

Narratives of Ex-convicts in Their Live-in Re-integration Efforts into Mainstream Makurdi, Benue State

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Abstract

Reintegrating back into society or community is what incarcerated persons who had committed crimes and are serving their terms or sentence in correctional centers or prisons look forward to. The gain of freedom at last, and the thought of experiencing the presence of family and loved ones bring joy and anxieties in the middle of their experiences and difficult moments. This study explored the life of nine ex-convicts through the narratives of their reintegration attempt into the community in Makurdi, Benue State. The study employed the phenomenological qualitative approach because the objective was to gain insight into the phenomenon of the narrative of reintegration into the community. By this, the thematic analysis method was utilized in organizing data collected and for analysis where two themes were evolved and narratives were anchored upon. These themes were: challenges of reentering the community, and breaking the vicious cycle by coping. The study, through the desistance and the reintegration theories, explained the impact of the individual ex-convict and the community on the reintegration phenomenon. The study showed that most ex-convicts experience challenges that could lead them to recidivating and, thus, they require strengths to cope with the challenges in order to live a crime-free life. Recidivism is seen as a global challenge just as incarceration itself, considering the crime situation. The study concluded that there are positive and negative aspects to reintegration. If ex-convicts are given a chance, they can be different and reintegrate, if not, they can only look at crime again and not reintegrate, if they work hard enough, given the available resources from the community, they can achieve a crime free lifestyle. The study recommended that government, trade and labour unions, and the private sector should give employment opportunities to ex-convicts who have employable skills in order to help them to fully reintegrate into the society and reduce recidivism.

Keywords: Ex-convict; Reintegration; Recidivism; Makurdi; Benue state

Introduction

Nigeria has evolved a plethora of development programmes and policies aimed at making better, the lives of her citizens. These programmes usually are short-lived as a result of changes in leadership and a subsequent introduction of fresh policies and programmes that witness a deviation from previous ideologies. The present administrations' removal of fuel subsidy is said to be in line with global trends aimed at making better the lives of, and the revenue base of the nation. Be that as it may, the policy has brought untold hardship on the public while the public is made to believe it is in their interest

It could be a plus that the minimum wage of the employees of both state and Federal Government is improved, the market rates are, however, suffocating the minimum wage increment to its silence and ineffectiveness. Most important here is that little or no thought is given in consideration of people who are not employed, particularly the ex-convicts. This group of people had spent a long time in incarceration and is unemployed, they have little or no chance at employment, and have to

go to the same market with everyone else. These people no doubt face significant hurdles earning a living and meeting their social and economic needs.

Despite the magnitude of sentences by the criminal justice system (CJS), the convict has his eyes set on the day of his release, except those serving life sentences. While the CJS' primary goal to protect the community from convicts and criminals through incapacitation or incarceration, it fails to spell out the post prison processes for re-injecting the ex-convicts back into the community and avoiding recidivating tendencies (Liem & Weggemans, 2018). Note must be taken that the prison and imprisonment (incarceration) has become one of the most employed methods for achieving community as well as society's protection from criminals and would-be criminals by deterrence, globally. It (incarceration) is a complex global issue with heavy implications. With these is the concern for rehabilitation and reintegration. It is believed that effective programmes can help reduce recidivism and support successful reentry of ex-convicts into society.

Imprisonment literally becomes burdensome and difficult experience for convicts and thus creates anxieties for the next day and largely for the day the convicts are to walk out as free men. These individuals who end up in prison are likely some of society's most vulnerable and traumatized members, and certainly, the experiences of prison are further traumatic. In some ways, a convict's entire family is imprisoned, or at the very least, profoundly affected. Family members left behind at imprisonment of their own member experience emptiness in the early days, then some of the relationships are lost as the prison term prolongs and wears them off.

At post-incarceration, even if one says the convicts had paid for their wrongs for lengthy times in prison and had probably been reformed along the line, and regret their ways, they cannot very much control the people who detected their offences and subsequently signed and put them away.

Coming out of prison places the ex-convict at mixed anticipations and difficulties; the willingness to embrace something better; the probable rejection by the society that helped put them away; the difficulty to be able to pick life up from where it was left; the way forward with accommodation; and the problem of employment (or unemployment). Leaving the prison means letting go of the incarceration norms and stepping into a realm of intuitive wisdom.

When a verdict reads guilty and convicts an accused person, his/her freedom is taken away either by death penalty or imprisonment (Ismaila, 2020). Countries around the world have imprisonment as a form of punishment, and in most countries, it is the most severe form of punishment meted out to criminals by the courts (Deuren, Blokland & Kleemans, 2022)). Incarceration (imprisonment) or corrections is the confinement of convicted and sentenced offenders for an extended period. Inmates in a penal institution are denied many rights, including the right to life and personal liberty – one of the most vital human rights (Niranjana & Sundaram, 2022; Guercke, 2021). The denial of personal liberty goes a long way at putting behind and disregarding the need for reformation and rehabilitation by rather prioritizing punishment. This makes many people view incarceration as a form of abuse that denies people the chance to live better lives. Rebuilding life after incarceration poses an exhilarating experience in as much as it (incarceration) serves as a tool for deterrence and to prevent recidivating tendencies.

After serving the terms in prison, ex-convicts go through a re-socializing process where they learn values, skills, and reformations to aid them fit into the community left so long behind. It is thus common place to experience discrimination, labeling and stigmatization (Quin-Hogan, 2021). It is therefore critical, never the less, for example, to experience discrimination and stigma while making effort to re-integrate. Recently released convicts suffer from issues such as mental health

effects due to the absence of a support system and the resources required for re-integrating into the society, resources such as employment, accommodation, access to medical care and more (Bebbington, McManus, Coid, Garside, & Brugha, 2021). Re-integration here means the transition from incarceration back to the community and the adjustment to life outside the prison (correctional institution) and attempting to maintain a crime free lifestyle (Alisha, 2023). Ex-convicts are seen here as persons who had been charged and convicted to a term of imprisonment been found guilty of an offence, had served the jail term and are released.

Ex-convicts look forward to finding their footing in the society and are likely going to put to use some of the reformation skills learnt while in prison, expecting society to see them as changed people and accept them. Bowman (2020) however is of the opinion that ex-convicts find it difficult to gain the much needed and required skills and knowledge to enter the work force or labour market. It is common place that employers look out particularly for candidates that have higher education and professionals with degree certificates.

In Makurdi, Benue State, and from the Makurdi correctional center, a good number of people are sent in and out. The number of those released varies yearly or periodically. This number indicates that people of the ex-convict bracket will be looking at opportunities to re-integrate into the Makurdi community. Community here implies the ways in which individuals and groups interact, share communalities, and develop a sense of belonging. This comes through shared identities, social bonds, geographic space, and collective interests.

Desistance theory looks at the factors that contribute to reform of ex-convicts (ex-prisoners), or that enables them to desist from crime. 'Desistance' under the theory, refers broadly to the movement away from criminal behaviour. It also implies the process of ceasing criminal behaviour by a person who has been into crime. Maruna and Thomson (2003) conceptualize desistance as processes that cause and support termination of offending behaviour. Their work became very influential by their age-grade theory of informal social control. They argue that strong social bonds (marriage, work, military service) are turning points that promote desistance.

Reintegration theory is premised on the belief that crime represents a breach of reintegrating and community support. Rather than solely blame convicts for crime, proponents of reintegration theory argue that society is responsible for creating conditions that breed criminals and criminality. According to Muthee (2020), the rationale for reintegrating ex-convicts is based on two moral premises. Firstly, it is better for people to be in harmony with one another, and secondly, wherever harmony and community are absent, they should be actively pursued. Muthee (2020) further notes that punitive approaches stigmatize and belittles convicts. This results in a further breach of community and disruption of harmony in society. To this end, reform and reintegration of ex-convicts should always be the ultimate aim of incarceration.

This study is, therefore, necessary to provide more understanding of the lives of ex-convicts after incarceration. The study will help the community understands its roles in the ex-convicts' successful re-entry without returning to crime or recidivating. The study is also important to address government agencies like those concerned with labour and employment to create programmes consistent with ex-convicts and their attempts to maintain crime free lifestyles. The study highlights the burdens of ex-convicts and provides hope to start a new life.

Research Questions

The study, in its attempt to put together the narrative of experiences of ex-convicts in their re-integration attempts, aim to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the experiences and problems of ex-convicts in their re-integration into Makurdi community?
- ii. How do the ex-convicts cope with their experiences and problems in their re-integration in Makurdi community?

Methodology

The study employed the phenomenological qualitative approach since the study aimed at gaining insight into the phenomenon of the narrative of experiences and problems of ex-convicts in their re-integration into the community. Also, the study sought to expose the coping capacities of ex-convicts in their re-integration attempts into the community. The study was conducted in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria. Makurdi is the headquarters or capital of Benue State and houses a correctional center (prison). Findings from the police headquarters and the B-division in Makurdi indicated that Makurdi is one of the communities in Benue State with the highest number of arrests of deviants. According to data released by the Makurdi correctional center, Makurdi is second to Gboko in number of ex-convicts' resident within the towns in Benue State.

Study Participants

The study included nine (9) ex-convicts who were in their full attempt at re-integrating successfully into their respective communities within Makurdi. These participants were persons who were incarcerated in the Makurdi correctional center and were released. Four of the participants were certain that they were on the good path to re-integrating, while five were not certain of the yield of their re-integration efforts. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting these participants, ensuring that they were chosen because of their suitability for advancing the objectives of the study. The criteria considered for selection of the respondents included being an ex-convict of the Makurdi correctional center, making efforts to re-integrate and facing challenges of re-integrating into their communities and being resident in Makurdi Metropolis. The study developed a confidentiality fictional identity scheme such as participant 'A', participant 'B', participant 'C', participant 'D', participant 'E', participant 'F', participant 'G', participant 'H', and participant 'I'. This ensured that the real identities of the participants were kept confidential in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data in the study were collected through comprehensive individual interviews using unstructured interview guide. For phenomenological qualitative research such as this one, the study utilized the thematic analysis to organize the data collected. Thematic analysis involves a close examination of the data collected to identify and come out with common themes-recurring topics and ideas (Chikadzi, Chanakira & Mbululu, 2022).

Ethical Consideration

The study ensured that the identities of the participants were kept confidential. Data were obtained through informed consent of the participants and the interviews were conducted without coercion.

The participants were allowed the freedom to answer questions or decline from answering where they felt discomfort.

Result of the Findings

Narratives of Ex-convicts in their re-integration into Makurdi Community

In the expository narratives of the ex-convicts in their re-integration into the community, following themes emerged:

Challenges of re-entering the community: ex-convicts find it difficult to secure a job after release from the correctional center (prison). Ex-convicts would most likely find menial jobs like moving materials on building sites, or start humbly by selling something to meet their daily needs in order to lessen the burden on their families for not finding a job (Yin, Boateng, & Kofie, 2022). Participant 'A' stated that:

regarding my economic wellbeing and situation, I still depend on my family. I cannot find a job. It greatly affects my family and me. People scare away and avoid buying from us with disdain from the little provision shop operated by my family due to my presence. I am seen as a threat and misfit to the environment and community.

Participants 'B' and 'C' were of the position that they have found and engage in self-help jobs and were moving on with life despite instances of stigma and name calling. Participant 'B' said

I don't mind that people make glances at me in some places. What matters most to me is the fact that I am able to earn for a living from my daily outings at the motor vehicle mechanics work that I have been able to set up and sustain". Participant 'C' on the other hand said "I have been able to gain trust from the people I transact with in the buying and selling of grains around the local markets. I am able to move on, and my family is happy and supportive. I can say that am re-integrating.

Participants 'D', 'E' and 'F' concurred that life has been very difficult for them since leaving the correctional center. According to Participant 'D', "I have no source of income so I live on a few members of my family, and others in the family see me as unnecessary burden". Participant 'E' maintained that

I am very confused because I don't know where to go with life. I can barely feed and the space I have for accommodation is less comfortable capered with that of the correctional center. I was trained in tailoring while in incarceration but am yet able to afford what is required to start up a business in that line.

Participants 'G', 'H', and 'I' said that they are very excited leaving incarceration and to be back to family and the general freshness that comes with the feeling of freedom. They were optimistic that they will be able to re-integrate successfully with expectations of support and encouragement from family and friends. Participant 'G' had this to say,

I have been lucky enough to receive unwavering support from my family. We operate a food items business in the family and I have been given an opportunity to

live again. Capital was given to me to start for myself a small outlet which am running successfully. I can say that am lucky.

Participant 'H' reported that despite having a higher diploma certificate in electrical and electronics his record as an ex-convict seem to take his chances for a job away: "people don't trust that I can actually provide services to them without issues of misconduct. Someone said even if I am the best at electrical works, he would rather get such services from someone else; he doesn't want problems. I am however bent on proving that I am better, character wise, and hope to have acceptability from the community". Participant 'I' said that "I have a wood work complex for carpentry and I receive reasonable patronage. Some people believe that I am a better person. Some say it to my face".

Being financially incompetent can alter one's life. Earning money is necessary for everyone. Although these ex-convicts would want to be as productive as they can during their re-integration, being unable to find a job made them struggle to earn a living. If they do not find an employer for a long time, despite the skills they have developed in their reformation, they may resort to recidivating. Ex-convicts have the same struggle as others for finding a job after release from jail in order to earn a living. They would most likely start from scratch since their degree of employability is very low. A lot of patience is required in starting from the scratch, impatience will likely take an ex-convict back to prison for a repeated crime. In Nigeria, an ex-convict can hardly be employed by government; cannot contest elections to be voted into any public office, except given some form of pardon. Most often the ex-convicts resort to selling something to sustain their daily needs (Yin, Boateng, & Kofie, 2022)

Maruna and Thomson (2003) argued that adverse and resentful treatment from the members of society will always be part of the everyday problems of ex-convicts in their struggle as they re-integrate back to society. Despite their hopes for finding a pathway to avoid recidivating, it becomes evident that difficulties can lead back to crime where the strength to cope is low or not there. The treatment from both family and society on ex-convicts affects them significantly. If the treatment is pleasant and humane, it will heal and favour them. However, if it is not, as mostly is the case, it can be bad for them.

Participants 'A', 'B', and 'C' agreed they face a seeming public opprobrium in their re-integration struggles. Participant 'A' said "it is like I am that total stranger; outcast and odd figure found among the community not deserving to be there with the people I call my own". Participant 'B' had this to say "I experience instances of judgment and disdain from those around me. I make a lot of effort to remain calm and focused on trying to stay out of trouble and show that I have changed. I learned a great deal of lessons while serving the term". While responding, participant 'C' said "the fact remains that some people will have difficulties trusting in someone who has been convicted and sentenced. Some people don't give me much chance, but on a general note, I have found favour in a number of people as I stay strong and resilient to stay determined and crime-free. This has helped me very much in my life after incarceration".

Responses from participants 'D', 'E', and 'F' converged on the position that people will certainly not understand what goes on in the life of an ex-convict. They note that people see them as misfits and estranged. They also feel certain levels of strangeness because the environment they left so long is no longer the same. The people are also not the same with those they interacted with while in prison. Participant 'D' particularly said "I experience judgment from people who I am certain

do not know what was going on in my life. In the midst of all these, I try to be focused on finding my footing back to the community”. Participant ‘E’ said “I cannot stop the people from having and displaying negative and unfavorable attitudes towards me and about me. The best I can describe of the relationship between me, family and neighbours is distant, careful and afraid”. Participant ‘F’ said “the way people avoid me is greatly challenging and affects me greatly, even my wife would shrink when I made advances. People are adjusting to my presence, however, and I am also adjusting and on the high way to getting the best of my freedom”.

Participants ‘G’, ‘H’, and ‘I’ said they are excited to have come out of incarceration. Participant ‘G’ said “I was excited that I could finally see and be with my family. It is heartbreaking, however, where some would avoid or walk the other way when I am seen approaching. I must however appreciate the fact that my close family has been providing the necessary support to have me stable on my journey to re-integrating”. Participant ‘H’ said “I am certain that things will change for the better. I don’t blame anyone for refraining from me. I hope to prove that I am a better person despite the difficulties associated with it. People in the community really make life miserable by clearly showing that someone like me does not deserve a chance”. Participant ‘I’ on his part said “my existence in the community is such that I hear people say spiteful things against me. From the early days I had cause to compare the treatment I received from the community against that received inside the prison. It really tested my patience. The good thing is I am getting my life back despite some lingering instances of distrust from community”.

Close family ties have a strong bond. The family shows its bond particularly in times of trouble since blood is said to be thicker than water (Gozum, 2019). The Makurdi community appears to prove this wrong. The gap between the ex-convicts and their families begins from incarceration to the re-integration into community. The ex-convicts’ relationship with family and relatives is important in their attempts at re-integration and to stop or avoid recidivating. Imprisonment no doubt leaves a huge scar that is not going away easily (Haimson, 2022; Toubiana, 2020; Moak, Walker, Earwood, & Towery; 2020). Ex-convicts aspire to become law abiding citizens again. It will be impossible, however, if society does not make them feel there is room for forgiveness, renewal and acceptance despite their mental and physical strengths. In most cases, emotional acceptance is the coping mechanism of these ex-convicts (Bakken & Visser, 2018). Acceptance is one of the coping factors in the successful re-integration of these ex-convicts. The Makurdi and other communities need to be more understanding of the people who have made mistakes, done wrongs, have undergone punishment and are reformed, and are now doing their best to be productive members of society (Baffour, Francis, Chong, Harris, & Baffour; 2021; Farrington, 2020; Muthee, Adeli, & Barasa; 2020).

Conclusion

Crime and incarceration are global challenges that require global attention at making the community and the world a better place. This could be done through the examination of crime causations, consequences and the possible strategies to prevention or curbing the situation. Imprisonment does not put strain on just the convict, it reduces the work force of the community, stresses the economy and severs relationships.

From the foregoing analysis and findings, therefore, it is apt to say that re-integration of ex-convicts into the community is a herculean task. The society that helps put them away is not fully prepared for the return of the ex-convicts. The ex-convicts have little or nothing to hold unto while

trying to re-integrate. Therefore, there are possible positive and negative aspects to re-integration to the ex-convicts. It is positive when family, peers and other relatives reach out to help the ex-convicts in their re-integration attempts. There has to be acceptance and the show of forgiveness for the ex-convicts to chart a proper path for re-integration. It is negative where there is resentment, neglect, low or no acceptance, and most importantly no opportunities for employment. Finding employment was one important factor that formed the struggles the ex-convicts needed to cope with in their re-integration in Makurdi community. Most employers wouldn't give a chance to the ex-convict considering the knowledge of their criminal records.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. The Department of labour and Employment of Benue State could develop employment opportunities and job assistance programmes where ex-convicts are target beneficiaries in order to help sustain their daily needs as they re-integrate fully. Here, the labour and trade unions could have platforms for remembering these forgotten members of society. They could as well raise agitations for the employment of ex-convicts who remain substantive members of society who are said to have been reformed and corrected by the institution of corrections.
- ii. Communities in Benue State should assist the ex-convicts by accepting them and providing moral support. Their re-integration efforts should be encouraged by patronizing the self-help businesses set up by these returning members. This could remove stigma and the feeling of resentment and cut down recidivism. The private sector employers could play a pivotal role by been willing to give ex-convicts a chance at earning for a living. Employers should be open minded and look beyond the criminal records of the ex-convicts to the future.
- iii. The Benue State Government could make inputs in the correction and reformation process by providing agriculture-based opportunities to inmates preparatory for their release date. Albeit a federal government-controlled institution, the state can extend its agricultural potentials where inmates could be trained along the lines of plant-crop or animal-livestock production. Most parts of peasant farming require little capital for takeoff. Ex-convicts can engage with farming as they re-integrate back to the community. Makurdi local government specifically should provide opportunities and assistance for ex-convicts and would be ex-convicts. This will help re-integration of ex-convicts. These opportunities can be created by conducting education seminars regarding re-integration, good conduct and sustenance. This will be a forum for ex-convicts to air their problems in the re-integration efforts and insights into life inside and outside the prison.

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