The influence of the immediate environment on parolee rehabilitation: The parolees’ experiences in a low-resourced area in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In democratic South Africa, there has been a shift from the punishment of offenders to the rehabilitation approach and a change from prisons to correctional centres. Once someone becomes an offender, the person goes through rehabilitation and not punishment. This paper discusses the influence of the immediate environment on the rehabilitation of parolees in Brits area of North-West Province in South Africa, a poverty-stricken area with limited resources. A qualitative approach and an exploratory descriptive design were utilised to describe the parolees’ experiences of parole in a low-resourced community. One-on-one in-depth interviews were used to collect data which were then analysed thematically and backed by existing literature. The findings of the study showed that environmental factors play a role in offending and rehabilitation of offenders in low-resourced areas. The paper makes critical recommendations for consideration by parole officials and researchers to facilitate the effective rehabilitation of offenders in low-resourced areas.

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Introduction

Crime is a social problem, not only in South Africa but all over the world. As such, South Africa uses community corrections in correctional centres as an alternative to rehabilitate offenders and make them law abiding citizens in their communities. The term “community corrections” is defined as community sentences and models that provide alternatives to imprisonment (Ndike, 2014, p 21). According to South African law, there are two alternatives to incarceration which are correctional supervision and parole. Both are exercised by the Department of Correctional Services and together are known as community corrections (Department of Correctional Services, 2018). Parole, as part of the reward system for progress in rehabilitation, is a key part of community corrections because of its management of offenders’ re-integration (Magadze, 2016, p79). Offenders that serve their sentence in the community are not expected to reoffend as the process is intended to rehabilitate them so as to leave a life of crime and become law abiding citizens; however, correctional centres struggle with managing the numbers of new cases and with offenders who have been under correctional services for offending more than once, called recidivism (Zara & Farrington, 2015). According to Zara and Farrington (2015), recidivism is the official criminal involvement of a person who after being convicted for an offence commits another crime. Communities that suffer from high rates of crime and the government at large often make efforts to devise ways to reduce crime and the rate of recidivism (Ahmed, 2017).

Recidivism rates vary worldwide. It was reported that Sweden had a 43% reconviction rate between 2005 and 2015, while in Norway, two-year recidivism rates increased from 14% to 42% from 2010 to 2011 (Fazel & Wolf, 2015). According to Khwela (2015), recent studies show that general figures for recidivism indicate that 50% to 70% of inmates reoffend within a period of three years. There are no specific statistics on the rate of recidivism in South Africa; however, the rate of crime continues to rise. For example, the total number of crimes committed in Brits, in the North West Province, increased from 4 856 reported crimes in 2016 to 9 466 in 2017...
(Crime Stats SA, 2017). This increase of crime in the Brits area, which doubled in a space of one year, calls for systematic social inquiry. The National Crime Prevention Strategy adopted an integrated justice system approach aimed at making the criminal justice system more effective, which should ensure that the risk of reoffending is less (White Paper on Corrections in South Africa, 2005).

The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa of 2005 also declares that it is difficult for rehabilitation to be fully complete without reintegrating the offender into their community (White Paper on Corrections in South Africa, 2005). One of the important characteristics of reintegration is that the community should be involved in the reintegration of offenders into them (Ndike, 2014). However, placing offenders in the community also has its own implications that can lead them to reoffending. Lekalakala (2016) states that the Department of Correctional Services in South Africa has a challenge to provide support to offenders beyond the reintegration programmes; further adding that support may be through other stakeholders to monitor offenders. The above-mentioned statement fails to add that families can also offer the necessary support that is needed to prevent unwanted results from offenders in the community. In this paper, we argue that that successful social reintegration cannot be achieved by legislation and institutions alone. Families of offenders and the community at large have an important role to play in assisting and supporting offenders to adjust in the community (Ndike 2014).

This study intends to provide essential information lens on parole as a rehabilitation mechanism in low-resourced communities such as Brits in North West Province in South Africa. The understanding of parole services in such communities is expected to influence the evaluations and re-configuration of the services for the benefit of the parole services as rehabilitation mechanisms of the departments concerned. Moreso, this paper contributes to the academic field in terms of developing the existing body of knowledge and theoretical frameworks on parole and criminal justice in low-resourced settings. Further, social work practice in correctional facilities should benefit from the findings of this paper in enhancing the social work roles in the parole system when rehabilitating offenders.

**Literature Review**

**Conceptual and Theoretical Review**

The main theoretical frameworks underpinning the concept of parole are the ecosystem, social disorganisation, classical approach, and social constructivist theories. These are discussed in detail in the succeeding paragraphs.

**Ecosystem theory**

Commencing with Mary Richmond in 1917, social scientists have understood that the environment plays a significant role in the lives of people (Teater, 2014). This theory has been redefined over the 20th century till date. This theory has enabled a movement away from focusing primarily on the person-in-environment, which has led to inadequate results and criticism. The theory also draws attention to focusing not only on intrapersonal issues, but also on the transactional problems impacted by environmental issues. The ecosystem theory is therefore essential in conceptualising recidivism.

In lieu of the fact that the ecosystem theory focuses on the person-in-environment, Paulson (2013) asserts that it provides vital lens for understanding ex-offenders and the world around them with an intention to reduce recidivism among ex-offenders in South Africa. More importantly from this theoretical perspective, there is need to determine the environmental factors that play an important role in human development (Țica, 2014). From this perspective, the issue of crime is seen as not limited to the person and family, but to the entire society. Teater (2014:21) maintains that the interconnectedness of systems with various parts of the society allows for transition or movement in one part of the system to causes a change in the other parts. It is argued from the ecosystems theory that offenders’ problems or their unacceptable behaviour may be caused or influenced by systems in their environment. The emphasis of ecosystem theory on the person-in-environment makes it possible to link and connect individuals, families and the entire community’s environment, (Teater, 2014), and how these influence the effectiveness of rehabilitating offenders and successfully reintegrating them into their communities.

As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, an individual’s health is within a microsystem which comprises the family, peers, church and school. This microsystem is then influenced by the mesosystem, then the exosystem and finally the macrosystem. All these different environments can significantly impact the individual. The ecosystem theory, according to Johnson (2008:2 as referenced by Dube, 2016), provides comprehensive knowledge of how individuals connect to their environment, which affects them, and how they impact the same environment. An interplay of systems such as individuals, groups, communities, and culture is emphasised as a primary driver of the positive and bad outcomes of such interactions (Johnson, 2008:3, as cited by Dube, 2016).
Social disorganisation theory

According to social disorganisation theory, crime and disorder are caused by weak local regulations at the neighbourhood level (Fazel & Wolf, 2018; Anderson et al., 2020). The point of departure for social disorganisation theory is that criminal activity among people is a “normal response to abnormal conditions” (Bond, 2015:1). Conditions such as poverty, filth and decaying living conditions, and increased levels of ethnic mixing are fertile predictive conditions for criminal thought and activity. In the Brits area, this theory finds assertion as the community is bordered by mining activities and neighbourhoods that are characterised by a mix of poverty, ethnic diversity, and dilapidated shacks. The existence of social disorganisations is also understood to occur when rules are missing, when there are contradictory rules, and when conformity to rules is not rewarded or punished accordingly (Inderbitzin, Bates & Gainey, 2016). This causes a collapse of community-based controls such as the parole system in South Africa.

Classical approach

The classical approach represents a traditional criminological viewpoint which describes crime as a free-will decision to engage in illegal behaviour. This decision is made using the pain-pleasure principle, which states that individuals act in ways that maximize pleasure while minimizing suffering. Classicists think that individuals are hedonistic, seeking pleasure at all costs and avoiding misery. According to classical thought, the best approach to prevent crime is by deterrence - the threat of arrest and punishment (Valasik, 2014). The classical approach holds a notion that people should be sentenced according to what they have done and not to be sentenced based on the level of likelihood that they might reoffend (Opp, 2020). Social scientists such as Von Hirsch (cited by Dancig-Rosenberg & Dagan, 2019) argue that people seek self-interest and that if there is a threat of punishment, the act of crime can be deterred notwithstanding the fact that if they want to commit crime they will. This means that people in disregard of punishment commensurate to the offense can still reoffend, which begs the question of whether the parole system, as an alternative to corrections, is effective enough to deter parolees from re-offending.

A traditional approach relies on "regular actions" or "situational crime prevention." This viewpoint focuses on "criminal contexts" (that is, conditions favourable to organized crime activities) rather than on individual or group reasons. This approach analyses the availability of possibilities to commit certain crimes and seeks to reduce them through, for example, greater urban redevelopment and environmental design. This strategy is founded on the principle of regular activities, or the notion that levels of organized crime are influenced by a number of enabling conditions, including the availability of appealing targets and chances, a low degree of supervision, and a low risk of arrest (Van Koppen, 2013).

Social constructivist theory

According to Teater (2014), social constructivism is based on the premise that individuals’ realities are continually transforming and adapting to the experiences in their lives. The theory’s origins may be traced back to two opposing philosophical traditions: interpretative and structuralist. As a result, numerous social constructionist aspects exist for criminology, as well as other social sciences, to examine and expand on. It is suggested that modern social constructionism provides potential answers to concerns at the forefront of criminological study. The ageless question of what constitutes a crime, as well as other pressing issues brought by actual social conditions and the intra-scientific state of affairs, are central (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018).
The debate lies in how people create knowledge and meaning of a phenomenon within a specific context. Within this context, problems are defined differently and thereafter, solutions to them are constructed differently. Social constructionists assert that humans produce knowledge and meaning about their experiences and their ideas (Mogashoa, 2014:52). Following that line of thought, this study adopts the social constructivism approach in understanding how the participants of the study conceptualise parole as an alternative method of rehabilitating offenders. The methodology of this study makes a commitment to this approach.

This paper is organised as follows: first it has an introduction part, the second part is a literature review with theoretical and empirical studies that shed light on the linkage between theory and practice. The third part introduces background information on research and methodology. After analysis and findings of the study, the authors provide discussions and implications. Finally, this paper has key conclusions and limitations of the study.

**Policy and legal frameworks on parole in South Africa**

Historically, South Africa operated on the notion that prisons were places of punishment which was executed through forced prison labour such as building roads (South African history online, 2017). In the early 1960s, the imprisonment of political detainees became a feature of South African prisons (South Africa history online, 2017) which then necessitated the introduction of parole system. In 1993, the Interim Constitution of South Africa embodied the fundamental rights of the country’s citizens, including those of offenders, which resulted in the introduction of the human rights culture into the country’s correctional system (White Paper on Corrections in South Africa, 2005).

One essential policy framework in South Africa is the White Paper on Corrections of 2005 which reformed correctional services and describes parole as a contributing mechanism to humane custodial conditions and also a vehicle for social reintegration. The White Paper on Corrections of 2005 necessitated the National Crime Prevention Strategy which adopted an integrated justice system approach aimed at making the criminal justice system more effective to ensure that the risk of reoffending is less (White Paper on Corrections in South Africa, 2005). The current focus is on rehabilitation of offenders to make them law-abiding citizens. Part of that rehabilitation is the reintegration of offenders into their communities by means of parole where they finish their sentences in the communities. A needs based approach is provided for in the South African correctional system which, according to the White Paper on Correction in South Africa (2005:61), Rule 66(1) of the Standard Minimum Rules, suggests:

“To these ends, all appropriate means shall be used, including religious care in the countries where this is possible, education, vocational guidance and training, social casework, employment counselling, physical development and strengthening of moral character, in accordance with the individual needs of each prisoner, taking account of his (or her) social and criminal history, his (or her) physical and mental capacities and aptitudes, his personal temperament, the length of his (or her) sentence and his (or her) prospects after release.”

Another important legal framework is the Correctional Services Act 111 of 2008. This legal instrument provides for parole in correctional centres in South Africa and allows offenders to serve their sentence in the community under community corrections. According to The Correctional Services Act 111 of 2008, section 50(1) (a) (iii) (iv), the objectives of community corrections are to enable persons subject to community corrections to be rehabilitated in a way that best keeps them as a vital part of society and to allow persons subject to community corrections to be fully integrated into society when they have completed their sentences. While parole plays an essential role in rehabilitation of offenders, it is however, regarded as a privilege and not a right. This implies that offenders should comply with their sentence and behave well to qualify to be released on parole. Before being placed on parole, the Correctional Services Act 11 of 2008, section 45(1), provides that offenders being prepared to be placed in the community on parole, should first be prepared for placement and reintegration into society by participating in a pre-release programme. The expectation is that offenders comply by participating in designated programmes to ensure rehabilitation or change of behaviour before they can be placed on parole.

The Criminal Procedure Act no. 51 of 1977 is also a very essential legal framework for parole services in South Africa. With the enactment of section 276A(3)(a)(ii) of the Criminal Procedure Act no. 51 of 1977, the legislation brought an uncommon idea into the South African criminal law. The Act provides that an incarcerated offender approaches the trial court after serving a certain minimum period as prescribed by the relevant Correctional Services Act in order for the court to reconsider the sentence originally imposed and, among other competent sentences, convert the remainder of the offender’s sentence to correctional supervision (Myburgh, 2017). It is within this legal framework that parole became a legalised rehabilitation process.

Despite being used widely in South Africa, the effectiveness of the parole system has been met with mixed feelings and perennial objections. Researchers argue that the use of correctional supervision, or parole, is a method of alleviating the pressure caused by overcrowding in prisons rather than an effective rehabilitation process (Myburgh, 2017). Such criticism of the parole system raises questions and necessitates scrutinising parole to determine areas of weakness and improvement to ensure that offenders are effectively rehabilitated.
The role of community-based interventions and support systems in facilitating the rehabilitation of parolees in low-resourced communities

Community-based interventions and support systems play a critical role in rehabilitation of offenders in low-resourced communities. However, it is noteworthy that community corrections can be more effective when adequately resourced and properly monitored (Center on Sentencing and Corrections, Vera Institute of Justice, 2013). Low-resourced communities have inadequate resources and therefore are comparatively deprived from fully accessing the benefits of community-based interventions despite their critical importance. The succeeding discussion sheds light on some of the critically important community-based interventions that low-resourced communities can use. It is noteworthy that there are many other interventions available, and we chose to discuss on the most feasible ones given the resource constrains of the low-resourced communities.

Re-entry Programmes

The Right on Crime (2023) describes re-entry programmes as comprehensive initiatives that provide a range of services to help parolees successfully reintegrate into their communities. When offenders are incarcerated, they are taken away from their communities for rehabilitation. When rehabilitation has been realised, they need to be reintegrated back into their communities. These services often include job training, education, mental health counselling, substance abuse treatment, and assistance with accommodation. Research has established that when re-entry programmes are implemented and sustained with proper resources, they facilitate the offenders’ smooth transition back into society and help reduce recidivism (United Nations, 2018; Mosteller, 2018)

Mentorship and peer support

In low-resourced communities, ex-offenders struggle with sustaining law-abiding behaviour after they have been reintegrated into the communities. Mentorship programs connect parolees with volunteer mentors who have successfully reintegrated into society after their own involvement with the criminal justice system. Research found that mentoring has a positive effect on the rehabilitation of offenders and sustaining law-abidance among ex-offenders and parolees (Timor, Peled-Laskov & Golan, 2023). The services that volunteer mentors provide among other include guidance, support, and being role models for ex-offenders and parolees.

Substance abuse treatment

In many societies globally, parolees struggle with substance abuse issues. Research found that such challenges with substance abuse among parolees is a precursor to re-offending (Petek, 2021). Community-based programmes that offer substance abuse counselling, therapy, and access to treatment centres to address these challenges have the potential to curb re-offending and sustain the outcomes of rehabilitation processes (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2023).

Community-based organisations

The role played by the non-profit sector cannot be overemphasised in the rehabilitation of offenders. This is more important in low-resourced communities where they are mainly active in South Africa and other similar contexts. The non-profit organisation and Faith-Based Organisations tend to be closer to the communities and work together with community members where most government services cannot be accessed (Sinclair, 2017). These organisations may offer a wide range of services tailored to the specific needs of their communities. For example, in South Africa, the Mhani Gingi organisation provides training in business to the community and also to the inmates in the Cape town area (Research Unit of the Parliament of South Africa, 2016).

Wraparound Services

Project Hope (2023) shares that wraparound services coordinate multiple support systems to provide holistic care and address the various challenges parolees face. Parolees are provided with “one stop” programmes that include mental health, primary care, and non-medical services such as education, housing services and employment assistance. Wraparound services aim to provide proper transition from prison into the community through improved social, health and educational outcomes (Azuela, 2018).

Research and Methodology

Research methodology is the science of studying how research is scientifically carried out. It refers to the research methods and the logic behind the methods that explains why certain methods were preferred and how they are going to be carried out (Kothari, 2014).

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa and Varpio (2015:669), view qualitative research as “the systematised investigation of a social phenomenon in its usual settings and the researcher is the main data collection instrument, examining why events occur and what those events mean to the participants”. The researchers also identified a direct connection between the qualitative research approach and social constructivist theory. Qualitative research designs seek to understand the experiences of human beings and are aimed at exploring and explaining how or why a phenomenon arises, which is also the essential lens taken by social constructivism (Haradhan, 2018). Qualitative research was suitable for this study because it assisted the researchers in collecting information about how parole works in rehabilitating offenders with the motive of creating understanding of the phenomenon (Haradhan, 2018).
Research Design

In this study, we used exploratory descriptive design. Exploratory descriptive design is a research design that aims to describe phenomena by exploring them from the participants’ perspective (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2018). The design was appropriate for this study as it enabled the researchers to explore the views of participants involved in, or who were part of, the parole system and to generate information for future research and to possibly inform and create insights of the changes needed in the parole system. The design is consistent with social constructivist theory to which this study was committed. Social constructivism holds that people give and attach different interpretations to a phenomenon due to different lenses they use and experience (Teate, 2014). This was essential for generation of substantial and insightful information needed in the correctional environments and directly consistent with the exploratory descriptive design this study used. The data collection technique employed was individual in-depth interviews with parolees to elicit information about their experiences and is consistent with exploratory descriptive design.

Population

According to Gray (2014), a population is defined as “the total number of possible elements that are included in the study”. The study population comprised of offenders who had been on parole since the year 2019. It was beneficial for the study to include parolees who had been on parole since 2019, to explore how well they had adjusted and were integrated into the community as bound by parole service condition (Magadze, 2016). It also assisted in better exploring the qualities of desistance, which was essential in determining whether parole was an effective way of rehabilitating (Alpher, Durose & Markman, 2018). The selection of offenders who were on parole since 2018 is in line with Khwela (2015)’s argument that recidivism rates indicate that 50% to 70% of inmates reoffend within a period of three years.

Sampling method

The sampling method that was used in this study was purposive sampling to identify primary participants who had personal experiences of parole as parolees. Other sampling techniques could not ensure this. Purposive sampling implies choosing participants according to pre-selected criteria relevant to a particular research question (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Therefore, the researchers selected only parolees who had been on parole since the year 2019. This assisted the researchers in exploring how the parolees had adjusted in the community for the past three years.

Sampling Size

The data saturation point determined the final number of participants in the study. Therefore, the sample size for this study was five participants comprising of parolees. In-depth interviews with five parolees provided rich data that no new data emerged after interviewing five parolees (Gray, 2014); Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016), and hence the researcher could not continue with the interviews as there were no new information emerging from the interviews.

Data collection

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the parolees, utilising an interview schedule as a data collection instrument. The interview questions were semi-structured to ensure the flow of the data did not miss any essential information needed in the study (Hunter et al, 2018).

Procedurally, the researchers sought ethical approval from the North West University Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, (HREC), to proceed with the study. Also, they sought permission from the North West Provincial Department of Correctional services. This was done to observe ethics and protocol essential in the research process (Department of Correctional Service, 2018).

All participants were given information on the study and signed consent form to indicate their willingness to be part of the study. Data were collected using one-on-one interviews (Gray, 2014), with the participants in a secure place to ensure that there were no distractions during the interview processes. Parolee were not forced to take part in the study, rather, voluntary participation was emphasised. The interviews were recorded with consent from the participants to ensure trustworthiness of the information collected. The interviews were both in English for those that comprehended English language and also translated into Tswana (the language in the are of the study).

Data analysis

Data analysis, which began when data was collected, (Kothari (2014), was done through establishment of categories, the application of the categories to raw data through coding, tabulation, and then drawing textual inferences. Thematic data analysis was used in this study. Maguire and Delahun (2017) define thematic data analysis as the process of identifying themes within qualitative data. The researchers transcribed the collected data by listening to the audio-recorded interviews to produce meaningful information; therefore, the raw data were classified into purposeful thematic categories which guided data presentation and analysis, and then the information was backed and compared with existing literature (Maguire and Delahun, 2017; Experian, 2020).

Ethical considerations
According to Bhandari (2021), ethical considerations are a set of principles that guide the research activities and ensure that the code of ethics is adhered to when collecting data. Therefore, it was important to ensure that the research adhered to ethical considerations as discussed below.

**Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy**

Confidentiality is an important component in any research and refers to protecting the data collected from participants. Therefore, precautions were made, and the participants were ensured that the information they provided would not be divulged to third parties except for those involved with the study. This was also explained to the participants (Ahmed, 2017). Participants’ names, identities, addresses, and any other identifying information linking the data to the participants were not used in the study. Anonymity refers to a condition in which the true identity of an individual is not known to researchers (The Evergreen State College, 2022). In this paper, pseudonyms are used in the presentation of the findings.

This also ensures anonymity of the participants. Privacy refers to when a researcher protects the identity of participants and protects the data collected from the interviewee. Interviews were done in private spaces where nothing could interrupt the interview processes and a “DO NOT DISTURB” sign on the venue of the interviews was clearly labelled (The Evergreen State College, 2022)

**Findings of the study**

Data were collected thematically, and analysis was also done in a similar method and the findings were therefore also presented in a thematic manner. The main themes of the study revolved around the experiences of parolees pertaining to the parole system. The findings therefore are presented in the succeeding sections.

**Biographical information of the parolees**

The researchers wanted to have a ‘biographical picture of the participants by including their personal details. These included their age, place of residence, educational background, and the type of families they came from. The names used in the table are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the parolees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Type of Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Damonsville</td>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>Poor Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Mmakau</td>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>Stable Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therry</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Ramogodi</td>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>Dysfunctional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thabo</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Mmakau</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Dysfunctional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Mmakau</td>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>Dysfunctional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Letlape & Dube, 2023

**Age**

Age was one of the factors that assisted the researcher with insight on the developmental stage most participants were in. From the above data presentation in table 1, it is evident that most participants are youth ranging from 26 to late-30s in age. The parolees were youthful offenders. Age plays an important role when it comes to understanding crime and the behaviour of humans. According to Farrington (1986), as cited by Cornelius, Lynch and Gore (2017), rates of criminal behaviour increase throughout the adolescent stage and then descend as the person ages. The transformation of participants, in this case, was mostly influenced by the rehabilitation process that takes place during their incarceration. Research findings from the Harvard Kennedy School’s Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management (PCJ) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) found that youth incarcerations are detrimental to the proper rehabilitation processes of the offenders and suggests the use of programmes that offer possibilities for healthy decision-making and development to young people in smaller, more homelike facilities or in their local communities (Schaffer, 2016).

**Type of family**

The family is an immediate environment which influences the upbringing of an individual. The family has direct influence on the behaviour of its family members (Thomas, Liu & Umberson, 2017). As such, the participants were asked about their upbringing and family background to explore how that factor may have contributed to their criminal behaviour. The sub-theme of unhealthy family dynamics emerged from the interview responses. The excerpts below indicate what the participants had to say:

“...I stayed with my parents, my mother however my father passed away and the situation was bad due to poverty... ” - Tony

“I come from a family where I was raised by maternal family and there has always been family conflict that only old people would know about. I was raised by a single parent who was working at Johannesburg therefore I was taken care of by my aunts who treated me bad…they used to remind me that my mother is not present...” - Terry

“I started staying with my sister then later moved to stay with my mother…my mother and father have separated when I was still young. “ - Thabo

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This study provides evidence that the majority of the participants came from disturbed family patterns and dysfunctional families which might have created a toxic environment for them. The study also shows that the family system plays a major role in socialising an individual. According to Tica (2014), the ecosystem theory emphasizes that environmental factors play an important role in human development. Offenders’ problems, or their unacceptable behaviour, may be caused or influenced by systems in their environment such as family. The emphasis of ecosystem theory on the person-in-environment makes it possible in this study to link and connect individuals, families, and the entire community environment (Teater, 2014) and how they influence each other in the rehabilitation of offenders and re-integration of them into their communities. From the above data presentation, four out of the five parolees interviewed came from home environments that were not conducive for their early childhood development and their wellbeing, which therefore could have negatively impacted them and led them to a life of crime.

**Place of residence**

It was important to highlight the place of residence from where the participants came because the environment in which one grows up is a typical immediate environment that can shape one’s behaviour. Ecosystem theory emphasises that environmental factors play an important role in human development (Tica, 2014). Below are the verbatim responses of where the participants came from:

“…I stay at Damonsville but I grew at Mmakau where I have committed my crime.” - Tony

“…I am from Mmakau…” - Thomas

“…I was born at Ga-Mphahlele however I grew up at Ramogodi then I moved to Johannesburg, that is where I started to commit crime…” - Terry

“I am from Mmakau…for me to move from Soshanguve where I was staying with my sister to come back to Mmakau it is because I had broken the law…” – Thabo

“I am from Bela-Bela however I now stay with my boyfriend at Mmakau…” - Tammy

From the above data, it is evident that all parolees are from areas or have been in areas where crime is prevalent, for example, Terry committed his crime in Johannesburg. Johannesburg is a city in South Africa known as the city of gold and also where crime is also prominent. According to the latest crime statistics, the level of crime in Johannesburg, is such that 89.34% of the population has experienced crime (Nambeo, 2022). It proves that the environment has power to influence a person. Tony, Thabo, and Terry were originally from the Brits Area, which is a low-income area where crime is also rife as a result of poor socio-economic circumstances. The total number of crimes committed at Brits, in the North West Province, increased in the period of 2016 to 2017, from 4 856 crimes reported in 2016 to 9 466 crimes in the 2017 (Crime Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2017). The statistics demonstrate that crime exists in the areas where the participants came from. Against the literature review, the social disorganisation theory is relevant to understanding the participants’ backgrounds and to understanding the phenomenon under study. When elaborating on this theory, Bond (2015:1) stated that criminal activity among people is a “normal response to abnormal conditions”. Conditions such as poverty, filth and decaying living conditions, and increased levels of ethnic mixing are fertile predictive conditions for criminal thought and activity. In Brits area, this theory finds assertion as the community is bordered by mining activities and a neighbourhood characterised by a mix of poverty, ethnic diversity, and dilapidated shacks.

**Educational background**

The participants were asked about their educational background to gauge the impact of education on criminal behaviour. It emerged in the study that all five participants had poor educational backgrounds that might have had an impact on their criminal behaviour. None of them had completed secondary school. The verbatim responses of the participants were captured and indicated:

“I went Lebogang Primary School then I went to Tswelelang Primary School, after that I attended school at Malatse Motspe Secondary School and dropped out in Grade 8. I dropped because sometimes I would not have things needed to go to school then I decided to leave school. ” - Tony

“…I dropped out of school in grade 7…” - Thomas

“My highest level of education is grade 7…” - Terry

“I finished high school in Grade 10 then I went to study to be a Chef at Sunnyside then I dropped out. I also have a certificate in business training.” - Thabo

“I dropped out of school in grade 11 however it was not my intentions, my sisters were not supportive and I got a child when I was still at school so I had to drop out.” - Tammy

With the exception of Thabo who has a certificate in business training, none of the participants finished school which also explains why most offenders struggle with unemployment. The parolees’ highest level of education also shows that although the correctional
services offer educational services to its offenders, not all offenders enrol so that they can further their studies to at least have Matric (grade 12). The White Paper on Corrections (2005) of the Department of Correctional Services states that all means, including education, shall be used to meet the holistic needs of the offenders. Free education, including grade twelve, is provided to all in the correctional facilities where resources permit (Department of Correctional Services, 2018). However, not all correctional facilities have proper resources to encourage parolees to finish their Matric or to further their studies. This paper argues that some cognitive aspect of offenders could contribute to them not completing their Matric education even though they were inside the correctional facility where opportunities for learning were available. Nonetheless, the holistic approach to the rehabilitation of offenders assists in a sense that the offenders may keep busy with different therapeutic and educational programmes that assist them to be better people. This paper also posits that education within the correctional facilities has the potential to reduce the poverty among the parolees as they may increase the chances of being employable.

Factors that led to committing crime

From the findings of the study, there were many factors that led to committing of crimes by the participants. This emanated from the responses they provided when they were asked about contributing factors that might have led them to crime.

Availability of alcohol leading to alcohol abuse

It emerged in the study that alcohol or drug abuse are contributing factors to many of the social ills that occur in South Africa and worldwide. One of those social ills is crime that alcohol abuse contributes to. When some of the participants were talking about the crimes they had committed, they mentioned how they struggled with alcohol abuse which might have led them to lead a lifestyle of crime or to finding themselves committing crime whilst under the influence. Below are the responses of two offenders who found themselves committing crime under the influence of alcohol:

“Sometimes to relieves stress, we start drinking a lot… Even my baby’s mother was telling me that alcohol will not solve anything…even at the end when I murdered that person, I was not aware of what I did…I would have anger that other people are educated or others are doing well in life then I would drink alcohol.” - Tony

“I was drunk when I committed my crime, I would get drunk around the 24th, 25th and 31st.” - Tammy

From the findings, it is evident that poor mechanisms of coping can lead to substance abuse, for example, Tony used alcohol to relieve stress. Two of these participants committed their crimes while they were under the influence of alcohol which shows how alcohol abuse clouds judgement and can affect one’s ability to think clearly or to behave accordingly. Studies by several researchers have identified eight key risk factors associated with criminal behaviour (DeMichele et al., 2019; Olver & Wong, 2019; Kotelnikova et al., 2021) and one of the existing factors amongst the eight is alcohol abuse.

Socio-economic challenges

Many people in our societies are led to a life of crime due to socio-economic challenges that they find themselves in. During the interviews, it emerged that the participants had experienced unpleasant socio-economic issues that contributed to committing crime. Three of the participants responses are presented:

“...there was a time I was stranded; I couldn’t find a job... I would go steal…” - Tony

“...there were times where I would sleep on an empty stomach when I was young and I would have to hustle or ask from neighbours so I can eat. So when I came to Gauteng then I met friends who got me involved in the life of crime to survive...” - Terry

“...I had pressure from getting my first-born child and I had told myself that my child will not grow up the way I grew up. I've been looking for a job and not getting one...until I got into a life of crime.” - Thabo

The above responses show that some people get into a life of crime as a mode of survival. The participants found themselves in situations where they did not have the means to financially sustain themselves or their families and as a result they resorted to a life of crime. The point of departure for social disorganisation theory is that criminal activity among people is a “normal response to abnormal conditions”, (Bond, 2015). In this instance the findings show how the participants responded to abnormal conditions such as unemployment by committing crime in order to be able to provide for themselves.

Anger triggers

Anger is triggered by circumstances that put the person under pressure to respond in an aggressive manner. The social interaction with the offender lessens the offenders ability to manage anger (Bond, 2015). In the study anger management challenges emerged as one the common factors amongst parolees that contributed towards their criminal records. The participants had this to say:

“... I have temper, if I don’t deal with a person who has angered me then I would not feel good. There was a time I committed a crime of malicious damage of property due to the anger issues I have...there were a lot of people I had anger towards.” - Tony

“...I am a person who has anger...so I would steal people’s possessions.” - Thabo

“...I can now manage my anger, at first I could not manage my anger.” - Tammy
From the above statements it is evident that some people commit offenses in their moments of outrageous anger outbursts. Others, like Thabo, have internal anger issues that might cause them to be inconsiderate of other people to an extent of feeling entitled to their belongings or trying to inflict pain on others. In the case of Tony, there is a pattern of crimes that are a result of anger, from murder to also having a previous record of malicious damage of property. Tammy also reported that she could not manage her anger before, hence her record of attempted murder. That is why anger management is one of the imperative and therapeutic programmes offered to offenders. When the immediate environment has anger triggers such as those found in the study, they contribute to violent acts including domestic violence (Psychology Today, 2022).

Peer Influence

Peer influence is a huge environmental factor. Mingling and sharing ideas with people that have criminal minds towards earning a living influences individuals from low-resourced communities to committee crime for a living. Peer influence was also one of the themes that emerged amongst myriad factors that led parolees to crime. Since the paroles were in their youthful ages and coming from a poor community, it is expected that peer pressure would have influenced their criminal behaviour towards earning a living. This kind of influence, even though earned the parolees a living, it represents bad influence. The participants had to say:

“...I became close with my cousin who used to do thefts so because of the pressure I had from my ex-girlfriend, I started stealing with my cousin to make bring food on the table.” - Tony

“...when I arrived at Joburg I then met friends who do crime then I ended up being involved in criminal activities to learn a living…” - Terry

“...I ended up befriending people that are a bad influence then I did crime just for a living…” - Thabo

“...after I realised that people I have been helping to fix their cars were bringing stolen cars, then decided to get involved in that kind of crimes as a way of living.” - Thomas

From the data presented, it is clear that the offenders were badly influenced by the people who were in their circles. The findings find credence in the arguments of the ecosystem theory which asserts that people are shaped by their interactions with different systems in their environment (Teater, 2014).

The rehabilitation experiences of parolees

The study sought to find out the participants’ experiences pertaining to the parole process that they have undergone and how they experienced being integrated back into their communities. It was interesting that various themes emerged from the responses of the participants with regards to their experiences inside the correctional facility, the roles of the parole officials and their reintegration into their communities.

Inside the correctional facility

In the study, the participants were asked about how they experienced rehabilitation inside the correctional facility and also how their behaviour earned them parole consideration. Two of the participants expressed how they behaved inside the correctional facility where the rehabilitation process started. Their responses were that:

“Inside the correctional facility during my sentence, I never got involved into gangs or any forbidden criminal behaviour…” - Tony

“...when I got inside I was part of the gangs however I was always on my good behaviour, I took a number but I never got involved into any violence and I was never charged...the gang was just there for a backup...the correctional facility I was part of everybody was part of a gang, if you not part of a gang is like you are nothing...I helped myself by not misbehaving.” - Terry

The rehabilitation process does not start when the participants are on parole but starts the moment, they get behind the walls of the correctional centre. As a matter of rules and procedures, offenders must comply with their sentence and be on good behaviour to qualify to be released on parole and that is why the two participants were released on parole. The common crime inside correctional facilities that both offenders mentioned, which could possibly influence them into not being law abiding citizens, is gangsterism. It is clear that the correctional facility environment is a possible learning environment for criminal behaviour. However, for offenders that want to earn parole, they abide the law. From the findings, Tony declared that he was never part of any gang when he was incarcerated, meaning that he made sure he became obedient inside the facility to aid his rehabilitation process. However, Terry was part of a gang to protect himself even though he did not get involved in any criminal activities that the gang did. This paper posits that even though the correctional facility seeks to create a conducive environment for rehabilitation, there are still myriad challenges that might not make it entirely possible to reach everyone with other offenders actively reoffending inside prison through gangs.

Parole officials’ roles and responsibilities

Parole officer are an essential component of the rehabilitation environment of the paroles. Unpacking the responsibilities and roles of the parole officials was necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the role and responsibilities they play when offenders are on parole. Their roles and responsibilities have a bearing on how parolees navigate the rehabilitation processes and programmes. Some participants when asked about their views on the roles and responsibilities of the parole officials responded this way:
Reintegration of parolees into society

In this study, it was important to understand the aspect of being integrated back into the community and family and what the parolees’ experienced. Proper parole system should be able to reintegrate the parolees back into their communities as mandated by the commitment of the Department of Correctional Services in South Africa. From the findings of the study, parolees had mixed feelings and experiences about community reintegration. While some parolees found community reintegration easy, one parolee could not find it easy to reintegrate back into the community because he had committed murder. His inability to reintegrate back into the community affected negatively proper rehabilitation processes. The parolees’ experiences are evidenced by the following verbatim responses:

"...getting into the community I was afraid...I went through Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) and I learned that the mother of the person I murdered is still hurting and I knew that I could not stay at that place so when I came back to the community I immediately moved to my cousin’s place." - Tony

"...most people did not know what I was arrested for, so they just heard rumours but they treated me well." - Thomas

"...I get a lot of support from the family. I relate well with even the community members...” - Terry

"...I get support from both family and community members, maybe the community members speak behind my back however when I am with them, they do not treat me otherwise...” - Thabo

"Inside correctional centre they teach you how to accept so when I got into the community it was easy for me to accept myself...” - Tammy

The findings show that four out of five parolees did not encounter many problems being integrated into the community because the community members accepted and reintegrated them back into the community. However, one participant, Tony, did not feel comfortable to go back and stay in the same community where he had committed the crime. He attended the Victim Offender Mediation services. However, the victim was not ready to forgive him and that meant the offender made a decision to move far from the victim. Victim Offender Dialogue, (VOD), aims to achieve the objectives of restorative justice. In respect to that, Hegger (2015) suggests that in all efforts to reduce the escalating rate of recidivism, community corrections officers can use the restorative justice model to bring those under supervision directly in contact with victims. However, it is clear from the case of Tony that bringing those under supervision directly to the victim may not be the ultimate best solution to ensuring successful reintegration of the offender into the community. This reduced possibilities of successful reintegration into the community. All the participants were aware of how the community also needs to accept them; hence they knew that it was possible that the community might not be in favour of them being...
in the community even though the participants had not experienced direct confrontation of that from any of the community members in their areas.

**Discussion of findings**

**Background information of then parolees**

Different factors in the social environment of the parolees contribute to criminal behaviour as evidenced by the findings of the study. It was important for the study to record the parolees’ backgrounds in order to understand whether the background of individuals have influence on criminal behaviour. It is confirmed from the findings of this study that most of the offenders interviewed were youths from dysfunctional family environments and came from areas where crime was rife. They also grew up in impoverished communities therefore influencing the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour. The parolees also lacked formal education to equip them for the job market thereby excluding them from the mainstream job market. Such backgrounds, life circumstances and environments are likely to influence offending and reoffending behaviours of individuals as promulgated by the ecosystems theory (Teater, 2014).

**Factors that led to crime**

In the study area, the environmental factors were central to offending and also to how the parolees experienced the rehabilitation process. The study concludes that most of the factors that led to committing crimes were influenced by the environment. In the study, the most common factors that led to crimes being committed were alcohol access and abuse in the Brits Area which also influenced anger management issues. Growing research evidence shows that people under the influence of alcohol have limited anger control mechanisms where there are anger triggers and anger provoking circumstances. Alcohol lowers inhibitions, impair judgement and increases aggressive behaviour (Alcohol Rehab Guide, 2023). The two parolees that had committed grave crimes of murder and attempted murder attested to having committed those crimes while under the influence of alcohol. The parolees also attested to having anger issues that they could not control and that was why they found themselves in situations where they harmed other people.

Two other immediate environmental factors that contributed to criminal offences being committed were poverty and peer influence. Debt is the most common cause of crime, and it was not surprising that the offenders mentioned it as one of the factors that influenced them to commit crimes of theft and robbery to maintain themselves and their families. The impact of poverty and peer influence confirm how the ecosystem theory is relevant in understanding how environments and the interactions with the environment influence human behaviour (Dube, 2016; Teater, 2014).

**The rehabilitation experiences of the parolees**

The rehabilitation process which begins when the offender is incarcerated should happen in a proper conducive environment for it to be successful. Low-resourced areas and poor environments offer limited successes to rehabilitation during the period of parole. This paper argues that the rehabilitation of offenders is a long process and not a single incident or activity but involves a variety of activities. These activities also need qualified and experienced personnel to carry out sufficiently the mandate of the Department of Correctional Services in South Africa. This was apparent when the parolees revealed that their rehabilitation journey started when they were incarcerated. They reported that because they behaved well, they became eligible for parole.

During the rehabilitation process, the role of the parole officials of Brits Community Corrections became central as they ensured the monitoring and supervision of parolees. This was critical to ensure they adhere to the prescribed parole conditions. Part of the role of the parole officers is to ensure reintegration of parolees into the communities where the environment is conducive for rehabilitation of parolees. Whilst this may happen without difficulty, some parolees experience discrimination in the communities and programmes such as ‘Victim Offender Dialogues’ do not always work. In grave crimes such as murder, some victims and communities members do not forgive the parolees. This makes proper rehabilitation and reintegration into the communities difficult.

**Broader societal implications of the research findings**

The wider social and communal development in underdeveloped areas can benefit from addressing the impact of the environment on the rehabilitation of parolees. This approach acknowledges that effective parolee reintegration benefits not only the individuals involved but also the communities they return to. Based on the finding of this study, we argue in this paper that there are broader societal implications, and the succeeding paragraphs discusses these implications.

**Reduced recidivism rates**

In this paper, we opine that addressing negative influence of the environment and providing a supportive environment for parolees that includes access to stable housing, employment opportunities, and social services can significantly reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020). Lower recidivism rates mean safer communities and fewer individuals cycling in and out of the criminal justice system.
Enhanced public safety

This paper also argues that parolees are more likely to successfully reintegrate into society when they have access to rehabilitation services and most importantly, a supportive environment. This lowers their propensity to commit crimes, making neighbourhoods safer and enhancing general public safety (Duwe, 2017).

Economic Contributions

When the negative influence of the immediate environment is addressed and parolees are supported in their rehabilitation efforts, they can become more productive members of society (Nastasi, 2023). When parolees become active in the economy of the society, it reduces their reliance on social services but also contributes to the local economy and tax base, which can potentially benefit the entire community.

Better community Integration

The aim of rehabilitation of offenders is to facilitate community reintegration. Fostering an environment that encourages the reintegration of parolees helps to break down societal stigma and promotes a more inclusive and accepting community. This can lead to stronger social bonds and a sense of belonging for all residents.

Conclusions

The study concludes that parolees struggle with unemployment as evidenced by the findings of the study. It is therefore recommended that Department of Correctional Services should prioritise capacitate and train ex-offenders in various vocational skills and build strong relationships with companies that can absorb qualified parolees and probationers without the criminal record being a hurdle.

It can be concluded that recidivism is also rife among ex-offenders in Brits area owing to serious criminals not being welcome back into the communities and entanglement by poverty among parolees. To lessen the rate of crime, this paper recommends that the Department of Correctional Services should adopt an element or division of punishment for more serious crimes to deter those who have not yet offended so as to lessen the rate of crime and recidivism.

The study also concludes that ‘Victim Offender Mediations’ are not always successful as a means for restorative justice. It is therefore recommended that these services should adopt holistic approach in which the victims also receive enough psychosocial support and education to prepare for cases where their offender is released into the same community.

Partnership with the Nongovernmental Sector is limited. There is need for more non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to partner with community corrections and to adopt their objectives to establish a more holistic approach to societal responsibility for rehabilitation of offenders.

The communities are less accepting to the ex-offenders in Brits area. They fear their criminal activities before rehabilitation and hence are very suspicious. It is recommended that in the Brits area, more awareness campaigns, such as: ‘an offender is still my brother or sister’, should be developed to curb the rate of stigma and labelling the parolees and ex-offenders receive in their communities.

The other conclusion is that the communities in the Brits area are less knowledgeable about the mandate of the Department of Correctional Services. There is need therefore, for the communities in the area and in South Africa in general to be educated on the mandate of correctional services as they are mandated to rehabilitate offenders to be better people rather than punishing them.

For further research, the following should be considered:

i. Further research should focus on how the community at large views parole as a mechanism of rehabilitating offenders. This will ensure that such studies cover major sectors of the society to influence policies on parole services in South Africa.

ii. While this study focused on parole some findings revealed restorative justice as an integral component of the rehabilitation process. Further research is needed to establish how restorative justice in low-resource communities can be mainstreamed in rehabilitation processes.

iii. This study was conducted in a single prison environment. Another study can be done with a different environment to compare findings for the enrichment of the parole process in South Africa and facilitate transferability of research findings.

Limitations of the study

One major limitation of the study was that it was conducted during the COVID19 pandemic when researchers needed to adhere to World Health Organisations (WHO) health protocols for controlling the spread of the corona virus. This limited access to the study site and access was granted under restricted conditions including times. Some research procedures such as the use of an independent person could not be realised due to controlled access to the correctional facilities.

The parolees were from one correctional centre under the same supervision conditions and experience. This is a major drawback as data saturation point was reached with a few participants as there was no new information from the participants. It would have
enriched the data to a greater extent if there were other participants from a different correctional facility with different experiences. Transferability of the research findings is therefore limited.

The study’s demarcation was rural-based and in a low-resourced area. The findings therefore can only be associated with a rural correctional facility. Other study settings might yield different results.

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