

Factors That Influence Recidivism Among Offenders In A Prison In Hurungwe District In Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

Background: Recidivism is the act of repeating an undesirable behaviour after having either experienced negative consequences of that behaviour, or having been treated or trained to extinguish that behaviour (Hensln, 2008). In the context of the criminal justice system recidivism refers to a return to incarceration in any penal institution after being released from such a facility (Bailey, 2007; Bennet & Feldman, 2005). Recidivism can incorporate permanent re-incarceration, parole revocation, new convictions, and court ordered returns to facilities (Bailey, 2007). Due to increase in rearrest, reconviction and re-incarceration at a prison in Hurungwe district, the researchers decided to explore factors that influence this phenomenon in order to make recommendations for its reduction and/or prevention.

Materials and Methods: A qualitative research methodology which employed documentary analysis, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was adopted to collect data for the study. Participants were 18 recidivist inmates from a prison in Hurungwe district in Zimbabwe. The data was analysed using descriptive, content and interpretive phenomenological approach.

Results: Findings revealed that recidivism among inmates at this prison were driven by social, cultural, economic and prison factors. Proposed strategies to reduce recidivism included rehabilitation and reintegration programs such as provision of counseling, education, skills training, creating employment opportunities to ex-inmates, empowering inmates upon their release and establishment of centres on farms for homelessness ex-inmates.

Conclusion: In order to reduce and/or prevent recidivism among inmates, the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service should internationally benchmark their services.

Key Words: Recidivism, Social factors, Cultural factors, Economic factors, Prison factors, Inmates.

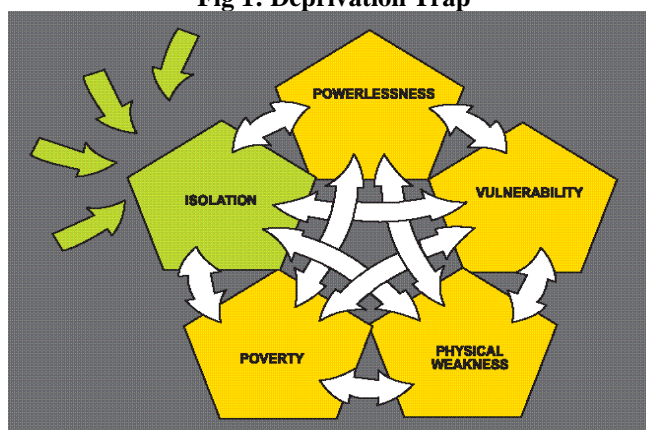
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I. Introduction

Recidivism rates in Australia, Ireland, Japan, Scotland, United Kingdom and United States were reported to be 39%, 62%, 43%, 50%, 46% and 52% respectively (Deady, 2014). This phenomenon is attributed to social, cultural, economic and prison factors. Social factors which influence recidivism include low literacy level, homelessness, rejection, and discrimination (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2012). Culturally, recidivism is associated with being possessed by ancestral spirit and evil spirits. Bukstel and Kilman (2006) cited in Gendreau et al (2016) attribute recidivism to economic problems such as poverty and unemployment. These problems are especially problematic upon release from prison. Bukstel and Kilman (2006) cited in Gendreau et al (2016) further assert that the overwhelming positive reinforcement provided by prison peer group from a variety of antisocial behaviours promote a pro-criminal environment. Inevitably, ex-inmates find themselves in a deprivation trap. Deprivation refers to lacking what is needed for well-being. It has physical, social, economic, political and psychological dimensions (Chambers, 1992). As shown in Fig. 1 below deprivation brings about disadvantages such as physical weakness, isolation, poverty, vulnerability and powerlessness. The five clusters of disadvantage interact with each other to trap people in a situation of disadvantages. Poverty as one of the five clusters narrows lack of assets while powerlessness, physical weakness, isolation and vulnerability widen the dimensions of poverty.

Fig 1: Deprivation Trap



Deprivation trap by Roberts Chambers (1983)

Research has shown that recidivism can be dealt with in several ways. One way is to provide pre-release counselling to inmates which assists inmates to think positively about their life (Wright, 2007). Counselling is based on the notion that the most effective way to produce behavioural change is not to suppress “bad” behaviour (Schultz & Schultz, 2004). However, proponents of counselling suggest that prisoners would benefit from counselling if it is provided continuously from the admission to the discharge of an inmate. The counselling process enables inmates to judge the consequences of their actions and to take responsibility for them (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Rehabilitation is another way of addressing recidivism. Wright (2007) defines rehabilitation as a fight back reformation technique that is based on two methods: (i) correcting maladjustment behaviour of an individual (ii) Educating an individual acceptable behaviour in the society. Education works in two levels to rehabilitate the criminals. On a macro level, society as a whole is being educated to promote the importance of keeping the laws as well as ensuring that there is less discrimination against former criminals. This ensures that propensity for ex-convicts to return to a life of crime is less, as they are able to secure jobs after their release. However on a micro level, education is offered within the prison to allow the prisoners to upgrade and stay relevant to the changing society outside the prison walls. Wright (2007), further points that the aim of rehabilitation programmes is to ensure that prisoners are given opportunity to increase their context knowledge base. This is essential as studies show that many inmates do not have basic grade school education. This would severely impede their success of acquiring jobs, thus many would turn to a normal life. Wormith (1994) states that basic criminal rehabilitation programmes ensure that there is a standard level of literacy amongst the inmates who sign up for rehabilitation course. Rehabilitation also ensures that inmates are socially well adjusted. Medical doctor’s assessment is meted to test for mental or physical disabilities that led to prisoners’ incarceration in the first place. Should the inmates be ready and willing to accept counselling and assessments, many of them are able to return to society as relatively well-balanced individuals. For unlawful entry criminals, this is a pertinent issue as counsellors would help them to balance inner dynamics that led to the deviant behaviour. James (2004) advised that availability of work and moral instructions are also crucial rehabilitation strategies in prisons. As this would equip prisoners with skills and consistently prisoners are also taught to work. This rehabilitation strategy is in consistent with a Chinese proverb which translates to, "give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." The proverb emphasizes the value of empowerment and self-sufficiency. Offenders must be taught to lawfully acquire their own property rather than to plunder other people’s property. Research suggest that offence specific programmes such as vocational education and training, health and nutrition and social skills training contribute to reduction in criminal behaviour (Goyer, 2004; James, 2009). Successful rehabilitation is always preceded by needs assessment (Goyer, 2004). It is also important to ensure that rehabilitation programmes are crafted to match different learning styles, cultural backgrounds and learning needs of inmates (Wright, 2007). Research also suggest that provision of aftercare service to ex-inmates reduces recidivism as this would help to monitor and assist ex-inmates to adjust to outside prison environment. Such services should be of international standard, therefore benchmarking is important. Another factor which reduces recidivism among prison inmates is rehabilitation. Successful rehabilitation depends largely on an offender’s state of health, level of education, ability to socially interact with people in a society, work ethic and ability to obtain and hold a job (Australian Department of Correctional Service, 2004).

II. Material And Methods

This qualitative study was carried out at a prison in Hurungwe district in Zimbabwe from October 2022 to October 2023. Eighteen recidivist inmates participated in the study.

Study Design: Qualitative study

Study Location: This was a correctional service centre located in Hurungwe District in Zimbabwe.

Study Duration: October 2022 to October 2023.

Sample size: 18 recidivist inmates.

Sample size calculation: The researchers purposively selected the eighteen recidivists who were part of the study. The selection strategy was considered suitable because it enabled the researchers to include participants with relevant knowledge and experience.

Procedure methodology

Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained ethical clearance from Research Council of Zimbabwe. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Service Research and Development. Participants were engaged in in-depth interviews on factors which influence recidivism. The interviews were conducted in room allocated by prison authorities. Each interview took between 45 to 60 minutes and all interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility, in depth individual interviews were conducted to get to the core of the recidivists' views. Interview scripts were written in a notebook to allow for auditing of the research process and this helped to improve trustworthiness of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited in Robert Johnson Foundation (2008) posit that trustworthiness of a research study is important to evaluate its worth and it involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Data analysis

Content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) was used to analyse and draw themes from the data. The aim was to attain a condensed and broad description of factors that influence recidivism among prison inmates. This involved reading out each in-depth interview to identify potential codes and creating a coding system and assigning agreed codes to relevant texts. The investigators independently coded data and compared notes to ensure reliability. Four factors emerged from the in-depth interviews.

III. Result

Characteristics of respondents

The researchers interviewed eighteen recidivist inmates. The recidivist inmates' ages ranged from 18 years to 44 years. All recidivist inmates were males. Five recidivist inmates had never been to school, seven had attended school up to grade 7 while six had attended school up to form four. Thirteen recidivist inmates came from disintegrated backgrounds while six recidivist inmates had a history of being orphans. Five recidivist inmates had recidivated three times, six recidivist inmates had recidivated four times, three recidivist inmates had recidivated five times, two recidivist inmates had recidivated six times, and eight recidivist inmates had recidivated once.

Factors influencing recidivism among inmates at a prison in Hurungwe District

As shown in Fig. 1 below participants reported that social, economic, cultural and prison factors influenced recidivism among inmates at a prison in Hurungwe district.

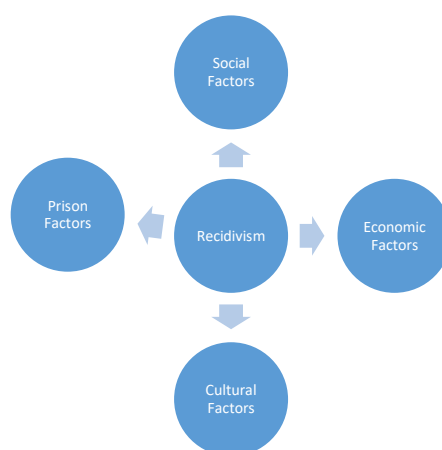


Fig. 1 Factors influencing Recidivism

Several social factors were reported to be contributing to recidivism among inmates at a prison in Hurungwe district. Fourteen participants reported that due to poor academic qualifications they failed to secure employment and consequently recidivated into criminal activities. For example, participant 6 said: *My parents died when I was doing grade three therefore I failed to continue with my education and failure to secure employment drove me back into criminal activities.* As indicated by thirteen participants lack of social support drove them back into criminal activities. This view is endorsed by Participant 1 who said: *like a child coming from the mother's womb, I was released from prison without any resource or money. I endured a lot of problems out of prison and finally decided to go back to criminal activities.* Two participants recidivated into criminal activities when they found their properties sold and their wives cohabiting with other men. This predicament was aptly narrated by Participant 9 who said: *Upon my arrival back home after completing my jail term, my wife had sold everything of my property and went back to her parent's rural area where she cohabited with another man who promised her marriage.* One participant disclosed that prestige was a social factor influencing recidivism among inmates. This view is endorsed by participant 15 who said: *My relatives are rich but I don't seek assistance from them when I got released from prison because I felt it was dignified to do my own things. I wanted to prove to my relatives that I was able to fend for myself. However, when I failed to fulfil this objective I recidivate into criminal activities.* Fifteen participants reported that rejection by members of their society upon prison sentence expiry drove them back into criminal activities. This difficulty is acknowledged by participant 4 who said: *When I was released from prison people don't accept me as a changed person, often they isolated and labelled me a thief.* Participant 3 echoed this problem when he said: *I was trapped between two hard rocks because I was rejected by the society including my relatives outside prison while the prison loved me no more after expiry of my jail term therefore I decided to recidivate into criminal activities.* These findings are in line with those of Irish Penal Reform Trust (2012) which associated recidivism with social disadvantages. This notion is supported by the ecological theory indicating that unavailability of resources, ill-treatment, lack of support services and ill-planned inmates' community re-entry could encourage former inmates to recidivate into criminal activities (Santrock, 2004).

Economic factors also drove recidivist inmates back into criminal activities. Thirteen participants reported that poverty triggered their criminal tendencies. More so because it is very difficult to regain employment after being incarcerated. For example participant 7 said: *I once refrained from criminal activities for four years when someone who owns some small trucks employed me. In order to survive, I recidivated into criminal activities when the trucks broke down.* Ten participants alleged that the current economic hardships prevalent in the country make life out of prison difficult and push former inmates into criminal activities. It seems most recidivist inmates fail to secure resources through legal means as a result they steal. Seven participants disclosed that their lives outside prison had been hopeless and they saw imprisonment as a solution. This view is shared by participant 13 who said: *I lost hope for a proper life outside prison and believe it is better to live in prison forever.* It seems some of the recidivist inmates who are convicted of crimes such as unlawful entry and theft do not think a great deal about the consequence of their crimes or freedom. In prison inmates receive free medication. However, things change when inmates are released back into their communities. As highlighted by two participants the need to get money for medication could drive inmates back into criminal activities. Participant 13 acknowledged this when he said: *I suffered a sexual transmitted disease outside there, all wasn't well and I could have gone near death, only committing a crime and get treatment in prison remained an option.* Especially in urban areas former inmates fail to afford rented accommodation. Two participants indicated that they lacked clothes, blankets and food and so recidivated into criminal activities. Participant 5 said: *Upon completion of my third jail term I slept under a bridge with no blankets.* Participant 8 said: *When my father died he left a house in Chikangwe location in Karoi but my brother chases me away saying that you are a thief; you should not stay here.* Other participants (33%) propounded that availability of market for stolen property contributes to their recidivism. These participants said that they are tempted to commit crimes since there is a ready market for their stolen goods. For example, participant 7 said: *When I was released from prison I met somebody who used to buy my stolen goods and asked if I could provide a television set immediately.* This seems to indicate that behind the recidivist inmates are people who promote criminal behaviour.

Cultural factors which contribute to recidivism include being possessed by ancestral spirits, evil spirits and use of juju. 6% of the participants reported being possessed by ancestral spirits as a contributing factor to criminal behaviour and recidivism. For example, Participant 9 said: *I don't know what happens to me because if I dream my grandpa, I go and steal mostly from somebody's house and I don't get caught. Usually somebody whom I sale the stolen property would lead to my arrest.* As for being possessed by evil spirits 16% of the participants reported being influenced by evil spirits to commit criminal offences. For example, Participant 12 said: *I eventually realized that evil spirits influence me to commit crimes so that I can stay behind bars.* A few participants (11%) reported use of juju or charm. They propounded that people need to get rich quickly therefore they make use of juju or charms hoping that they will steal and go uncaught. They blamed sangomas for giving

recidivist inmates juju, giving them hope of committing crime without being caught or promising them non-conviction by the court officials.

Prison factors which contribute to recidivism include harsh sentences and serving a jail term due to wrongness conviction, peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness. A few participants (6%) reported serving a sentence for an offence that one did not commit as another contributing factor as one may revenge by committing a crime. For example, Participant 10 said: *I served a jail term while I was innocent on my first conviction therefore I decided to revenge by committing a crime. However, I got caught and came back to prison.* Some participants (44%) pointed out that they were influenced by friends to re-engage in crimes. 11% of these participants went on to blame themselves for accepting poor advice from their friends. For example; Participant 14 said: *My friends influenced me to re-engage into criminal activities. They advised me that we are behind in terms of wealth and we don't have money to start new life. If we can strategise very well, we will steal and not get caught. This will help us to start a new life.* Prison environment is sometimes a good training ground for crimes. It has also been established that prison conditions are so bad that they depress some inmates permanently.

IV. Conclusion

The study revealed that social, economic, cultural and prison factors influence recidivism among prison inmates. Strategies to reduce and/or prevent recidivism include rehabilitation and reintegration activities such include counseling, education, skills training, assisting inmates to fit back into the community, employment creation, empowering inmates upon their release and provision of half way homes or homes to ex-inmates.

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