

A Study of Multiple Causes of Recidivism among Youth Offenders at Thohoyandou Female/Juvenile Correctional Centre in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT Many of the juveniles in custody often must return to prison as re-offenders, or because of parole or correctional supervision conditions that have been broken. Furthermore, some youth come from dysfunctional families that also provide fertile ground for acts of criminality. The aim of this paper was to explore factors that influence offenders to re-offend at Thohoyandou Correctional Centre within the Female/Juvenile place found in the Vhembe District. The paper investigated recidivism among youth offenders in the Female/Juvenile Correctional Centre at Vhembe District. It focuses on finding out and identifying some of the problems relating to recidivism. The sample consisted of juvenile offenders incarcerated. Male and female juveniles participated in the study. Qualitative research design was used to collect data. Data were collected through interviews. Data were analyzed thematically. The paper revealed that there are pull factors in society that influence youth to offend and re-offend. This paper recommends that rehabilitation of offenders should not be prison-based only but should also focus on addressing communities where offenders come from. It also recommends that the Department must conduct road shows within the communities pertaining to the services they render.

INTRODUCTION

Recidivism has become a pressing and unrelenting problem all over the world. Many of the juveniles who have been in custody often have to return to prison as re-offenders because of parole or correctional supervision conditions. Some juveniles re-offend mainly because of the conditions in their dysfunctional families. Lack of delivery of basic socio-economic needs such as, employment, public infrastructure, social recreational infrastructure and poverty, combined with dysfunctional families also create a fertile ground for juveniles to re-offend.

Recidivism is defined as the act of a person repeating an undesirable behaviour after he/she has either experienced negative consequences of that behaviour or has been treated or trained to extinguish that behaviour (Mckean and Ransford 2004). It is also used to refer the percentage of former prisoners who are rearrested for a similar offence. It is also referring as the lapse into criminal activity and is generally measured by a former prisoner's return to prison for a new offence. Rates of recidivism reflect the degree to

which released inmates have been rehabilitated and the role correctional programs play in reintegrating prisoners into society. The rate in recidivism in the United States of America is estimated to be about two-thirds, which means that two-thirds of released inmates will be incarcerated within three years. High rates of recidivism result in tremendous costs both in terms of public safety and in tax dollars spent to arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate re-offenders. High rates of recidivism also lead to devastating social costs to the communities and families of offenders, as well as the personal costs to the offenders themselves. Due to these severe costs, programs for inmates and released inmates that reduce recidivism can be cost-effective even those that have modest rates of success (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics 2002).

Globally, the most recent recidivism study estimated the recidivism patterns of about 400,000 persons released from state prisons in 30 states in 2005. Two studies, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2006) and Ehrisman and Contardo (2005) come closest to providing national recidivism rates for the United States of America. One

tracked 108,580 state prisoners released from prison in 11 states in 1983. The other tracked 272,111 prisoners released from prison in 15 states in 1994. The prisoners tracked in these studies represent two-thirds of all the prisoners released in the United States for that year. The relationship between illiteracy and criminal behaviour was established long before the Walnut Street Jail opened in Philadelphia in 1790 and remains as one of the major issues in corrections today. Jenkins found that eighty-five percent of the incarcerated population did not graduate from high school, and statistics from the US Department of Education indicate that sixty-five percent of inmates are illiterate.

According to the International Centre for Prison Studies (2014), the juvenile prison population in some of the SADC countries 2009 until to this date is: zero percent juvenile offenders in Mozambique prison since 2009, 1.1 percent in Namibia since 2013, 3.1 percent in Lesotho since 2013, and 6.6 percent in Botswana. Many of these youths form sub-cultures, with no discernible livelihood to turn to, and have resorted to violence and crime for survival. Violence and crime in South Africa has emerged as a major national issue of concern. Many communities are becoming increasingly criminalized because of the youth gangs proliferating in this country. South Africa is therefore faced with the spectre of a disempowered, anomic youth lumpen - proletariat, which is increasingly beginning to undermine the urban economy and society at large (Tshiwula 2001: 26).

Many of these youths are alienated by mainstream society and are becoming criminalized. However, irrespective of the age differences the commonality among the 14 to 35 years olds is that they are all perceived as in transition into independent adulthood, such as being employed, taking responsibility for family life, participating in community decision making processes, and owning property. Many young people however, experience being labelled youth for extended periods and many more never graduate into adulthood. The concept youth remains controversial. It is on the whole a social construction, portraying different meanings to different segments of the population. For some people it portrays a violent undisciplined criminal element in society, for others, it connotes an excluded marginalized segment of the population (Tshiwula 2001: 26).

The South African government has introduced a Child Justice Act, Act 75 of 2008 which defines a child as any person under the age of 18 years. This Act deals with the Child Justice court and the criminal trial of a child. The Child Justice Act provides that a child must be assisted by his parent, guardian or an appropriate adult in child justice court. Section 66 of the Child Justice Act encourages the speedy conclusion of trials with a few postponements as necessary. The range of sentences available to the child justice court include: Community-based sentences, Restorative justice sentences, Correctional supervision, Suspended sentences, Penalties in lieu of a fine or imprisonment, Custodial sentences to a child and youth care centres or prison.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Recidivism is one of the widely documented problems facing societies in the world in general and South Africa in particular. Many of the juveniles in custody often have to return to prison as re-offenders because of parole or correctional supervision conditions that have been contravened. Furthermore, some youth come from dysfunctional families that also provide fertile ground for acts of criminality. Lack of delivery of basic socio-economic needs, such as employment public infrastructure, social recreational infrastructure and poverty also fuel the situation of criminality among the youth. All the factors cited above provide the circumstances for young ex-offenders to relapse to a life of crime. A complicating factor in the occurrence of re-offending is the fact that the juvenile offender often must go back to the same community and family circumstances in which he or she lived before his or her incarceration. This neutralizes all the possible positive effects of the rehabilitation programmes on the youth. A valid concern is that a pattern of re-offending starting at such a relatively youthful age may be the onset of a life-long pattern of crime with all its consequences for a future family (Sickmund 2012: 11). In view of the above, the main purpose of this study was therefore to explore the multiple contributory factors of recidivism among youth offenders incarcerated in the Thohoyandou Female/Juvenile Correctional Centre.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

In this paper, qualitative research method was used to collect rich descriptive data of youth offenders who have committed different types of crimes. Qualitative research was appropriate because it was more suited to the exploration, description and understanding of the offender's experiences (Babbie and Mouton 2001).

Sampling and Sampling Size

The sample of this study was made of seven male juvenile offenders and seven female offenders incarcerated at Female/Juvenile Correctional Centre within the Vhembe District. The population that sample was drawn from were juvenile offenders who committed different types of crimes. Purposive sampling method was used to select study participants who were directly affected by crimes. In purposive sampling, the researcher uses skills and judgment about which respondents to choose and selects only those who best meet the purpose of the study. Participants for this study were therefore selected based on the crimes they committed.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through interviews and focus group interviews. Interview is defined as the situation in which answers are directly elicited from subjects by a person who asks for and usually records responses. An interview provides an opportunity for researcher to learn about social life through perspective, experience and language of those living it (Boeije 2010: 62). Focus group interview provided opinions and attitudes from the subjects' point of view. With the permission of the management of the juvenile centre, the researchers used the tape recorder. The tape recorder was important for the researchers to record the proceedings of the discussions so that whatever information was missed during the discussion would be heard later through the tape and it would be easier to analyse the data.

Data Analysis

The method which was used to analyze data was grounded theory. The method was relevant to the study because offenders' feelings and

experiences in this topic were important and explored during the interview. Data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing, emerging or non-linear process. The main aim was to end up with the key themes that describe the essence of study.

Ethical Considerations

In the context of research, ethics are very important in that they address the beliefs about what is right or wrong, proper or improper, good or bad. Frequently sets of principles are drawn up to guide our actions in the field as well as protect the rights of participants in research (Somekh and Lewin 2006: 114). Permission to collect data from offenders within the Female/Juvenile Correctional Centre was sought. Offenders signed the informed consent form. Permission was granted to the researchers through telephonically and verbally. Participants were made aware of the audio-tape recorder. They were also informed about voluntary participation and that they are free to terminate their participation in the study. Confidentiality was observed through-out the data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Recidivism is defined as the act of a person repeating an undesirable behaviour after he/she has either experienced negative consequences of that behaviour or has been treated or trained to extinguish that behaviour. It is also used to refer to the percentage of former prisoners who are re-arrested for a similar offence. Makkai et al. (2004) concluded that the basic assumption underlying prediction of offending behaviour is that persistent offenders have similar characteristics such as anti-social personality features, which have different behavioural manifestations at different age levels and that the most serious delinquents become the most serious adult offenders. Offenders released during the year were back in prison either because of a new crime for which they received another prison sentence or because of a technical violation of their parole. From this study, the following themes emerged from the factors contributing to offender's criminal offence.

Theme 1: Knowledge about Recidivism

One of the themes emerged from this study was knowledge about recidivism. Most respon-

dents who were asked to have these to say about recidivism: "Recidivism is when a person commits an offence, gets arrested, sentenced to serve a prison term, released from correctional centre and re-arrested for committing another crime."

Recidivism or Re-offending refers to coming back to prison more than once for crimes committed. Reoffending refers to getting arrested and sentenced more than once or either for committing the same or different crime.

The study shows that most offenders who have been re-arrested are aware of recidivism since they themselves are not first-time offenders. These have been attested by respondents A-C as indicated by their responses above.

Theme 2: Family Support during Incarceration

All institutions require visitors to present acceptable identification. Many institutions limit the items that can be taken into the correctional centre. To prevent visitors bringing contrabands such as drugs, weapons, money, cameras, cell phones etc. into the correctional facilities, all closed facilities require searches of persons and belongings. The way offenders interact with family members will strongly impact the continuation of these visits and maintenance or enhancement of family ties. Even male offenders serving very long sentences most of whom were unmarried fathers with little or no contact or knowledge of their children's whereabouts still perceived themselves as fathers and wanted to improve their parenting skills (Silverman 2001).

The researchers obtained information from youth or juveniles who committed crimes staying with their parents or single parent. The respondents have this to say about the views of their parents: "Our parents never concerned themselves about what we do with our lives. They never provide any advice or share any positive idea to us. Some of us are raised by our grandparents who do not advise us when we commit these crimes."

I do not know what they think about me and because since I have been arrested I have not seen them not even once. I am only living with my mom and she never came to visit me nor to come during my court appearance therefore I do not know what she is thinking or whether she is angry with me. My parents were so disappointed after I got arrested and since then they never visited me. They never visited me. They

both stay in Johannesburg, maybe the distance of the prison is too far. It's like they have abandoned me as I was raised by my grandmother.

Such information was revealed by the Sapouna (2011) who cited that female offenders strongly harbour the importance of loving their children and guiding their appropriate social, behavioural and attitudinal development.

Theme 3: Social Contributory Factors

The majority of offenders had these to say about the drugs and alcohol abuse: "We re-offended because we were unable to cope with the communities' demands especially the high alcohol intake and drugs." According to the finding of the study, offenders felt that they are vulnerable to alcohol and drugs when they are released on parole or outside the correctional centre.

Yes, I was under the influence of substance abuse more especially alcohol. The crime was committed at the tavern. Sometimes I used to smoke dagga which influenced me to commit crimes.

This matter clearly shows that more juveniles are into drugs and alcohol intake. They spend more time drinking and smoking daily be it after school, on weekends and during holidays.

Theme 4: The Reintegration of Offenders Back to the Society

Some of the offenders had this to say about community reintegration: "The communities have no problem in accepting us back it is just that any crime which is committed we are the first to be suspected and accused of committing it. Some community members went as far as labelling us criminals wherever we are going."

One of the offenders explained his on situation in the following manner:

Not anymore because when I applied for parole, the Chief said that as a community they have forgiven and accepted me, but I should complete the whole sentence. This means that I don't have a problem being reintegrated back to the community. I am not sure, but I think I will have a problem because I was denied parole because I committed another crime in the community while on parole.

From his responds the community has accepted him back, but he must first serve or complete his sentence whereas respondent I has violated his parole condition and must serve his sentence fully. The researchers have identified

that the problem with re-offenders is that they do not use their privilege offered to them effectively and efficiently instead they use the opportunity of parole to engage in other criminal activities. Failure to do so can lead to incarceration. According to Latessa and Smith (2011), one of the most important conditions of parole is the requirement to report regularly to a parole officer and not leave a prescribed area, such as the county, without permission. Offenders who fail to report or whose whereabouts are unknown are called absconders.

Theme 5: The Impact of the Department of Correctional Services to Offenders

The study revealed the way in which programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services either bear fruits or not in terms of reforming offenders who spend their times there.

In this regard Respondent K had this to say:

The Department of Correctional Services is helping a lot because there are programmes that we have here at prison such as gangsterism, substance abuse etc. secondly there are Pastors who come here to preach and give us advice on how to change our lives.

This is indicative that indeed there are programmes which assist offenders to change or be rehabilitated within the correctional centres, it is up to the offender whether to take it positively or not. However, there are other offenders who the researchers interviewed regarding the programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services. The research participants responded as follows:

Re-offending programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services are helpful, useful and empowering. We learn almost everything within the centre such as educational, recreational and behavioural. These programmes change us in a positive way and prepare us to face a new start / beginning in our community.

The above statement by respondents highlight the extent to which the programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services had brought about the positive change in the lives of the youth who were in prison. This positive change has been due to the provision of a variety of services and programmes offered by the

relevant department in the country (Silverman 2001). The Department of Correctional Services has been able to realise this through the efforts of different professionals with different skills, for example, social workers, psychologists, parole officers and pastors.

CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, this paper concludes that recidivism amongst youth offenders is caused by a multiplicity of factors. Children from poorer families are likely to re-offend because they are less able to achieve their goals legally and because they value some goals (for example, excitement) especially highly. Reintegration plays an important role in the life of the offenders. This is where an offender feels that he is going to be re-united with his family as part of his sentence will be served at home. From the study result, the Department of Correctional Services does not provide well-structured programme to re-integrate the released juveniles back into their communities. They are just released and sent back to their communities. There is nothing or no one to provide support to the juveniles who have been released. In the end, it becomes very difficult for the juveniles to cope and resist the temptation to re-offend. Families, schools and community structures find themselves lacking on how to deal with the juveniles who have been released. Community members and other school children often harbour negative attitudes towards the youth who are from prison. The juveniles who have been released also find that their former criminal friends are ready to welcome them. All these factors makes it very easy for the young ex-offenders to re-offend. This shows that there is still much that needs to be done in order to stop recidivism among the youth in South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this paper recommends that the Department of Correctional Services should revise and improve its restorative programmes to promote reconciliation between the offenders and the victims. Parents should pay visits to their incarcerated children irrespective of their differences. It is also recommended that youth offenders should be assisted to learn to accept

their poor background at home. Youth structures within the communities should be supported and encouraged to focus on educational campaigns which promote positive behavior among the youth. More can be achieved in addressing the issue of recidivism if there is more collaboration efforts to address juvenile delinquency by families, schools youth serving organisations, other community structures and relevant government departments.

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