

# Understanding Recidivism amongst Incarcerated Youth Offenders: A Case Study of the Thohoyandou Correctional Centre



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## ABSTRACT

Violence and crime in South African communities, particularly the influence of youth gangs, threaten economic stability and social cohesion, affecting social reproduction and intergenerational poverty. Recidivism among young offenders results from personal, familial, community, and institutional interactions. This study examined recidivism patterns among youth at the Thohoyandou Correctional Centre, identifying factors that contribute to repeated offending. Through purposive sampling, 20 juvenile reoffenders were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences within the criminal justice system. The findings revealed five recidivism dimensions: poverty and unemployment driving crime, substance abuse impairing judgement, peer pressure and gang involvement, family dysfunction hindering reintegration, and institutional environments fostering recidivism by mixing first-time and repeat offenders. Effective interventions must address systemic inequality and provide individualised support. The study shows how correctional environments may perpetuate criminal careers among young South Africans, highlighting the need for policy reforms to address institutional practices and the social determinants of youth crime.

*Keywords: Correctional Centre, Juveniles, Offenders, Recidivism, Youth Crime, Rehabilitation*

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## INTRODUCTION

The conceptualisation of recidivism within criminological discourse reflects tensions between individual and structural explanations of criminal behaviour, with definitions varying across scholarly and policy contexts. Although scholars approach recidivism through different theoretical lenses, most definitions focus on patterns of repeated criminal involvement, where individuals return to illegal activities after contact with criminal justice institutions.<sup>1</sup> This definitional variability extends to practical challenges in measurement, intervention design, and policy development, particularly in contexts with limited resources and competing priorities. For this investigation, recidivism is operationally defined as re-arrest and reconviction for any criminal offence within 24 months of release from incarceration. This definition aligns with international standards in recidivism research while acknowledging the specific institutional realities and timeframes of the South African criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup> The 24-month time frame provides a sufficient opportunity to observe re-offending patterns while accounting for the lengthy detection, arrest, and conviction processes that may delay the documentation of repeat offending within local contexts.

<sup>1</sup> Lise McKean and Charles Ransford, *Current Strategies for Reducing Recidivism* (Center for Impact Research Chicago, IL, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> M. D. Maltz, *Recidivism* (Academic Press, 2001).

Champion defines recidivism as stages of criminal justice re-involvement, including re-offending, arrests, reconviction, parole revocation, and reincarceration.<sup>3</sup> This concept reflects the effectiveness of correctional interventions and community reintegration support for former offenders. Weisberg notes that recidivism involves individuals returning to crime despite previous deterrents or correctional programming, revealing limitations in addressing criminal behaviour's root causes.<sup>4</sup> Recidivism represents the percentage of released prisoners who are re-arrested. When former inmates commit new crimes, it constitutes recidivism, regardless of offence similarity. Measurement occurs through returns to correctional facilities, although this may underestimate actual re-offending. Recidivism rates indicate rehabilitation success and programme effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> High rates demonstrate programme failure to reduce criminal behaviour and create high costs through threats to public safety and repeated incarceration.

The social costs of high recidivism extend beyond financial impacts and affect communities, families, and offenders. Communities face insecurity when residents cycle through the criminal justice system without achieving behavioural change. Families bear emotional and financial burdens from repeated criminal involvement, experiencing stigmatisation that compounds their disadvantages. For offenders, recidivism means separation from family and community, institutionalisation that reduces independent living capacity, and criminal records that limit opportunities for employment, housing, and social participation.

Freeman argues that recidivism data show that South Africa's Department of Correctional Services lacks adequate rehabilitation.<sup>6</sup> This aligns with broader critiques of the system's capacity to facilitate behavioural change. Khwela notes that measuring recidivism is challenging due to inconsistent statistical indicators.<sup>7</sup> The lack of accurate re-offending data affects the development of effective interventions and policies. South Africa's criminal justice system reflects the historical legacy affecting crime patterns. Morris notes that South Africa's incarceration rates exceed those of European countries, while rehabilitation remains ineffective.<sup>8</sup> Thinane indicates that prison rehabilitation shows limited success, suggesting misalignment with inmate needs.<sup>9</sup> Research estimates South African recidivism rates between 55% and 95%.<sup>10</sup> According to Bartley, repeated criminal involvement leads to higher recidivism through cumulative effects that increase costs.<sup>11</sup>

Dissel argues that South Africa's high recidivism rates persist due to ineffective rehabilitation, potentially perpetuating criminal careers.<sup>12</sup> The challenges of global recidivism reflect social inequalities and policy failures. Rakis views recidivism as requiring an understanding of universal and context-specific factors, particularly in South Africa, where poverty and unemployment enable crime.<sup>13</sup> Youth offenders are significant because the patterns established during adolescence persist throughout criminal careers. Young offenders face development and education vulnerabilities that increase their risk of recidivism. Youth populations offer the highest potential for intervention due to their developmental plasticity and shorter criminal histories.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Individual and Family Risk Factors

Contemporary South African research has identified substance abuse as a primary predictor of youth recidivism, with patterns of drug and alcohol use consistently associated with repeated criminal involvement in different regional and demographic contexts. Cronje and Peacock document significant

<sup>3</sup> Dean J Champion, *Probation, Parole, and Community Corrections* (Prentice Hall, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Weisberg, "Meanings and Measures of Recidivism," *S. Cal. L. Rev.* 87 (2013): 785.

<sup>5</sup> B Bartley, "Criminal Justice Definition of Recidivism," *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Freeman, "Can We Close the Revolving Door," *Recidivism vs. Employment of Ex-Offenders in the US*, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Michael N Khwela, "Effects of Incarceration on Recidivism in South Africa," *Journal of Public Administration* 50, no.2 (2015): 407–13.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G Morris et al., "Analyzing the Presence and Consequences of Unobserved Heterogeneity in Recidivism Research," *Crime & Delinquency* 62, no. 2 (2016): 229–52.

<sup>9</sup> Tsekelo Shadrack Thinane, "The Institutionalisation of Effective Rehabilitation Programmes at Groenpunt Maximum Security Prison" (North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Marelize Schoeman, "A Classification System and an Inter-Disciplinary Action Plan for the Prevention and Management of Recidivism" (University of Pretoria, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Bartley, "Criminal Justice Definition of Recidivism."

<sup>12</sup> Amanda Dissel, "Rehabilitation and Reintegration in African Prisons," *Human Rights in African Prisons*, 2008, 89–103.

<sup>13</sup> John Rakis, "Improving the Employment Rate of Ex-Prisoners under Parole," *Fed. Probation* 69 (2005): 7.

disparities in substance use patterns between repeat and first-time offenders, finding that 78% of repeat offenders in Gauteng correctional facilities reported problematic drug use compared to 45% of first-time offenders.<sup>14</sup> These findings suggest that substance abuse may function both as a contributing factor to initial criminal involvement and as a maintenance factor that perpetuates criminal careers through its effects on judgment, decision-making, and social relationships.

Mental health challenges represent another critical dimension of individual risk, particularly when traumatic experiences and conduct disorders remain untreated within communities that lack adequate mental health services. Stephens and Nel demonstrate how untreated psychological difficulties significantly increase risks of re-offending among young people, often interacting with substance abuse patterns to create compounded vulnerabilities that prove difficult to address through traditional correctional programming.<sup>15</sup> The intersection of mental health and criminal behaviour becomes particularly complex when considering how traumatic experiences may both contribute to initial criminal involvement and result from exposure to violence within criminal justice settings.

Family functioning emerges as perhaps the most critical environmental factor that influences juvenile criminal trajectories, and research consistently demonstrating how family disruption creates pathways to criminal involvement. Roestenburg and Oliphant provide compelling documentation of how parental criminality, abuse experiences, and family abandonment create developmental contexts that increase the risk of criminal behaviour among South African youth.<sup>16</sup> These family-level risks often compound across generations, creating cycles in which criminal involvement becomes normalised within family systems. At the same time, protective factors such as supervision, emotional support, and legitimate role modelling are diminished.

Educational participation and achievement are crucial protective factors to prevent both initial criminal involvement and subsequent recidivism among young people. Lekalakala demonstrates dramatic differences in recidivism rates based on educational attainment, documenting that youth who discontinue education before completing Grade 10 show recidivism rates of 67% compared to 34% for those who complete secondary education.<sup>17</sup> These findings highlight how educational disruption may result from and contribute to criminal involvement, creating cumulative disadvantages that limit legitimate opportunities and increase exposure to criminal peer networks.

### **Structural and Environmental Determinants**

Economic factors represent fundamental drivers of youth recidivism in South African contexts, with poverty and unemployment creating conditions in which criminal activity may appear as rational responses to material needs and limited legitimate opportunities. Khwela demonstrated clear relationships between community economic conditions and re-offending patterns, showing that communities with unemployment rates exceeding 60% produce recidivism rates nearly double those of more economically stable areas.<sup>18</sup> These patterns suggest that individual-level interventions may prove insufficient when implemented in the broader context of economic marginalisation and limited opportunity structures.

Gang networks in townships and informal settlements enable repeat offending by providing social structures and economic opportunities. Statistics South Africa shows increased participation of young people in serious crimes through gangs that offer material benefits and a sense of belonging.<sup>19</sup> Gang connections extend to correctional facilities, maintaining these criminal associations. Geographic factors shape crime patterns, with rural youth facing limited economic opportunities and inadequate services. Remote areas lack infrastructure for youth transitioning from facilities to communities, while rural regions rely on insufficient informal social controls to address criminal involvement.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Cronje and Robert Peacock, "A Comparative Study of Recidivism Factors Associated with Different Offense Categories in South Africa," *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice* 21, no. 1 (2023): 56–79.

<sup>15</sup> Oluyemi Adetunji Stephens and Norma M Nel, "Recidivism and Emotional Intelligence of Male Recidivists in Lagos State, Nigeria," *Journal of Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2014): 115–24.

<sup>16</sup> Willem Roestenburg and Emmerentie Oliphant, "Community-Based Juvenile Offender Programs in South Africa: Lessons Learned," in *Social Development and Social Work* (Routledge, 2013), 32–51.

<sup>17</sup> Ernest Ramokone Lekalakala, *A Comparative Penological Study on Recidivism* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Khwela, "Effects of Incarceration on Recidivism in South Africa."

<sup>19</sup> Statistics South Africa, "Census 2022: Housing and Household Amenities (," *Report No. 03-01-11* (Pretoria: Stats SA, 2023).

Community social organisations affect both crime prevention and rehabilitation outcomes through mechanisms of collective efficacy, informal social control, and opportunity provision, which vary considerably in different neighbourhood contexts. Areas characterised by high residential mobility, economic disadvantage, and weak institutional presence often lack the capacity to provide adequate supervision and support to young people, while simultaneously offering limited legitimate opportunities for social and economic participation. These community-level factors interact with individual and family risks to create cumulative disadvantages that may persist across developmental periods and during life transitions.

### **Institutional and Systemic Gaps**

There is a critical gap in understanding how correctional environments influence the recidivism of South African youth. Although international research has shown the criminogenic effects of incarceration through criminal networks, institutional dependency, and stigmatisation, limited research has examined these processes in South African corrections. Housing first-time and repeat offenders together may increase re-offending risks through criminal learning processes. South African recidivism research focuses mainly on adults, leaving youth-specific factors poorly understood.<sup>20</sup> Youth may respond differently to correctional interventions and face unique reintegration challenges, with developmental processes creating distinct vulnerabilities. Correctional systems lack the empirical foundations for programme improvement without systematic outcome tracking. This study examines institutional factors within correctional settings, focusing on juvenile recidivists in rural South Africa, to provide evidence for policy development. This study explores youth perspectives on correctional experiences and subsequent criminal involvement to understand how institutional practices influence re-offending patterns.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This investigation integrates social disorganisation, strain, and social learning theories to understand youth recidivism in South Africa. These theories explain the influences that shape criminal trajectories, ranging from structural conditions to community processes and individual learning mechanisms. Social disorganisation theory shows how poverty, unemployment, residential instability, and weak institutions create neighbourhoods with limited collective efficacy.<sup>21</sup> In disorganised communities, disrupted socialisation leads youth toward crime, while lacking the capacity to support youth transitioning from correctional facilities. The Strain Theory explains how individuals respond to discrepancies between cultural goals and the legitimate means to achieve them.<sup>22</sup> Young offenders often face a tension between societal expectations and access to legitimate opportunities. This creates pressure for "innovation" responses, where individuals pursue goals through illegitimate means. Post-release barriers like criminal records that limit employment and social stigmatisation intensify strain, making crime appear as a response to blocked opportunities. Social learning theory explains how criminal behavior is acquired through social interaction, particularly with groups that provide models of criminal behavior.<sup>23</sup> Individuals learn criminal behaviour through differential association, where definitions of law violations determine the outcomes. Correctional environments may facilitate criminal learning through offender mixing, while limiting opportunities for legitimate behaviour. These perspectives provide a framework for understanding youth recidivism by examining structural, community, and individual factors. Effective interventions must address multiple levels to reduce inequalities while supporting prosocial development.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research was conducted at the Thohoyandou Correctional Centre in the Thulamela Municipality, 200 km north of Polokwane, South Africa. The facility serves the rural and semi-urban populations of northern Limpopo, examining youth recidivism in communities with limited economic opportunities. Twenty sentenced juvenile offenders from the facility's juvenile section were studied, in alignment with qualitative

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<sup>20</sup> Lekalakala, *A Comparative Penological Study on Recidivism*.

<sup>21</sup> Clifford Robe Shaw and Henry Donald McKay, "Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas," 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas J Bernard, "Testing Structural Strain Theories," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 24, no. 4 (1987): 262–80.

<sup>23</sup> E. H. Sutherland, *Principles of Criminology*, 4th ed. (J. B. Lippincott, 1947); Ronald L Akers, "Deviant Behavior: A Social Learning Approach," 1973.

research principles.<sup>24</sup> Purposive sampling targeted offenders of various crimes who were re-arrested within 24 months of their previous release. Participants were 16-21 years old, with a minimum six-month incarceration period, and could communicate in English or Tshivenda. Voluntary informed consent was obtained. Data collection used unstructured interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes in private rooms, following Neuman's approach. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and conducted in their preferred languages, with bilingual assistance available.<sup>25</sup> Focus group interviews complemented the individual data by exploring the collective perspectives on recidivism. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Correctional Services. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic approach, with two researchers coding 30% of the transcripts.<sup>26</sup> (Cohen's kappa = 0.78). Themes were developed by comparing the codes across participants. Atlas.ti software enabled systematic data management and analyses.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Sample Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 20 participants, all of whom documented patterns of recidivist behavior according to the operational definition employed in this study. These young people represented diverse criminal trajectories while sharing common experiences of repeated involvement with criminal justice systems and multiple incarcerations within the Thohoyandou Correctional Centre.

**Demographic Profile:** The age distribution reflected the population of juvenile offenders, with a mean age of 19.2 years (SD=1.6) and a range of 16-21 years old. This age profile captures critical developmental periods during which identity formation and peer influence undergo significant changes, affecting criminal involvement. Gender representation included 12 males (60%) and eight females (40%), providing perspectives from male and female offenders who experience different pathways into criminal activity. Educational attainment showed significant deficits, and 67% did not complete secondary education after arrest. This educational disruption reflects both a consequence and a risk factor for criminal activity, as limited credentials constrain employment opportunities. The employment status showed that 78% of the participants were unemployed, indicating limited economic opportunities and potential motivations for criminal involvement.

**Criminal History Patterns:** Participants demonstrated substantial criminal justice involvement, with a mean of 2.8 prior convictions (SD=1.4) preceding their incarceration. This extensive criminal history suggests that participants had multiple opportunities to experience the deterrent effects of criminal justice sanctions but continued to engage in criminal activities despite previous correctional experiences. Current offence patterns indicate that theft is the most common offence category (35%), followed by assault (25%), drug-related crimes (20%), robbery (15%), and other offence types (5%). This distribution reflects both property crimes, potentially motivated by economic needs, and violent crimes that may result from interpersonal conflicts or involvement in criminal networks.

### Qualitative Findings

The following analysis presents findings from comprehensive interviews with participants on the multiple factors contributing to recidivism among youth offenders within the context of the Thohoyandou Correctional Centre. Data were obtained through unstructured interviews that enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while providing a detailed exploration of factors they identified as important for understanding their criminal trajectories. Most participants fell within the 18 to 21 age range, and all were assigned alphabetical identifiers to protect their identities while enabling tracking of individual perspectives across different topics.

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<sup>24</sup> Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability," *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 59–82.

<sup>25</sup> W. L. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 5th ed. (Allyn & Bacon, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> David Byrne, "A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke's Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Quality & Quantity* 56, no. 3 (June 26, 2022): 1391–1412, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>.

### ***Economic Deprivation and Survival-Based Criminal Activity***

The study revealed five interconnected factors that participants identified as contributing to their patterns of recidivism, with poverty and unemployment emerging as the most fundamental drivers of criminal involvement. Participants consistently described how family economic hardship and limited legitimate opportunities created contexts where criminal activities appeared necessary for survival and family support. The relationship between economic deprivation and criminal activity is complex, involving not only individual material needs but also broader family obligations and community expectations that create pressure for economic contribution regardless of the means employed.

One participant articulated this dynamic by explaining that;

*"Poverty contributes to a deviant lifestyle because you may find that it is a family wherein there is no income that is being received, no one is working, maybe they are receiving R300 for a child grant, which cannot provide the needs for the whole family."*

This observation highlights how inadequate social support systems and limited employment opportunities create economic pressures beyond individual needs to encompass family survival and community participation.

The responses from the participants indicate that unemployment and poverty function as increasing factors that increase crime rates within their communities, making youth increasingly likely to resort to criminal activities as a means of supporting themselves and their family members. This pattern suggests that criminal involvement often emerges from rational calculations about survival and responsibility rather than moral deficiency or inadequate deterrence. The economic motivations for criminal activity become particularly concerning when considering how legitimate opportunities remain limited within rural and semi-urban contexts, creating structural conditions that may perpetuate criminal involvement across generations.

### ***Substance Abuse and Impaired Decision-Making***

Substance abuse, particularly with alcohol and cannabis (dagga), emerged as a significant factor influencing criminal behaviour among participants, with most describing how substance use impaired their judgement and decision-making capacity during critical moments that led to criminal activity. The relationship between substance abuse and criminal involvement was multifaceted, involving acute effects that influenced specific criminal incidents and chronic patterns that undermined the participants' capacity to engage productively with legitimate opportunities and social relationships.

One participant described this dynamic by stating,

*"I was under the influence of substance abuse, wherein I did not think, which led me to commit a crime. When I am drunk, I normally bully other people around me."*

This account illustrates how substance use may function both as a direct contributor to criminal behaviour through its effects on impulse control and social interaction and as an indicator of underlying difficulties with emotional regulation and stress management that may require comprehensive intervention approaches.

The majority of participants reported regular substance use patterns that contributed to their inability to cope effectively with community demands and social expectations, leading to poor decision-making processes that resulted in criminal activities. These substance use patterns often begin during early adolescence and become increasingly problematic over time, suggesting that effective prevention and intervention efforts must address substance abuse as both a consequence of social marginalisation and a contributing factor to continued criminal involvement.

### ***Peer Influence and Gang Involvement***

Peer pressure and gang involvement created powerful social influences that consistently directed participants toward continued criminal activity, often providing alternative sources of identity, protection, and economic opportunity that competed with legitimate alternatives. Participants described peer pressure as paramount in influencing deviant behaviours, with gang membership offering both immediate benefits,

such as protection and status, and longer-term involvement in organised criminal activities that provided economic opportunities within constrained legitimate employment contexts. The institutional environment of the correctional facility appeared to facilitate gang involvement and criminal network development, with participants reporting that some individuals joined gangs specifically for protection while incarcerated. As one participant explained,

*"I joined the gang in prison because I wanted to be safe and protected,"*

while another described more extensive involvement by noting,

*"I am a second in charge of the gang that we formed in prison; the gang aims to go and commit heists and make money after being released."*

These accounts suggest that correctional environments may inadvertently provide contexts for criminal organisation and planning that increase, rather than decrease, the risks of subsequent criminal involvement.

The influence of experienced criminals who became friends and associates during incarceration encouraged participants to commit additional crimes after their release from correctional custody. This pattern indicates that social learning processes within correctional facilities may transfer criminal knowledge, techniques, and motivations that persist beyond institutional experience and influence subsequent community behaviour. Gang involvement becomes particularly problematic when considering how these networks often extend across institutional and community boundaries, maintaining criminal associations and planning criminal activities that span multiple jurisdictions and time periods.

### **Family Dysfunction and Inadequate Support Systems**

Family dysfunction and absent parental support emerged as critical factors contributing to recidivism patterns among participants, with many describing rejection from families following initial arrests and the subsequent withdrawal of emotional, financial, and practical support that might otherwise facilitate successful community reintegration. Family responses to criminal involvement often involve both immediate consequences, such as residential displacement, and longer-term relationship disruption that eliminates important sources of social control and legitimate opportunities. Several participants described experiences of family rejection that created additional pressure for criminal involvement as a means of survival and support. One participant explained,

*"I do not stay with my parents because I have impregnated a girl; therefore, my parents chased me out of their house, which resulted in me staying with my girlfriend and committing crimes to fend for her and my unborn baby."*

This account illustrates how family rejection may create cascading effects that increase, rather than decrease, the pressures for criminal involvement, particularly when combined with new family responsibilities and limited legitimate opportunities for economic support. The absence of adequate parental care and support appeared to contribute directly to participants' likelihood of re-offending following release from correctional custody, as families failed to provide the moral guidance, emotional support, and practical assistance that might otherwise facilitate successful transitions back into community life. This pattern suggests that effective intervention strategies must address family relationships and support systems rather than focusing exclusively on individual behavioural change, recognising that family dysfunction may contribute to initial criminal involvement and perpetuate criminal careers through inadequate reintegration support.

### **Institutional Practices and Criminal Learning**

Perhaps most concerning among the findings, the institutional environment of the correctional facility itself appeared to contribute significantly to recidivism risk through the inappropriate mixing of first-time and repeat offenders in communal living arrangements that facilitated the sharing of criminal techniques and planning of future criminal activities. Participants consistently reported that housing different categories of offenders together in communal cells allowed experienced criminals to mentor newcomers in criminal methods while providing opportunities for collaborative planning of post-release criminal enterprises.

One participant explained this dynamic by noting,

*"Yes, because when we are locked up at night, we discuss and share criminal ideas on how to rob and break into people's houses."*

This suggests that correctional facilities may inadvertently function as educational institutions for criminal activity, providing contexts where criminal knowledge and techniques are transmitted across different experience levels and offence categories. The nighttime period appears particularly problematic, as reduced supervision enables extended discussions and planning sessions that may not occur during more closely monitored daytime hours.

Most of the interviewed participants expressed the view that the Department of Correctional Services was not providing appropriate treatment for first-time offenders when they were housed together with habitual or repeat offenders in communal living arrangements. Participants observed that first-time offenders were often easily influenced and manipulated to commit additional crimes after their release from correctional custody, suggesting that institutional practices may increase rather than decrease criminal involvement among individuals who might otherwise desist from criminal activity. This pattern indicates that correctional policies regarding offender classification and housing may require a fundamental revision to prevent criminogenic effects that undermine the rehabilitation objectives of the correctional system.

### ***Institutional Experiences and Motivations for Change***

The perspectives of the participants on correctional experiences revealed complex relationships between institutional life and motivation for behavioural change, with some individuals expressing appreciation for services and programmes. In contrast, others described institutional conditions as contributing to hardened criminal attitudes. Understanding these varying responses is crucial for developing more effective correctional approaches that facilitate, rather than undermine, desistance from criminal activity. Some participants described the positive aspects of correctional life, providing stability and unavailable services in their home communities. One participant observed,

*The Correctional Centre provides free meals, educational programmes, health care, and religious care programmes. We play recreational sports such as soccer, rugby, athletics, chess, and cards during our spare time. However, these programmes do not remove the fact that we have committed crimes repeatedly and are considered offenders. It is really painful to be in prison knowing that I have left my family behind, and I should be looking for a job."*

This response suggests that while correctional facilities may provide material benefits and structured environments that offer stability to some individuals, these advantages do not necessarily translate into motivation for behavioural change or successful community reintegration. The tension between appreciation for institutional services and awareness of family separation and missed legitimate opportunities reflects the complex psychological processes that may influence post-release decisions and community adjustment.

Other participants expressed more negative perspectives on correctional experiences, emphasising how institutional conditions contributed to feelings of frustration and resentment that might influence subsequent behaviours. One participant stated,

*"No, I am not enjoying being here. I feel pain when I am here because I was doing my final year as a boiler maker, and maybe I would have been looking for a job rather than sitting here gaining nothing."*

This response highlights how incarceration can alter or disrupt educational and career trajectories, which represent legitimate pathways toward economic stability and social integration. Another participant observed,

*"I do not enjoy staying at this place; I am always thinking of my family,"*

while a fourth noted,

*"If I were at Bosasa, I would say I am enjoying it, but since I am here, I am not enjoying life. Being here is very difficult because we do not have a choice in anything; even the food we eat is not enough."*

These responses indicate that correctional experiences may generate feelings of powerlessness and institutional dependency that could undermine the capacity for independent decision-making and community adjustment following release.

Participants A, H, and D demonstrated remorse for their actions and were willing to change their behaviour if provided with appropriate opportunities and support. Through interviews, researchers observed that participants acknowledged guilt about their criminal activities and were willing to participate in rehabilitation or restorative programming (Robinson & Shapland, 2008). This readiness for change represents an important foundation for intervention efforts. However, it requires institutional responses that capitalise on motivation for change rather than undermining it through inappropriate policies and practices.

### ***Institutional Infrastructure and Criminal Facilitation***

The study revealed significant challenges within the correctional infrastructure that the participants identified as contributing directly to re-offending patterns and criminal-learning processes. Participants consistently indicated that current housing arrangements facilitate rather than prevent criminal involvement by placing offenders who have committed various crimes, including rape, robbery, assault, and theft, in communal cells where they can plan criminal activities and share criminal techniques.

Mixing offender categories creates environments where criminal knowledge is transmitted from more experienced to less experienced offenders, potentially increasing their criminal capacity. One participant noted that while infrastructure affects recidivism, individual readiness for change also influences outcomes, showing the interaction between environmental and personal factors. Other participants emphasised how institutional arrangements enable criminal learning. As one respondent stated,

*"Yes, because when we are locked up at night, we discuss and share criminal ideas on how to rob and break into people's houses."*

This demonstrates how unsupervised communal living provides opportunities for criminal planning that may influence post-release behaviour.

Participants expressed particular concern about how current housing policies do not protect first-time offenders from exposure to more experienced criminals who may recruit them into criminal networks or teach them advanced techniques. One participant noted that "when they are housed under one roof, there are strong possibilities of forming gangs that will continue re-offending", while strongly condemning the practice of placing offenders who committed different categories of crimes in the same living space. The institutional environment appeared to create conditions that can contribute to the development of hardened criminal attitudes and identities that resist change. One participant observed,

*"The infrastructure does not play a role; what is difficult is the living conditions of the prison, which are not good at all; the conditions contribute to making a person a hardened criminal."*

This assessment suggests that correctional conditions may inadvertently produce psychological and social adaptations that facilitate future criminal involvement rather than prevent it.

### ***Correctional Programming and Rehabilitation Efforts***

Participants acknowledged various Department of Correctional Services programmes that enabled positive change and skill development. Educational programmes, substance abuse treatment, religious counselling, and recreation address the factors contributing to criminal behaviour while providing alternative activities. According to Bednarowski, governments should invest in prison education

programmes as they significantly reduce recidivism while lowering long-term incarceration costs.<sup>27</sup> Although general recidivism rates range from 50-70% within three years of release, educational programming reduces these rates by 29%, producing public safety and economic benefits that justify programme expansion.

The historical evolution of correctional institutions reflects a growing understanding of criminal behavior and the corresponding institutional responses. Initially, penitentiary models operated on the belief that imprisonment could reform offenders by fostering new moral perspectives and life purposes through isolation and reflection. These methods were later refined in light of positivist criminological theories, which emphasize that criminal behavior originates from individual traits and environmental conditions, necessitating systematic intervention rather than mere punishment or moral instruction. Modern rehabilitation programmes aim to equip offenders with various services, including education, job training, and psychological support, to enhance their ability to navigate community conditions and decrease the likelihood of future criminal activity. Silverman observes that rehabilitation has become a primary rationale for imprisonment, with programmes crafted to offer offenders opportunities to address personal issues while acquiring the academic and work skills essential for legitimate community involvement.<sup>28</sup>

The participants' perspectives on correctional programming revealed mixed experiences and varying levels of engagement with available services. One participant observed, "The Department of Correctional Services is helping a lot because there are programmes that we have here at a prison, such as gangsterism, substance abuse, etc. Secondly, Pastors come here to preach and advise us on how to change our lives." This response demonstrates an appreciation for the diversity of the programme and acknowledges that multiple intervention approaches may be necessary to address the complex factors contributing to criminal involvement.

Other participants provided comprehensive assessments of programming effectiveness, noting that "Re-offending programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services are helpful and empowering. We learn educational, recreational, and behavioural skills. These programmes change us positively and prepare us for our community." These observations suggest that well-designed programmes may provide a foundation for behavioural change and reintegration. However, participants noted limitations in programme reach, observing that while rehabilitation programmes exist, "more has to be done in terms of these programmes so that not only a few offenders are rehabilitated, but the majority should be so that less crime and less re-offending is achieved." This indicates that programme availability does not ensure complete coverage for all those who require intervention services.

### ***Offender Classification and Institutional Management***

The issue of offender separation emerged as a critical concern among participants, who consistently identified the mixing of first-time and repeat offenders as a fundamental policy failure that contributes directly to recidivism through criminal learning and network development. According to the Department of Correctional Services Annual Reports, limited staff skills and inadequate training continue to constrain rehabilitation delivery and departmental transformation efforts, while increasing prisoner populations create additional pressure on already strained institutional resources.

Between 1996 and June 2001, the number of prisoners in South Africa increased by 34%, with sentenced prisoners increasing by 27% and those awaiting trial increasing by 54%.<sup>29</sup> This rapid population growth has created overcrowding conditions that may constrain the implementation of appropriate classification and housing policies while forcing institutions to prioritise basic custody over rehabilitation programming and individual treatment needs.

Participants expressed concerns regarding classification policies. One participant noted, "*The Department does not differentiate between first-time and repeat offenders; all offenders are housed together. First-time offenders are unsafe when placed with experienced inmates, leading them to re-offend as they learn from others.*" This observation highlights safety concerns and implications for criminal

<sup>27</sup> M. Bednarowski, "Education and Recidivism: A Review of the Literature," *Prison Policy Initiative*, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> D. Silverman, *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Department of Correctional Services, *Annual Report 1999/2000* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2000).

behaviour learning. Multiple participants confirmed that separation by criminal experience does not occur, stating that *"We stay together with other offenders in the same cell."* These accounts indicate a failure to implement classification policies that could prevent criminal learning while protecting vulnerable individuals. Participants noted that first-time offenders, seen as "harmless and unfamiliar with prison", were vulnerable to manipulation by seasoned criminals. These offenders, serving one to 24-month sentences, can receive intensive criminal education through exposure to experienced inmate educators. The lack of effective classification policies misses opportunities to prevent criminal learning and achieve rehabilitation outcomes. Participants believed that addressing these issues could reduce re-offending through better social network formation during incarceration.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this investigation reveal complex interactions between individual vulnerabilities, family dysfunction, community disadvantage, and institutional practices that combine to perpetuate criminal involvement among young South Africans. Rather than reflecting simple moral failures or inadequate deterrence, recidivism among participants emerged from systematic disadvantages and policy failures that create conditions conducive to continued criminal involvement while limiting opportunities for successful behavioural change and community reintegration.

The prominence of economic factors in participants' accounts aligns with strain theory predictions about how blocked legitimate opportunities create pressure for innovative responses to achieve culturally prescribed goals. However, the findings extend beyond individual adaptation to reveal how family obligations and community expectations create additional pressures that may intensify, rather than reduce, the motivation for criminal involvement. The inadequacy of social support systems, particularly the R300 child grant mentioned by the participants, highlights how policy responses that do not address the full scope of economic need may inadvertently perpetuate conditions that facilitate criminal involvement among youth.

Substance abuse patterns among participants reflect both individual coping mechanisms and broader community problems that require comprehensive intervention approaches that extend beyond correctional programming to address availability, social norms, and the underlying stressors that drive problematic use. The relationship between substance abuse and criminal involvement appears bidirectional, with criminal involvement providing access to drugs. In contrast, substance use impairs judgment and decision-making capacity during critical moments that may lead to additional criminal activity.

Gang involvement and peer influence dynamics underscore the importance of social learning processes in sustaining criminal careers, particularly when institutional environments facilitate rather than hinder the development of criminal networks and the transmission of knowledge. The finding that gangs form within correctional facilities specifically to plan post-release criminal activities indicates fundamental failures in institutional security and programming that allow criminal organisations to flourish within settings designed to prevent crime.

Family dysfunction and inadequate support systems represent critical intervention points that correctional approaches often fail to adequately address. Family rejection after criminal involvement creates effects that increase pressure to continue criminal activity, particularly with limited opportunities and family responsibilities. Interventions must address family relationships and support systems rather than focusing solely on individual behavioural changes. The institutional practices documented here violate effective correctional programming principles by facilitating criminal learning while lacking the requisite rehabilitation services. The mixing of first-time and repeat offenders in unsupervised settings creates environments for criminal activity that may increase the criminal capacity and networks of individuals who might otherwise avoid crime.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Institutional Reform and Policy Development**

Rehabilitation efforts must extend beyond prisons to address the community conditions that lead to criminal behaviour and hinder their reintegration. This requires partnerships between Correctional Services and community organisations to enable coordinated interventions that address multiple risk

factors. Workshops between Correctional Services and community organisations should prepare institutional staff and community members to support offender reintegration. These efforts should develop support systems addressing housing, employment, education, and family relationships, contributing to criminal involvement. Reforming offender classification and housing policies is essential to prevent the spread of criminal knowledge within facilities. First-time and repeat offenders should be housed separately, with programmes to prevent the formation of criminal networks. This separation requires tailored programming to address the distinct needs of different offender categories. Educational and vocational programmes must be expanded to offer alternatives while providing skills for legitimate employment, and be designed to align with local economic conditions and job opportunities.

### **Community-Based Prevention and Support**

Economic development initiatives must prioritise youth employment and training opportunities in communities with high crime rates and limited legitimate opportunities. These initiatives must address immediate employment needs and longer-term economic development, creating sustainable opportunities for young people transitioning from correctional facilities. Substance abuse prevention and treatment programmes should be integrated into both correctional and community settings, focusing on addressing the underlying factors driving problematic use while providing comprehensive treatment that extends beyond institutional boundaries. Family support and intervention services should be developed to tackle family dysfunction, equipping families with the skills and resources necessary to support the successful reintegration of members returning from correctional facilities. Community-based supervision and support programmes should be strengthened to offer ongoing assistance and monitoring to facilitate successful transitions while preventing recidivism. These programmes must be adequately funded and staffed to provide intensive support during critical transition periods when the risk of recidivism is highest.

### **CONCLUSION**

This investigation reveals that youth recidivism in Thohoyandou stems from interactions between individual vulnerabilities, family dysfunction, community disadvantage, and institutional practices that perpetuate criminal behaviour. The research captured perspectives on the factors driving repeated criminal involvement using qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups. The study shows how correctional environments may facilitate criminal learning through inappropriate policies while failing to address the underlying factors driving crime. The findings parallel patterns in other countries while revealing context-specific factors that require local interventions. Youth represent populations with the highest intervention potential, which makes it crucial that responses capitalise on opportunities for positive change rather than perpetuating criminal involvement. Participants believed that prevention required government development initiatives, particularly those focused on youth job creation. Young people require support systems that address both their immediate needs and long-term development. Effective responses must address multiple levels, from individual skill development and family support to community economic development and institutional reform. Understanding recidivism requires attention to the interactions between personal agency and structural constraints while creating conditions that support positive development and community integration for all youth.

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