



Exploring the Experience of Ex-Offenders in West London

Accredited Community Research Course

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The student group

2013-2014

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to the Evelyn Oldfield Unit especially Sarah Menzies and Matthews for giving me this research opportunity. Many thanks to Nathaniel Oyinloye, Director of the Hospital and Prison Network, Amanda Amito of Kwa Africa and Cassim Adepegba for their encouragement. I greatly appreciate my survey participants who were patient enough to offer the valuable information that has formed the bedrock of this work. My special thanks go to my friends and children for being there for me.

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Executive Summary

This is a qualitative research project to explore the personal experiences of ex-offenders in West London while in prison and in the larger society when they are out of it. With the high rate of re-offending by ex-offenders and the huge amount that this costs the government, it is imperative that we know the state of mind of these people just immediately before they got released and how these may be compounded by difficulty of re-assimilation into the normal society.

The Guardian newspaper reported in 2010 that re-offending costs the British government eleven billion pounds a year (James E, 2010). A similar 2014 report in London Evening Standard claims the cost to have jumped to thirteen billion (Cohen D, 2014). This is alarming and argued by many as colossal waste of public funds. However, does government really have any choice? The literature includes articles, national statistics, police, survey, etc.

It may be pertinent to state here that a prisoner hardly comes out of prison with the same state of mind that he had when arrested or convicted. We have to accept that prison is a community where people interact to share ideas and discuss each other's case. This has the possibility of either hardening the person in living the life of crime or become fully remorseful and change his ways for the better. No matter how good the ex-offender resolves to become, he has to contend with acceptance and help by others to live a straight life.

I used focus group of my co-workers and a well-designed questionnaire to get the exact information that is required.

I found out from the research that ex-offenders have two widely opposing views of life, to either remain in crime or reform their ways. However, the latter group has different levels of commitment to stay out of crime and what may make them to return to crime.

Chapter 1:

(i) Central aim and research plan

The central aim of this research is to try to find out what informs the thought of an offender immediately before release, how these thoughts are positively or negatively affected by rate of assimilation and the elimination of stigmatization.

My research plan is to use focus group, administer a well-designed questionnaire, train volunteers, make telephone calls to prospective participants and possibly send emails, etc. It would be carried out between 1st and 30th of March 2014

I would start off by sending the proposed questionnaire to Evelyn Oldfield Unit for review and approval. After that I will recruit and train research volunteers to help in administering the questionnaire mainly amongst ex-convicts and other stakeholders who would be reached via phone using my contacts as a former prisons Muslim chaplain. Findings would then be collated and analysed. Meanwhile, a focus group would be put together to share personal views, beliefs, experiences, etc on the research topic

My literature review would be mainly through relevant books and literature both online and offline. This would be in the third week after I must have finished with both the focus group and the questionnaire.

Aim:

To explore the experiences of black prisoners both inside and outside prison (from the perspective of ex-prisoners)

Objectives:

- to find out support available inside and outside of prison
- to explore the experiences of people after prison
- to explore why people re-offend
- to explore how effective the support is
- to set out what else needs to be done

About the Researcher:

I feel strongly about this research topic because as a former prisons Muslim chaplain and currently a mentor for prison inmates and ex-offenders for eleven years, I feel greatly concerned at the spate of re-offending by ex-offenders and seek to find out what may be the cause as well as how other external factors like assimilation and stigmatization may be fuelling the rate at which these people go back to prison.

(ii) Literature review

The prison system has gone through evolutions in scope, magnitude and modus operandi over the decades since its first introduction into human society. An arrangement of order and regularity where each prisoner is isolated in a cell and made to abide by rules of total silence was in practice in the 1830s (Morris N; Rothman DJ, 1998).

The high rise of prison population with the attendant cost of maintaining prison inmates in the recent past has got the UK government thinking on how to avoid the large number of ex-convicts that returns to prison (Ed. Hucklisby A.; Hagley-Dickinson L, 2007).

A major set-back to any government resettlement program for ex-offenders is the willingness of employers to bring them into their work force. Many studies has shown that there is a lot of scepticism about how reformed they may be and if they may negatively explore company information towards a criminal end. An online poll found that though many employers refuse to take on ex-conflicts, only ten percent would admit this (Working Links Report, 2010).

Mentoring ex-offenders has long been touted as an ideal route for assimilation back into the society with little note taken of how the process impact on the mentor (Kavanagh L; Borrill J, 2014).

There has been support for ex-offenders from organizations such as the Princes Trust in terms of employment training, self-employment grants, etc.

Volunteering within and outside prisons offer ex-offenders the opportunities to learn new skills and build self-confidence. Some prisons allow inmates to help other inmates in a peer to peer approach to problem solving (Taylor C, 2008).

There has been many intervention strategies used over the years to fully rehabilitate ex-convicts. Of the lot, arts has been very effective with many workshops, meetings, conferences and exhibitions in that respect as exemplified by the one by Arts Alliance, Cardiff. The clergy has remained a traditional source of support for ex-offenders as indicated by the activities of Jon March, Vicar of St Luke's Church in Kentish Town London with the Caring for Ex-Offenders program.

Housing has always been a problem for ex-offenders just released from prison. In order to solve this and other things that will facilitate their integration, it would be ideal to have a unified programme (Penfold C et al, 2009). This stance is even made more relevant as thirty percent of ex-convicts are said not to have anywhere to live and that this may eventually lead them back to prison (Byrne R, 2014).

Desistence by those that are prone to re-offending, intervention based on improving the capacities and skills of ex-offenders as well as practitioners using quality practice skills have been identified as being key to reducing re-offending (IRISS, 2012).

(iii) Methodology

In used both focus group and a questionnaire was administered in West London. As a subject of concern to many people in London, many participants who were ex-convicts participated willingly. As most ex-convicts are secretive because of stigma, it was not easy getting them to join other experts in a focus group but some were willing to do so as this is the only way to get their first-hand personal experience embedded in the discussion and take cognisance of. It was carried out in one location where their safety and privacy was assured. The use of questionnaire enabled me to harness aggregate data quickly and cheaply on the research topic, an approach that enabled me to properly collate and analysed the data gathered that is projectable to reflect the same research topic elsewhere.

This is a qualitative research that studies causes, explains, is objective and tests hypothesis. Thus, unlike quantitative research, this takes note of the respondents' feelings, beliefs, etc I had a detailed literature review touching on ex-convict housing, employment, etc, with effort made to be unbiased both in data collection and analysis. It explored the two possible thought pattern of an ex-convict just before being released: be remorseful to live straight or get hardened in crime.

Many ex-convicts were wary of being personally identified and so declined recorded interviews to avoid stigma so I could not get them to give voice responses. I had enough accurate data from the questionnaire and focus group to be collated and analysed.

I administered ten questionnaires to ex-convicts in west London. I used the opportunity to explain questions that were not clear to them. At first I thought about concentrating on black prisoners but from my experience, I realised that people regardless of race suffer from the same issues, and therefore I decided to open it out and reflect same in the research title.

Getting ex-convicts to cooperate for such an exercise was daunting but I got some after assuring them of safeguarding their personal identities and that their response may lead to findings that may help change things for the better. Women are hard to approach for such work so using my current role as a prison pastoral support where I don't have access to women, I decided to focus on men. Due to the ethical and practical challenges of interviewing prisoners, I decided to talk to former prisoners.

I explored some connections from my job and expect that these leads will help me access others. I am in touch with a number of imams and ministers in prison, a probation officer, my mentees whom I can interview.

Ten questionnaires were administered on the ex-convicts and used a separate questionnaire for the focus group were both ex-convicts and colleagues in the charitable service of providing support for ex-convicts in a session that was lively and brought many vital points to the fore that has helped in shaping this findings.

SPECIFIC RESEARCH METHODS

There are three distinct methods of research, namely questionnaire, focus group and interview.

Questionnaires are easy to administer, provides data that can easily be collated and analysed and the outcome is projectable elsewhere where a similar research with same research topic. The disadvantage is that its responses are restrictive as it is multiple choice, the respondents understanding of the questions may differ and may be reflected in the outcome.

Focus Group, a discuss between people with personal beliefs, experiences, expertise, etc on the research topic, has the unique features of having them bounce ideas amongst each

other and evolve with well refined outcomes, is flexible on questions that may be adjusted as deemed necessary and offers the moderator the opportunity of making participant observation. Its disadvantage is that it may be hijacked by a vocal few and the outcome is not projectable.

Interviews are one-on-one based where the person interviewed gives unrestricted details but since it may be full of sentimental expressions, it has to be carefully analysed for inclusion in the final report.

(iv) Ethical considerations

Safeguarding the identity of ex-convicts was of paramount importance to them and I had to assure them that I am neither going to use their names nor personal descriptions in the research's final report. In pursuance of this promise that I made to them, we had to use safe locations where their personal privacy could be guaranteed.

Participants were asked not to answer any of the questions that they don't feel comfortable about and may even chose to withdraw from participating in the process at any point in time.

Prior to commencement, I submitted my research plan and questions to the Evelyn Oldfield Unit's ethics board and I would be submitting the raw data to them for secure storage.

All the participants did so voluntarily and willingly without any covert or overt duress.

Chapter 2: Research findings

(1) (i) What were you in prison for?

Almost One in three of the research respondents were in Prison for drug offences, twenty percent each for stealing and burglary with ten percent each for GBH (great bodily harm), fraud and shoplifting respectively. This reflects the metropolitan police mapping of crime in London (www.maps.met.police.uk)

(ii) How long were you in prison for?

Thirty percent each went in for two and four years respectively while ten percent each did three years, one year and less.

(iii) How long have you been out?

Only one in ten had left for up to four years, three in ten for two years and the rest being a year or less. Thus, those who partook in the research were still relatively fresh and therefore reliable

(2) Which of these services did you access in prison? Please tick all that apply.

Respondents ticked all provided options in the following descending order to reflect the services they accessed in prison; healthcare, employment, gym, counselling, life skills, exercise and immigration. This indicates that the prisons primarily met its primary responsibilities to the inmates probably with the exception of immigration. The following question however seeks to answer the depth at which such responsibilities were met. Many organizations, like the St Giles Trust, are helping inmates from within and outside prisons.¹

(3) How effective was the support you received?

Only one in ten rated the help they got towards employment as very effective, one in five felt it was simply effective, three in ten rated it as ok while another one in five deemed it

¹ <http://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/what-we-do/p489-prison-based%20services.html>

ineffective. On education, one in five said it was very effective, two in five see it as ok and one in five said it was ineffective. For health, three in ten deemed it very effective, while one in five rated it as ok and not effective respectively. The findings on life skills was poor as only one in ten found it to be very effective, one in ten saw it as ok and another one in ten said it wasn't effective. Counselling had only two ticks with one in ten each for very effective and ok while only one in ten ticked ok for immigration. The prison gyms got high ratings with three out of ten deeming it very effective and one in ten said it was simply effective. Only two respondents' ticked literary classes with one each going for very effective and ok. Exercise had one in ten very effective and one in five saying it was effective. The variations in the services accessed by the ex-convicts may not only be a reflection of accessibility but also personal interest which may be why majority of them ticked the employment, education and health options.

(4) Was the time you served in prison a positive or negative experience? How did it affect you. (i) Physical (ii) Mentally

One in two was very positive, less than a third were negative while one in five declined to answer. While the questionnaire method of data collection does not give room for explanation, those positive feelings may be for different reasons probably including reformation, health, family, etc.

There is still no clear indication of what the prison system is meant to achieve with the inmate, as both who accept self-reformation and those who reject it are all at the losing end after being released from prison. There have been many calls that prisons should not be used with the aim reducing criminal behaviour.²

(5) What issues did you experience coming out of prison?

Two in five felt stigmatized, three in ten were concerned with unemployment and unemployability, one in ten felt drawn back into gang lifestyle and one in five declined. This outcome is a common expectation going by the general discussions one has had with ex-convicts. Some ex-prisoners have written a lot about their experience directly or under pseudo names and one dwells on prisons life survival strategies.³

² <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/e199912.htm>

³ <http://phrack.org/issues/67/5.html>

(6) Which organization or people have been supporting you since leaving prison?

One in five have had the help of the Job Centre, while one in ten each had help from organizations like Positive East, Alcohol Anonymous, Adult Literacy, Clergy, NACRO and Family. Thus they had help from various sources, especially from charity organizations offering different types of help.

(7) How far do you feel you are fully re-integrated into society since leaving prison? Please tick the statement that best describes your feeling just now.

Half felt isolated, three in ten believe that they have settled in the society a little, one in five see themselves as unsettled while three in ten did not notice any changes in their personal lives. Isolation is a common thing among ex-convicts and this is not always caused by actual rejection but fear of it hinders them from freely taking steps to reintegrate properly. The label of 'offender' seems to stick permanently to an ex-convict and this makes this difficult for them.⁴

(8) How far has prison sentence affected your relationship or work? Please tick what your situation is right now.

One in five each felt their sentences had very positive effect and very negative effects on their relationships respectively, three in ten said it had negative effect and another three in ten observed no change. On friends, three in ten felt it had very positive effect, one in five felt it had negative effect, three in ten said it had very negative effect while three out of ten observed no change. For work, one out of five said it had very positive effect, another one in five said it had a negative effect, three in ten said it had very negative effect while one in five recorded no change.

(9) If relevant, what would have made your leaving Prison easier?

Most respondents skipped this question with only four in ten responding out of which one out of ten each choose good character, car pick me up, stay with family and decline respectively. This question was aimed at knowing the factors that might have made their sentences be reviewed downwards to enable them leave prison early.

⁴ <http://blogs.iriss.org.uk/discoveringdesistance/2013/02/11/820/>

(10) How hopeful are you about the future?

The responses elicited by this question was grim as only one in five said they were very hopeful of the future, with three in ten being fairly hopeful, two in five not sure and one in ten not very hopeful. Left with no job, stigmatization and operating at the lowest ebb of confidence, it is no wonder that we had this outcome. This also portends danger for the society as they longer these people stay with this kind of feelings, the more the chance of their re-offending to spend more time in jail at the expense of the tax payer.

Coming out of prisoners can be a mixture of joy and fear as the ex-prisoner steps into a life of stigma, uncertainty and rejection as indicated in the life of these two sisters.⁵

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/oct/19/life-after-prison-sisters-drug-smuggling>.

Chapter 3: Discussion

I focussed the research on the factors that may make a convict re-offend and go back to prison, often within a short of release from serving time for the previous offence.

Causes:

- *Stigmatization*

The fear of stigmatization and the actual or assumed stigma from the larger society has always been a worry for the ex-convict. Simply put, they often feel unacceptable and have less confidence in living normal life like in employment, housing, family, etc. The government and employers are not making things easy to eliminate stigma despite all the rhetoric just as some families and friends don't make things easy. This portends danger as when the ex-offenders finally resolve that they would never be accepted no matter what effort they put in to that effect, they may easily be lured back into the world of crime and criminals where they are more likely to feel more acceptable.⁶

- *Housing*

This is a major problem that, to many ex-convicts, it defines if they start living straight or end up on the street that may eventually lead them back to jail. Though the current shortage of housing is already a herculean task for government to solve, the housing of ex-convicts should be prioritised and accelerated to help with their reintegration. As many of them end up with nowhere to live, they become at risk to sleeping rough on the streets where survival is a daily struggle and with every passing day, going back to crime becomes more and more attractive. Though some organizations like Shelter UK⁷ are trying to help, there is still need for more.

⁶http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc93288/m2/1/high_res_d/THREE%20Edwards%20LaShonda.pdf

⁷ http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/your_housing_situation/prisoners_and_ex-offenders

- **Health**

Though the prisons health facilities is usually at par with the ones offered in the larger society, the conditions that ex-convicts who are just released are forced by personal circumstances often make them vulnerable to ailments especially long term ones that may have later consequence. For instance, going to the streets exposes them to the cold as well as put them at risk of acquiring HIV if they end up sharing needles with other drug users. These places are usually where they may quickly meet other criminals and thereby facilitate their eventual recruitment back into the world of crime. Most offenders and ex-offenders are likely to experience mental health problems and if not quickly cared for, may quickly deteriorate.⁸

- **Family**

Sentencing made a lot of ex-offenders to lose their family cohesion often leading to broken homes and whatever family assets that they might have built over the years. Any problem at the family front has the tendency of leading to psychological and health problems. With no family to turn to, the affected ex-offender may not feel the need to put in effort towards complying with societal norms and thus become vulnerable to re-offending. The importance of family support while inside and out of prison cannot be under estimated.⁹

- **Community**

Though there is an improvement in this regard due to awareness, acceptance and/or rejection by the community goes a long way for reintegration. Where they feel rejected, they are likely to be withdrawn and seek their likes elsewhere, a development that may lead them to a life of more criminal or anti-social activities. The society needs to change its concept of imprisonment and learn to offer ex-offenders second chance to live a straight life, for the common good of all. This effort is being explored by some organizations like the triangle trust.¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.nepho.org.uk/topics/Offender%20Health>

⁹ <http://www.urban.org/publications/900762.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.triangletrust.org.uk/what-we-fund/current-funding/rehabilitation-offenders-and-ex-offenders-project-grants>

- ***Unemployment***

Most employers are not interested in ex-convicts even if their conviction time has been spent. Some ex-convicts are also not helping matter by not retraining to gain new skills to improve their chances. Self-employment should be a safer option for them but they have to choose the industry carefully as some may require licencing or registration that would legally require disclosure of their conviction. Where ex-offenders are not able to successfully navigate the stigma-induced unemployment, they have to live somehow and may resort to crime as a last resort for survival. This should not be allowed to happen as stated here.¹¹

¹¹ <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/11/employment-ex-convictsbanboxjobscriminalrecord.html>.

Chapter 4

(i) Conclusions

I wanted to find out the experiences of prisoners after prison. I found that stigmatisation is still rife and ex-convicts are still suffering it. This made it difficult for me to get some of them to partake in the research as they were afraid of exposing themselves for more stigmatization. I had to reach out to more ex-convicts in order to have enough of them to participate and this slightly affected my time frame.

I wanted to explore the experiences after prison and how effective this is.

- Housing for ex-convicts remains a problem as many still report having nowhere to live, making them go to the streets thereby exposing themselves to the risk of falling into the trap of criminal gangs who may entice them with where to sleep, food, etc.
- Employers, including government, are wary of employing ex-convicts, a development that has left many of them exposed to begging around and seeking food hand outs to survive as well as sleep rough wherever the day ends for them. With no source of income, falling back on their crime expertise and contacts becomes an attractive option in their quest for survival.
- Communities are not yet fully receptive to giving them chance to live a straight life. Being treated as 'persona non-grata' by neighbours and the community at large, force the ex-convicts to withdraw into their own world and this can be dangerous to them and the society in the long or short term. I reached out to some community leaders to form part of the focus group but a lot of them declined.
- Families need to be there for their member who is an ex-convict. While a lot of them are doing this, there is a need for a few others to emulate this. It goes beyond receiving them from prison and offering them initial place to live. They should be spoken to in manners that neither reminds them of the sad past or tries to impugn their dignity and self-confidence. They need to be encouraged that they can live a straight life and guided gently towards achieving that. In fact one of them said he could not even trust his family so why should he trust me when I asked him to trust me about respecting his privacy in the research findings report.

Finally, I would like to say that as the IRISS (2012) report states, intervention based on improving the capacities and skills of ex-offenders as well as practitioners using quality practice skills have been identified as being key to reducing re-offending (IRISS, 2012). The better the support in and out of prison, the less likely people are to re-offend.

(ii) Recommendations

This section set out what needs to be done.

- That stigmatization should be eliminated through conscientious effort and actual ongoing government projects in order to give ex-convicts second chance in life.
- Housing for ex-convicts should be accelerated via a fast track scheme to make it easier for them to resettle. While some may see this as rewarding criminals with housing at the detriment of the general populace on the waiting list, we should also look at the consequences of having this people back to the street and them possibly jail.
- Employment of ex-convicts serves the dual purpose of giving them source of livelihood and get them engaged in such a way that they have little or no time for crime and criminals.
- Communities would do well if they can give ex-convicts chance to make amends to their lives and contribute positively to where they live. Being an ex-convict is not a form of long term ailment that can never be treated but it is rather a behavioural change for which they went to prison to get corrected and they now have a chance to apply whatever lessons that they might learnt.
- Families are supposed to be everyone's bedrock of support when other things fail one in life. If for whatever reason they are not there for the ex-convict, it makes things tough for him or her to restart life on the positive side and may compound the trauma instead of ameliorating it.

(iii) The strengths and limitations of research

The topic was an obstacle to a great extent and I had to do a lot of explanations and offer re-assurances to get ex-convicts to participate

The focus group had a very quality session that gave valuable opinions that highly. The questionnaire was designed to get best outcome without infringing on the participants right to privacy. In addition, some participants in the questionnaire gave personal opinions that helped a great deal in the report of findings.

The fact that there was no money to recruit and train volunteers as well as take care of administrative costs made the research difficult.

The initial plan was to administer a separate questionnaire on mentors of ex-offenders but the idea had to be jettisoned due to the delay in getting their response and the time constraint so I had to rely on the findings from the general questionnaire in addition to the focus group and interview.

Some adjustments had to be made in the process of conducting the research. It took three weeks in March 2014, with ten questionnaires administered to a carefully selected sample population that fairly cuts across race and gender of ex-convicts in western part of London. The focus group was made of ex-convicts and a few experts on crime and criminality.

If I get support, I will like to further explore the topic under study to probe further into the mind set of an ex-convict immediately upon release, acceptability by the community, how employment opportunities to them may be expanded, the state of stigma and how it can be drastically reduced, the family front and, ultimately, how re-offending may be reduced to save the tax payer the billions of pounds spent on that every year.

In such study, I would prefer to use the three methods of focus group, questionnaire and interviews over a longer period of time to enable proper data collection, collation, analysis and findings writing. The focus group would be broader and more inclusive of all affected persons with more time allocated for that method. The questions would be more detailed and/or giving respondents more answer choices and more questionnaires would be used to be administered by more trained volunteers. Interviews would be done with some used as case studies.

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