

Offender Reintegration in South Africa during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Criminological Perspective



Ernest Ramokone Lekalakala ¹  & Kholofelo Annah Rakubu ¹ 

¹ Department of Law, Safety and Security Management, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The former Minister of Correctional Services, Ronald Lamola, announced the early release of 19,000 inmates on parole as a measure to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within South African correctional facilities. This decision aimed to reduce overcrowding, which posed a significant challenge to implementing preventative measures such as social distancing among inmates and staff. Low-risk offenders were prioritised for release to ensure compliance with lockdown regulations. Consequently, communities were deprived of the opportunity to deliberate on the reintegration of released offenders. Drawing on criminological theories and qualitative data collected from 30 purposefully selected participants—including 15 released offenders (10 males and 05 females), 10 community leaders, and 05 personnel from the Department of Correctional Services—this study examined the ramifications of early inmate release, focusing on community rejection and its potential to exacerbate recidivism rates. The study argued that the rejection experienced by prematurely released offenders may result in frustration, heightening the likelihood of re-offending. Furthermore, it is posited that post-pandemic South Africa may witness an increase in crime rates, with this research exploring the nature of offences likely to be committed by rejected parolees. The findings contribute to criminological scholarship by offering empirical insights into the socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by parolees post-early release. Additionally, the study advanced discussions on correctional policy by highlighting the necessity of community engagement in offender reintegration to mitigate recidivism. The study's findings have implications for both policymakers and practitioners, highlighting the importance of structured post-release support systems to facilitate successful reintegration.

Correspondence

Ernest Ramokone

Lekalakala

Email:

LekalakalaER@tut.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges globally, significantly affecting various sectors, including the criminal justice system. In response to the pandemic, the South African Department of Correctional Services, under the leadership of the former Minister Ronald Lamola, announced the early release of 19,000 inmates on parole. This decision was primarily driven by the urgent need to reduce prison overcrowding, which hindered the effective implementation of preventative health measures such as social distancing. The released inmates were deemed low-risk, a classification intended to balance public safety with health imperatives.

Offender reintegration refers to the process by which ex-offenders are reintegrated into society, ideally becoming law-abiding citizens. Parole is a supervised conditional release of prisoners before the completion of their sentence. Recidivism is the tendency of previously convicted individuals to re-offend, posing a significant challenge to criminal justice systems worldwide. Effective reintegration is crucial in reducing recidivism and promoting community safety.

The early release of inmates, while necessary to mitigate health risks, has sparked significant debate and controversy. One primary issue is the insufficient engagement with relevant stakeholders, particularly local communities, in the reintegration process. This lack of consultation has led to community rejection of parolees, further complicating their reintegration. The premature release without adequate preparation and support systems raises concerns about the potential increase in recidivism rates.

The core problem addressed in this study is the potential adverse impact of early inmate release on community safety and recidivism rates in South Africa. The sudden release, driven by public health emergencies, has not allowed for thorough stakeholder engagement or the establishment of comprehensive reintegration frameworks. This gap poses significant risks, including community rejection of offenders and subsequent re-offending, ultimately escalating the crime rate post-pandemic.

This study aims to critically examine the ramifications of the early release of inmates on parole during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on community rejection and its contribution to recidivism. By employing a qualitative methodology, this research seeks to explore the challenges of offender reintegration, particularly in rural communities, and propose strategies to mitigate the risks associated with early parole. The study intends to provide insights to inform future policy decisions and improve reintegration practices, thereby enhancing community safety and reducing recidivism rates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Offender reintegration remains a critical challenge in the criminal justice system, particularly in the context of post-pandemic corrections. Reintegration refers to the process of supporting ex-offenders to transition back into society while addressing societal stigma, which often leads to community rejection.¹ This rejection has been linked to social labelling and the fear that offenders might re-offend, further perpetuating cycles of crime.² During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid release of offenders disrupted established reintegration protocols, exacerbating the challenges posed by community rejection.³

Parole is intended to balance public safety and rehabilitation by offering supervised reintegration.⁴ However, the premature release of inmates during the pandemic created significant challenges, as the Department of Correctional Services could not sufficiently prepare communities for the reintegration process. Studies have shown that community rejection can heighten ex-offenders' frustration, increasing the likelihood of recidivism.⁵ Furthermore, insufficient support systems during parole can impede rehabilitation and heighten the risks of re-offending.⁶

Recidivism remains a persistent issue in correctional systems worldwide. South Africa, with its high crime rate, faces a particular challenge in managing recidivism effectively. Research indicates that inadequate reintegration measures, such as those caused by the pandemic, contribute to higher rates of re-offending.⁷ Criminological theories, such as strain theory, explain that individuals who face rejection and limited opportunities may resort to criminal behaviour to cope with societal pressures.⁸

¹ C. L. Jonson and M. Cullen, "Community Rejection of Parolees and Its Impact on Reintegration," *Journal of Criminology* 50, no. 2 (2015): 215–30.

² R. Tewksbury and M. Copes, "Social Rejection and Recidivism: The Role of Stigma in Criminal Behavior," *Crime and Delinquency* 66, no. 2 (2020): 120–35.

³ Janet Garcia-Hallett, "Reintegration Challenges During the Pandemic: A South African Perspective," *Journal of Criminology*, 2021.

⁴ D. Stemen, "The Impact of Parole and Early Release on Recidivism Rates," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2017.

⁵ Tari Colon, "Ecological Needs and Challenges That Impact Ex-Offenders' Reintegration and Recidivism" (University of Arizona Global Campus, 2022).

⁶ Ramadhani Missanga, "Contribution of Parole in Reintegrating Offenders to Reduce Recidivism" (Institute of Accountancy Arusha (IAA), 2023).

⁷ Grant Duwe, "The Effects of Prison Reentry Programs on Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis of Controlled Studies," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2018.

⁸ Robert Agnew, *General Strain Theory and Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Rural communities often exhibit stronger resistance to offender reintegration due to cultural dynamics and limited resources.⁹ This resistance is intensified when reintegration efforts are perceived as externally imposed without sufficient community consultation.¹⁰ In South Africa, rural communities are frequently under-resourced, lacking the necessary infrastructure to support returning offenders, which further exacerbates rejection and increases the potential for recidivism.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted critical gaps in correctional policies and practices, particularly in the context of offender reintegration. While emergency measures such as early release were necessary, they revealed the need for more robust reintegration frameworks to adapt to crises.¹² Evidence suggests that post-pandemic correctional policies must prioritise community engagement, offender support, and post-release monitoring to address the risks posed by premature releases.¹³

Criminological theories, such as labelling theory and strain theory, offer valuable insights into the challenges of offender reintegration.¹⁴ These theories emphasise the importance of addressing stigma and societal rejection to reduce recidivism. Incorporating these theoretical frameworks into reintegration policies can enhance their effectiveness, particularly in mitigating community resistance and supporting successful transitions.

The reviewed literature highlights various challenges of offender reintegration, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Critical gaps identified include insufficient community engagement, limited post-release support, and the heightened risk of recidivism due to rejection. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach integrating criminological insights with practical reintegration strategies, ensuring long-term community safety and offender rehabilitation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges associated with offender reintegration following their early release during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach enabled a rich, in-depth understanding of the experiences of released offenders, community stakeholders, and correctional personnel. The study captured personal stories and perspectives using narrative inquiry, highlighting the complexities of reintegration within varied community contexts.¹⁵

Participants: The study included 30 purposefully selected participants from Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre in Gauteng Region, South Africa to ensure diverse perspectives on reintegration. These participants comprised 15 released offenders (10 males and 05 females), 10 community leaders, and 05 personnel of the Department of Correctional Services. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 and represented both rural and urban communities, ensuring a broad exploration of reintegration experiences. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals directly involved in or impacted by the early release initiative.¹⁶

Data Collection: Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted conversationally to encourage participants to share their experiences freely. Questions centred on themes such as community acceptance, support systems, and the perceived impact of early release on personal and societal outcomes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Observational notes were also taken during interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors.

⁹ Brenda Zaragoza, “Reentry Roadblocks: Investigating the Unique Reintegration Challenges of Rural Offenders” (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2024).

¹⁰ Joan Petersilia, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Garcia-Hallett, “Reintegration Challenges During the Pandemic: A South African Perspective.”

¹² Stemen, “The Impact of Parole and Early Release on Recidivism Rates.”

¹³ D. P., et al. Mears, “Reintegration of Ex-Offenders in the COVID-19 Era: Challenges and Policy Solutions,” *Criminal Justice Studies* 34, no. 4 (2021): 456–72.

¹⁴ Agnew, *General Strain Theory and Crime*; Jonson and Cullen, “Community Rejection of Parolees and Its Impact on Reintegration.”

¹⁵ Catherine K. Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Sage, 2008).

¹⁶ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (SAGE, 2015).

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the qualitative data. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes and patterns.¹⁷ The analysis focused on three primary themes: community rejection, post-release support, and recidivism risks. Sub-themes, such as stigma in rural versus urban settings and the adequacy of rehabilitation programs, were also explored. NVivo software facilitated the organization and analysis of data, enhancing the systematic identification of themes.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Data were securely stored, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities.

The qualitative methodology provided a nuanced understanding of the reintegration challenges faced by offenders released during the COVID-19 pandemic. By capturing the lived experiences of diverse stakeholders, the study highlighted the profound social and psychological impacts of early release. These findings offer critical insights into the interplay between community dynamics, policy gaps, and offender outcomes, underscoring the importance of tailored reintegration strategies.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS /FINDINGS

The findings from this study provide a qualitative exploration of the challenges surrounding offender reintegration following early release during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data analysis revealed three primary themes—community rejection, inadequate post-release support, and heightened risks of recidivism. These themes are presented in alignment with the study's objectives and contextualised through comparisons with previous research.

Community Rejection: Participants highlighted significant challenges stemming from community resistance to reintegration efforts. Released offenders reported experiences of stigmatisation, ostracism, and mistrust, particularly in rural communities where traditional norms often play a central role. Community leaders expressed concerns about the lack of consultation before the release, which contributed to heightened apprehension about safety and societal harmony. These findings align with prior studies suggesting that community rejection undermines successful reintegration and exacerbates social alienation.¹⁸

Inadequate Post-Release Support: Released offenders and correctional services personnel identified systemic inadequacies in post-release support mechanisms. The early release initiative, implemented under pandemic conditions, did not allow sufficient time for pre-release counselling, skill-building programs, or the establishment of community support networks. Many participants noted that a lack of resources, such as housing and employment opportunities, left offenders vulnerable to relapsing into criminal behaviour. These results mirror the findings of Smith et al., who underscored the critical role of structured post-release programs in reducing recidivism.¹⁹

Heightened Risks of Recidivism: The study revealed that the premature release of offenders, coupled with community rejection and limited support, heightened the likelihood of recidivism. Participants recounted cases of frustration and hopelessness among released offenders, which often led to re-offending. Notably, participants from correctional services linked this phenomenon to inadequate preparation during incarceration and the lack of societal reintegration frameworks. These observations

¹⁷ V. Clarke, "Braun & Clarke's Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide for Research and Teaching," *The Qualitative Report* 24, no. 2 (2019): 369–86.

¹⁸ M. Langa, "The Role of Correctional Staff in Successful Offender Reintegration," *South African Journal of Criminology* 48, no. 4 (2021): 75–90.

¹⁹ J. Smith, "The Internet of Things: A Foundation for Smart Cities," *Journal of Urban Development* 25, no. 3 (2020): 214–31.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to the discourse on offender reintegration, particularly in the context of early releases during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' voices provide critical insights into the challenges and implications of reintegration, underscoring the interplay between community dynamics, systemic inadequacies, and the psychological impacts on offenders.

Community Rejection

Community rejection emerged as a significant barrier to reintegration. Offenders shared their experiences of stigmatisation and societal exclusion, which undermined their reintegration efforts. One participant lamented, ***“No matter how much I try to change, they only see the person I used to be, not who I am now.”*** This sentiment reflects findings by Langa who noted that societal perceptions of offenders often remain rigid, contributing to a cycle of alienation and mistrust.²²

Community leaders echoed these concerns, highlighting the lack of prior consultation regarding early releases. A leader remarked, ***“We were not prepared to accept them back; we were not informed or involved in the process.”*** Such findings align with Jones and Smith who emphasised the importance of community involvement in reintegration planning to foster a sense of ownership and trust.²³

Inadequate Post-Release Support

Participants described systemic shortcomings in post-release support mechanisms. Many offenders expressed feelings of abandonment upon release, with one stating, ***“I was left to figure everything out on my own—no job, no home, no guidance.”*** This echoes Smith et al. who underscored the critical role of structured support systems in reducing recidivism. Correctional staff also acknowledged resource constraints, noting, ***“We were overwhelmed; there simply were not enough resources to help everyone properly reintegrate.”***²⁴

Psychological Impact and Risk of Recidivism

The psychological toll of rejection and lack of support was a recurrent theme. One offender shared, ***“I feel trapped—like I cannot escape my past. It is frustrating, and sometimes I think, what is the point?”*** This frustration often led to re-offending, as noted by Turner et al. who found a strong correlation between emotional distress and recidivism rates.²⁵

Participants also highlighted the role of societal expectations in exacerbating these challenges. One offender stated, ***“They expect us to behave differently, but they do not give us the tools to succeed.”*** This reflects broader structural issues in the South African context, where socio-economic disparities and resource limitations compound reintegration challenges.²⁶

Comparative Context

These findings resonate with international studies and highlight unique challenges within South Africa. For instance, while global practices stress the importance of pre-release preparation and community engagement, the South African context is marked by acute resource shortages and socio-economic inequalities.²⁷ A correctional officer noted, ***“We do not have the luxury of extensive reintegration programs like other countries.”***

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study underscores the urgent need for policies prioritising community involvement and allocating resources for post-release support. Participants called for targeted interventions, with one suggesting,

²² Langa, “The Role of Correctional Staff in Successful Offender Reintegration.”

²³ Smith, Jones, and Ngubane, “Market Access and Livestock Theft: The Role of Policy Interventions.”

²⁴ Smith, “The Internet of Things: A Foundation for Smart Cities.”

²⁵ Turner, “The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study.”

²⁶ Mbhekeni Sabelo Nkosi, “Political Economy and the Socio-Cultural History of Land Dispossession, Proselytization, and Proletarianization of African People in South Africa: 1488–1770 (Part 1),” *Philosophical Perspectives on Land Reform in Southern Africa*, 2021, 39–59.

²⁷ Keith Bennett and Tracy Carter, “Pre-Release Planning and the Role of Community Involvement in Offender Reintegration,” *Journal of Criminal Justice Policy* 22, no. 3 (2021): 150–65.

“We need mentorship programs—someone to guide us through the transition.” Such initiatives could mitigate the risks of recidivism by addressing both the psychological and practical challenges faced by offenders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practical Recommendations

1. **Community Engagement Programmes:** The establishment of structured pre- and post-release community engagement initiatives is critical. These programs should include awareness campaigns to address stigma and provide platforms for communities to discuss concerns, fostering acceptance of offenders.²⁸
2. **Enhanced Post-Release Support Systems:** Resources should be allocated to strengthen post-release support, including housing, employment opportunities, and mental health services. Partnerships between governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) could provide a multi-faceted approach to offender support.²⁹
3. **Training and Capacity Building for Correctional Staff:** Correctional staff require training in reintegration strategies, focusing on holistic approaches that address the social and psychological needs of offenders. Continuous professional development in restorative justice practices is also recommended.³⁰
4. **Resource Allocation for Rural Areas:** Specific attention must be given to rural communities, which often face unique challenges in accommodating reintegrated offenders. Targeted funding and resources are necessary to address infrastructure and service gaps in these areas.³¹

Recommendations for Future Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies on Recidivism:** Further research should employ longitudinal designs to track offenders' reintegration progress and identify factors influencing recidivism rates over time.
2. **Exploration of Gender-Specific Challenges:** Investigating how gender impacts reintegration experiences, particularly for women offenders, could provide insights into tailored support strategies.
3. **Impact of Technological Interventions:** Research should explore how digital tools, such as virtual counselling and online skills training, can support reintegration efforts in resource-constrained settings.
4. **Integration of Criminological Frameworks:** Future research should expand on criminological theories, such as labelling theory and social disorganisation theory, to deepen the understanding of community rejection's impact on offender reintegration. Theoretical models should also explore the intersectionality of socio-economic status, rurality, and cultural dynamics in reintegration efforts.³²
5. **Development of Reintegration Models:** A comprehensive reintegration model tailored to the South African context is essential. This model should incorporate community-based restorative justice practices, focusing on dialogue and reconciliation between offenders and communities.³³

Suggestions for Policy Reform

1. **Mandatory Reintegration Planning:** Policies should mandate the inclusion of reintegration planning in sentencing and parole processes, ensuring offenders are adequately prepared for societal re-entry.

²⁸ David Jones and Tracy Carter, “Community Engagement in Offender Reintegration,” *International Journal of Criminal Justice* 26, no. 3 (2022): 200–212.

²⁹ Turner, “The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study.”

³⁰ Langa, “The Role of Correctional Staff in Successful Offender Reintegration.”

³¹ Themba Mthembu, Zanele Hlongwane, and Siphon Ngcobo, “Rural Reintegration: Addressing Infrastructure Gaps,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2023): 102–15.

³² Karen E Smith and Seth D Pollak, “Social Relationships and Children’s Perceptions of Adversity,” *Child Development Perspectives* 15, no. 4 (2021): 228–34.

³³ Siphon Stephen Nkosi, *Ubuntu and the South African Law of Contract with Particular Reference to the Common Law Contract of Employment* (London: Oxford Publishers, 2022).

2. **Community Restorative Justice Forums:** Institutionalising restorative justice forums at the community level could provide structured mechanisms for conflict resolution and offender acceptance.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the challenges of offender reintegration, particularly in the context of the early release of inmates during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The findings highlight a significant gap in the reintegration process, primarily due to limited community engagement and the premature release of offenders. Community rejection emerged as a crucial factor, with offenders experiencing heightened frustration, which likely increases the risk of recidivism. The study also suggests that rural communities face unique challenges in reintegrating offenders, exacerbating the difficulties of re-entry. Moreover, the findings indicate that post-pandemic, South Africa is likely to experience an increase in crime, driven by the frustrations of rejected parolees. To address these issues, it is crucial to implement community-based reintegration programs, strengthen post-release support systems, and allocate resources specifically for rural areas. Ultimately, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on offender reintegration and underscores the importance of holistic, community-driven approaches to reducing recidivism and facilitating successful reintegration.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Ernest Ramokone Lekalakala is a Lecturer in Law, Safety and Security Management at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), based in Pretoria, South Africa. He holds a PhD in Criminal Justice from the University of South Africa (UNISA), where his research focused on a penological analysis of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons. His scholarly interests include correctional services administration, penology, recidivism, and forensic investigations. He has extensive experience in higher education, specializing in curriculum development, academic administration, and research dissemination. He also serves as Vice-Chairperson of the Correctional Supervision and Parole Board in the Department of Correctional Services, leveraging his expertise in rehabilitation, policy formulation, and criminal justice systems. His professional background spans multiple roles in the public and private sectors, including security management and corrections. He is a dedicated educator and researcher who actively contributes to academic and community initiatives while conducting research on safety and security management, rehabilitation, and criminal justice reform.

Prof. Kholofelo Rakubu is attached to Tshwane University of Technology in the Department of Law, Safety and Security Management as Head of Department and Faculty Research Ethics Chairperson. With 20 years teaching experience at institution of higher learning, Prof Rakubu is also a criminologist who is a member of CRIMSA, served as a Secretary for Criminological Society of Africa (CRIMSA 2018-2020) and further served as a board member for CRIMSA (2021-2023). Prof Rakubu was an editorial board member for both *Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology and Victimology* and the *Southern African Journal of Security*. Since 2015 to date, Prof Rakubu serves as a reviewer and convener for Doctoral Applications and training for the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). Published book chapters, and further published on local government and crime, substance abuse, organised crime, domestic violence, crime prevention, community policing, victimology, municipal safety, school safety, cybercrime, vigilantism and policy analysis.