy and mental health (Table 4). Notably, none of the identified studies specifically investigated remand prisoners, highlighting a significant research gap. Furthermore, while studies such as Kamoyo et al. (2015) have examined depression among female inmates in other contexts, gender-specific analyses within Malaysian remand populations remain absent, indicating another dimension for future research. The included studies focused on general prison populations or juvenile detainees.

Table 4. Summary of Included on Bibliotherapy and Related Interventions in Malaysian Prison Settings

| No. | Author (Year) | Databases | Title | Sample | Key Finding Relevant to Bibliotherapy/Intervention |
|-----|------------------------------------|----------------|--|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. | Hidayati et al. (2023) | Scopus | A Scoping Review of Correctional-Based Interventions for Women Prisoners with Mental Health Problems | Women prisoners | Identified Seeking Safety Intervention as effective; supports the potential of structured, manual-based approaches akin to bibliotherapy. |
| 2. | Gunenthira et al. (2018) | Scopus | A systematic review on complementary approach for depression among adult prison inmates. | Adult prisoners | Found that cognitive bibliotherapy and music therapy show potential as complementary approaches for reducing depressive symptoms. |
| 3. | Muhammad et al. (2022) | Scopus | Psycho-spiritual intervention to reduce anger level among delinquent teenagers. | Female delinquent teenagers | Demonstrated the efficacy of psycho-spiritual intervention, suggesting a role for guided reflective materials (a bibliotherapeutic component). |
| 4. | Puji Gusri Handayani et al. (2023) | Google Scholar | Creative Biblio-Counseling to Enhance Adversity Quotient of Juvenile Prisoners. | Juvenile prisoners | Showed that creative biblio-counseling using books and multimedia improved resilience (adversity quotient), indicating therapeutic benefit from mediated content. |
| 5. | Sh Marzety Adibah & Zakaria (2015) | Google Scholar | Using Expressive Art Therapy in The Healing Process of Delinquent Adolescents. | Teenage girls in detention | Art therapy facilitated emotional expression, implying that material-based therapies can access and process suppressed emotions. |

| | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|----------------|--|----------------|--|
| 6. | Rafedzi & Abrizah (2014) | Google Scholar | Information needs of male juvenile delinquents: the needs to be met in a prison setting. | Male juveniles | Highlighted the importance of books and reading materials for personal development and future planning, underpinning the foundational need that bibliotherapy addresses. |
|----|--------------------------|----------------|--|----------------|--|

A thematic analysis of the six included studies reveals a notable divergence in intervention design: whereas studies on adult populations (Gunenthira et al., 2018; Hidayati et al., 2023) emphasized structured, protocol-driven bibliotherapy (often CBT-based), research involving juveniles (Puji Gusri Handayani et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2022) favored more flexible, creative, and spiritually-integrated approaches. This suggests that developmental and cultural factors may mediate receptivity to bibliotherapeutic content, implying that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is unlikely to succeed. Crucially, all studies conceptualized bibliotherapy not as a standalone intervention but as a complementary component within a broader psychosocial or counseling framework, underscoring the importance of facilitator involvement and institutional support.

Discussions

The review sought to determine the effectiveness of bibliotherapy for depression among remand prisoners in Malaysia. The findings, drawn from six studies involving broader prisoner populations, indicate a positive therapeutic signal: bibliotherapy intervention, which is associated with reduced depressive symptoms, improved emotional coping, and enhanced psychological resilience (Gunenthira et al., 2018; Puji Gusri Handayani et al., 2023). This aligns with international evidence positioning bibliotherapy as a viable low-intensity psychological intervention (Pardini et al., 2014).

The most striking finding is the complete absence of studies specifically targeting remand prisoners. This is a profound oversight given their unique vulnerability—facing trial uncertainty, often lacking sentence-focused programming, and potentially experiencing more acute isolation. The reviewed studies on sentenced adults and juveniles indirectly support bibliotherapy's utility, but they cannot be directly generalized to the remand context without further research. This gap represents both a limitation of this review and a clear directive for future studies.

Bibliotherapy likely operates through several mechanisms: providing vicarious experience and normalization through narratives, facilitating cognitive reframing and offering a structured yet self-directed tool for self-reflection (Shechtman, 2009). Moreover, narrative-based bibliotherapy has been shown to support identity reconstruction and self-transformation among vulnerable groups, suggesting its potential applicability in the remand context where identity disruption is common (Drianus & Nuraisah, 2020).

In a prison environment where autonomy is stripped away, the self-paced nature of bibliotherapy can be inherently empowering. Successful implementation, however, requires more than just book access. This aligns with earlier findings that highlight the pivotal role of correctional counselors in facilitating behavioral and emotional change among young inmates, suggesting that bibliotherapy could be effectively integrated into existing counseling frameworks (Saralah Devi & Noor Azniza, 2011). It necessitates collaboration between prison authorities, mental health professionals (psychologists, therapists), and trained facilitators to select culturally appropriate materials, guided sessions, and integrate learning into coping strategies.

To strengthen the case for bibliotherapy in Malaysian remand prisons, future research must move beyond establishing if it works to investigate how, for whom, and under what conditions it works best. Robust randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with remand-specific samples are essential. Furthermore, economic evaluations of cost-effectiveness and studies on long-term outcomes post-release would provide crucial data for policymakers. The Malaysian Prison Department and Ministry of Home Affairs have a pivotal role in championing such evidence-based, humane interventions that fulfil rehabilitation mandates and uphold fundamental rights to health.

Conclusio

The systematic review confirms the potential of bibliotherapy as feasible and beneficial intervention for addressing depression within prison populations, based on evidence from related groups in Malaysia. However, it simultaneously exposes a critical void in research pertaining specifically to remand prisoners—the very population that may benefit most from timely, low-threshold mental health support. The current evidence, while promising, is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions for this subgroup.

Therefore, the primary contribution of this review is to identify and articulate a pressing research and practice priority. Future efforts must prioritize the development, implementation, and rigorous evaluation of culturally sensitive bibliotherapy programs tailored to the distinct psychological and situational needs of remand prisoners in Malaysia. By doing so, the criminal justice system can take a significant step toward a more rehabilitative and mentally healthy environment for some of its most vulnerable inhabitants.

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