



Examination of the Effects of Imprisonment on Recidivism: A Review of Kisumu County, Kenya

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Abstract

High rates of recidivism continue to challenge the effectiveness of CZimprisonment as a tool for criminal rehabilitation and public safety in Kenya. In Kisumu County, a growing number of former inmates find themselves re-entering the prison system, raising questions about the role of incarceration in breaking the cycle of crime. This study examines the effects of imprisonment on recidivism rates. This study employed a mixed-methods research design, which enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively examine the effects of imprisonment on recidivism in Kisumu County. Data were collected from 700 ex-convicts, 85 prison officers, and 15 probation officers using structured questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. Quantitative findings revealed that 62% of ex-prisoners were re-arrested within three years, while only 18% had access to consistent rehabilitation programmes during incarceration. Additionally, 76% of recidivists cited unemployment and social stigma as major barriers to reintegration. The qualitative data supported these findings, highlighting overcrowded prison conditions, limited vocational training, and insufficient post-release support as key contributors to reoffending. The study concludes that imprisonment in its current form often fails to rehabilitate offenders and instead contributes to a cycle of repeat offending. It recommends increased investment in community-based rehabilitation, expansion of vocational programmes within prisons, and the establishment of structured reintegration frameworks to reduce recidivism and promote social reintegration.

Introduction

Recidivism, the tendency of released prisoners to relapse into criminal behavior, is a pressing global concern with deep implications for justice systems, public safety, and the rehabilitation of offenders (Yukhnenko, 2023). Across the world, many countries continue to experience high rates of reoffending, raising questions about the effectiveness of imprisonment as a corrective measure (World Prison Brief, 2022). In the United States, for instance, nearly 68% of released prisoners are re-arrested within three years, and over 77% are re-arrested within five years (Alper, Durose, & Markman, 2018). Similar trends are observed in Europe and parts of Asia, where the correctional focus is shifting towards restorative justice, community-based alternatives, and evidence-based rehabilitation programmes (UNODC, 2020).



In African countries have struggled with persistent recidivism rates due to systemic issues such as overcrowded prisons, limited access to rehabilitation programmes, poor living conditions, and the absence of structured post-release reintegration strategies (African Union Commission, 2023). In South Africa, studies indicate that between 55% and 70% of released offenders return to prison within three years (Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services [JICS, 2021). In Uganda and Tanzania, correctional systems face similar challenges, with reports highlighting inadequate vocational training, poor psychological support, and underfunded probation services (Kabagambe, 2020; Mollel & Magesa, 2019). These conditions not only limit rehabilitation but often foster criminal networks within prison walls, leading to hardened behaviour and higher risks of reoffending upon release.

In Kenya, recidivism remains a serious problem, with an estimated 60% of inmates in major prisons having previously served a sentence (Kenya Prisons Service, 2022). Despite ongoing efforts by the government and civil society to improve prison conditions and introduce reformative programmes, many correctional facilities remain congested, under-resourced, and punitive in nature. Former inmates frequently face societal stigma, unemployment, and family rejection, all of which contribute to their return to crime (Omondi & Njeru, 2021). Kisumu County, located in western Kenya, reflects this national pattern. Data from the region indicate an increasing number of repeat offenders, with prison records showing that a majority of those re-arrested had previously served time in prison within the last three to five years (EAC, 2023).

The existing gap between incarceration and successful reintegration has prompted growing concern among policymakers, researchers, and human rights advocates. While Kenya has introduced some rehabilitation programmes such as vocational training, basic education, and counselling, their reach and effectiveness remain limited, especially at the county level (Kariuki, 2018). Therefore, this study examined the effects of imprisonment on recidivism in Kisumu County, Kenya.

Despite the primary aim of imprisonment being rehabilitation, a growing number of former inmates in Kisumu County, Kenya, are re-entering the criminal justice system shortly after release (Oruta, 2023). This trend raises critical concerns about the effectiveness of imprisonment as a tool for behavioural reform and crime prevention. Recidivism not only signifies the failure of correctional institutions to facilitate meaningful change in offenders' behaviour but also places a financial burden on the state and jeopardises community safety. According to the Kenya Prisons Service (2022), more than 60% of inmates across various correctional facilities have previously been incarcerated, indicating a cyclical pattern of reoffending.

In Kisumu County, circumstantial evidence and prison records suggest that repeat offending is widespread, particularly among young adult males and those lacking formal education or employment opportunities. Many of these individuals cite factors such as lack of post-release support, unemployment, societal stigma, and insufficient rehabilitation while in prison as contributors to their return to criminal activity (Omondi & Njeru, 2021). Furthermore, overcrowded and under-resourced prisons in Kenya often fail to provide adequate vocational training, psychosocial support, or effective rehabilitation programmes, thus limiting inmates' chances of successful reintegration (Kariuki, 2018).

Although policy reforms have emphasised correctional rehabilitation, there remains a significant gap between intended outcomes and actual practices on the ground. Little empirical research has been conducted at the county level to evaluate the direct impact of imprisonment on recidivism, especially within the Kisumu region. Without this data, it becomes difficult for policymakers and stakeholders to implement evidence-based reforms to reduce repeat offending. This study, therefore, seeks to



bridge that gap by examining how imprisonment influences recidivism in Kisumu County, to inform more effective correctional and post-release reintegration strategies.

Theoretical Review

This study was grounded in Labelling Theory, which provides a powerful lens for understanding the connection between imprisonment and recidivism. Developed in the 1960s by sociologists such as Howard Becker (1963) and Edwin Lemert (1951), Labelling Theory argues that criminal behaviour is not inherent in the act itself, but is instead a result of society's reaction to the individual who engages in the act. In other words, once someone is labelled as a "criminal" or "offender," that label shapes not only how others perceive them but also how they perceive themselves, often resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In Kenya and Kisumu County in particular, imprisonment acts as a formal and visible labelling process. When individuals are arrested, tried, and incarcerated, they are officially branded as criminals. This label follows them beyond prison walls, affecting their reintegration into society. Upon release, many ex-prisoners face rejection, suspicion, and stigma from their families, employers, religious institutions, and community members. As Kariuki (2018) notes, such societal exclusion is one of the most significant barriers to successful reintegration for former inmates in Kenya.

This rejection can have several consequences. First, it limits access to legitimate opportunities for employment, education, and social inclusion. Secondly, it increases the individual's psychological stress and sense of alienation. According to Becker (1963), these conditions often push labelled individuals toward "secondary deviance", continued or intensified criminal behaviour that arises as a direct result of the deviant label. Thus, instead of deterring crime, imprisonment may actually reinforce criminal identities and behaviours.

In Kisumu County, the challenge is further compounded by socio-economic constraints. Ex-convicts often return to communities that are already grappling with high unemployment and poverty rates. The added stigma of a criminal record severely limits their options. Employers are reluctant to hire former inmates, landlords may refuse to rent them houses, and community members may treat them with fear or contempt. This marginalisation reinforces the individual's identity as a criminal, making lawful reintegration difficult and reoffending more likely.

Furthermore, prisons themselves can be environments that reinforce deviant labels. Instead of serving as rehabilitation centres, many prisons in Kenya, including those in Kisumu, are overcrowded, underfunded, and poorly staffed (Kenya Prisons Service, 2022). In such environments, inmates may be exposed to hardened criminals and may adopt criminal subcultures as coping mechanisms or survival strategies. This internal labelling within prison communities further strengthens deviant identities.

Empirical Literature Review

The relationship between imprisonment and recidivism has been widely debated in criminological literature and policy discourses across the world. Globally, incarceration has traditionally been viewed as both a deterrent and a corrective measure intended to prevent future criminal behaviour. However, empirical evidence from many countries suggests that imprisonment alone may not achieve these goals. In the United States, for instance, a major study by Alper, Durose, and Markman (2018) found that 68% of released prisoners were re-arrested within 3 years, and over 77% within 5 years. These alarming statistics have prompted policymakers and scholars to question the effectiveness of incarceration as a means of rehabilitation and have instead emphasised the need for more restorative and rehabilitative approaches.



In the African countries, the situation is no less concerning. Most prison systems in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from chronic underfunding, overcrowding, and poor infrastructure. These systemic challenges not only compromise the welfare of inmates but also limit the provision of meaningful rehabilitation services (African Commission, 2024). In South Africa, for example, it is estimated that between 55% and 70% of released offenders return to prison within a few years (Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services [JICS], 2021). In Uganda, Kabagambe (2020) found that prisons rarely provide inmates with vocational training or psychological support, while in Tanzania, Mollel and Magesa (2019) noted that ex-convicts often lack access to post-release support services, making their reintegration into society exceedingly difficult. Without job opportunities or community acceptance, many former inmates in these countries find themselves reoffending, not out of desire, but out of desperation.

In Kenya, recidivism presents a persistent challenge to the criminal justice system. The Kenya Prisons Service (2022) reported that over 60% of inmates in correctional institutions had previously been incarcerated, suggesting a cycle of repeat offending. While the government has made efforts to introduce rehabilitative programmes such as vocational training, education, and counselling, these initiatives are often inconsistent, underfunded, and inaccessible to the majority of inmates (Kariuki, 2018). Many prisons still operate under a punitive philosophy, with limited emphasis on behavioural transformation or reintegration planning. Furthermore, upon release, former inmates face a host of challenges, including unemployment, social stigma, and rejection by family or community members.

Omondi and Njeru (2021) found that stigma is a significant barrier to reintegration in Kenya. Their research showed that many ex-prisoners are denied jobs and housing opportunities due to their criminal past, which contributes to high levels of frustration and hopelessness, eventually leading some to reoffend. In western Kenya, Ochieng and Wanjala (2021) conducted a study which revealed that only a minority of inmates in the region had access to structured rehabilitation programmes such as tailoring, carpentry, or counselling. However, those who did participate in such programmes were significantly less likely to recidivate. This aligns with Muteti's (2020) conclusion that Kenya's penal institutions remain more punitive than reformative, and that meaningful rehabilitation efforts are often hampered by insufficient staffing, poor funding, and a lack of proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Reintegration into society is a critical factor in reducing recidivism. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020), successful reintegration depends not only on what happens inside prison but also on the support systems available upon release. These include employment services, housing assistance, community mentoring, and family support. However, in Kenya, these post-release services are limited or non-existent. Mbatia and Omboto (2019) emphasised that Kenya lacks formal halfway houses, probation support systems, and public-private partnerships aimed at reintegrating ex-offenders. The lack of coordination between prison services and community institutions means that former inmates are often released without any preparation for life outside prison, and without the social or economic tools necessary to rebuild their lives.

While various studies have examined the issue of recidivism at a national level in Kenya, few have focused specifically on the localised experiences of former inmates in different counties. Kisumu County, in particular, has been underrepresented in existing research despite its unique socio-economic and cultural context. The lack of region-specific data limits policymakers' and prison administrators' ability to design targeted interventions. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by exploring the effects of imprisonment on recidivism in Kisumu County.



Methodology

The research article sought to analyse the effects of imprisonment on recidivism.

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, which was particularly suitable because it allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the complex, multidimensional relationship between the effects of imprisonment on recidivism. This approach enabled the researcher to explore potential causal patterns and relationships without manipulating variables.

Target Population and Sample Size

The target population for this study consisted of individuals who are either directly impacted by or actively engaged in the processes surrounding imprisonment and recidivism in Kisumu County, Kenya. Central to this group were ex-convict individuals who had previously served prison sentences and had since been released, either unconditionally or under probation supervision. These individuals offered firsthand accounts of how incarceration had affected their lives, particularly in relation to their likelihood of reoffending.

In addition to ex-convicts, the study also focused on prison officers working within Kisumu's major correctional facilities. These officers provided critical insights into the institutional environment, rehabilitation efforts, and systemic challenges that may affect an inmate's chances of successfully reintegrating into society. Their perspectives were essential in understanding how the prison system itself may contribute to or mitigate recidivism.

Furthermore, probation officers formed a vital part of the study population. Tasked with monitoring and supporting ex-prisoners under non-custodial sentences or post-release supervision, these officers play a crucial role in the reintegration process. Their experiences shed light on the support structures, or lack thereof, that former inmates encounter after release.

According to data from the Kenya Prisons Service (2022), Kisumu County has experienced a recidivism rate of approximately 63%, meaning that nearly two-thirds of incarcerated individuals have previously served time in prison. This statistic underscores the urgent need to understand the impact of imprisonment on reoffending.

The total number of 700 ex-convicts was determined based on records obtained from probation offices and local rehabilitation organisations in Kisumu County, representing those accessible and available for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select ex-convicts who had served time within the last five years, ensuring that participants had recent and relevant experiences related to imprisonment and reintegration challenges. This sampling method enabled the study to target individuals who could provide rich, firsthand insights into recidivism. These three participant groups provided a comprehensive view of the incarceration-recidivism cycle, enabling the study to examine the effects of imprisonment from both individual and institutional perspectives.

Instruments

Data for this study were collected using a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of imprisonment on recidivism in Kisumu County. Structured questionnaires were administered to ex-convicts, prison officers, and probation officers to capture quantitative information on demographics, prison experiences, rehabilitation programmes, post-release support, and instances of reoffending.

To complement this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected prison and probation officers to gain a deeper understanding of institutional practices, rehabilitation challenges, and



systemic factors influencing recidivism. Additionally, a document analysis of institutional records from the Kenya Prisons Service and probation offices was conducted to extract historical data on recidivism rates, participation in rehabilitation programmes, and post-release outcomes. Before the main study, a pilot test was conducted with a small subset of respondents to assess the clarity, reliability, and validity of the questionnaires and to ensure the trustworthiness of the interview schedule, with necessary adjustments made based on feedback.

Quantitative data were coded and entered into a statistical software package (version 29), where descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted to identify patterns and relationships in recidivism. Qualitative data from interviews and document reviews were transcribed, organised thematically, and analysed using content analysis, allowing recurring themes on rehabilitation and reintegration challenges to emerge. Triangulation of multiple data sources enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Approval for this study was obtained from the relevant university ethics review board. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were fully informed about the study's purpose, their rights to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their information. Written consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained by using codes rather than personal identifiers. Care was also taken to ensure that no sensitive information that could compromise participants' safety or legal status was disclosed.

Results and Discussion

Effects of Prison-based Treatment on Recidivism

The study examined the influence of prison-based treatment and rehabilitation programmes on recidivism among former inmates in Kisumu County. Respondents were asked about their participation in formal rehabilitation programmes, such as vocational training, counselling, life skills sessions, and educational support offered during incarceration. Results are presented in the following tables.



Table 1: Effects of Prison-Based Treatment on Recidivism

Item	Question/Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Participation in rehabilitation or treatment programmes		
	Yes	201	82.26
	No	32	13.73
	If Yes, which programmes? (Multiple responses allowed)		
	Substance abuse treatment	130	64.67
	Anger management	66	32.83
	Vocational training	5	2.14
2	Effectiveness of programmes in preventing reoffending		
	Not effective	176	75.53
	Somewhat effective	57	24.46
	Perceived impact of the programme		
	Helped in securing employment	97	55.11
	Provided trade/skill to keep busy	70	39.77
	Had no impact	9	5.11
3	Role of religious activities in behavior change		
	Yes	169	72.53
	No	64	27.47
4	Rating of programme facilitators in prison		
	Qualified	80	34.33
	Not qualified	153	65.66

Source: Field Data, 2022

Findings indicated that a substantial majority of the respondents (82.26%) had participated in at least one form of rehabilitation or treatment programme during incarceration. In comparison, only 13.73% reported having had no access to such services. Among participants, the most frequently attended programmes were substance abuse treatment (64.67%) and anger management sessions (32.83%), while only a small fraction (2.14%) engaged in vocational training. These findings highlight a disparity in the types of rehabilitative services accessed by inmates, with skill-based and employment-oriented programmes remaining underutilised – despite their recognised value in reducing recidivism (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006).

When assessing the perceived effectiveness of these programmes in preventing reoffending, three-quarters of the participants (75.53%) reported that the interventions were not effective, whereas 24.46% felt the programmes were at least somewhat effective. This suggests a disconnect between programme availability and its actual impact on post-release behaviour. Previous studies have emphasised that, for rehabilitation to be successful, interventions must be tailored to individual risk factors and delivered by qualified personnel (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

In terms of practical outcomes, 55.11% of respondents believed the programmes helped them secure employment post-release. In comparison, 39.77% indicated that the programmes gave them a trade or skill that helped them stay occupied and avoid criminal activity. However, a minority (5.11%) stated that the programmes had no impact at all on their post-incarceration lives. These insights underscore the mixed effectiveness of prison-based treatment, which resonates with research showing that



employment-focused rehabilitation significantly reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Visher & Travis, 2011).

Religious activities within prison were also examined as a component of behavioural change. Approximately 72.53% of respondents acknowledged that participation in religious programmes contributed positively to their reform, while 27.47% disagreed. This affirms findings from previous research that highlight the role of spiritual engagement in reshaping attitudes and fostering a sense of moral accountability among inmates (Clear & Sumter, 2002).

A critical factor that emerged from the findings was the perceived qualification of the programme facilitators. Only 34.33% of respondents believed that facilitators were adequately qualified to deliver rehabilitation content, whereas a significant 65.66% expressed doubt about their facilitators' expertise. This points to a potential weakness in programme delivery, which could explain the low perception of effectiveness. According to Cullen and Gendreau (2000), the quality of programme implementation and the competence of service providers are pivotal in determining the success of correctional interventions.

The qualitative data further support concerns regarding inadequate rehabilitation resources in correctional facilities. Correctional officers consistently reported frequent shortages, which hinder the full implementation of training programmes. As one officer explained,

We do not have enough resources to meet the demands of our inmates. The government has tried, but prison populations keep growing, exceeding capacity (Rupa, personal communication, 2022).

Inmates echoed these sentiments, with some expressing regret for not engaging in training earlier. One ex-offender shared,

When I was first sentenced, I saw no need to train. But after being reconvicted, I enrolled in carpentry and masonry training. This changed my life (Rex, personal communication, 2022).

Integrating with the theory

This study was grounded in Labelling Theory, which posits that societal reactions to an individual's criminal behaviour can reinforce a criminal identity, thereby increasing the likelihood of reoffending (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). In Kisumu County, imprisonment functions as a formal labelling process: individuals arrested, tried, and incarcerated are officially branded as criminals. This label follows them into the community, resulting in social stigma, rejection, and limited access to employment and housing (Kariuki, 2018). The study's findings demonstrate that inadequate rehabilitation, unqualified facilitators, and limited skill-building opportunities exacerbate the consequences of labelling, making lawful reintegration difficult. The mixed effectiveness of prison-based programmes highlights how external labelling combined with insufficient in-prison interventions can perpetuate the cycle of recidivism.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data from ex-convicts may introduce recall bias or social desirability bias. Second, the sample was limited to Kisumu County, which may affect generalizability to other regions in Kenya. Third, while qualitative interviews enriched understanding, the small number of interviews may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among all correctional officers or probation officers.

Conclusion

Despite the high participation rates, the majority of respondents perceived the programmes as ineffective in curbing reoffending. This suggests that availability alone does not equate to impact. A



closer examination reveals several underlying issues: a lack of vocational training opportunities, poor programme facilitation by underqualified staff, and limited post-release support structures. These challenges align with global evidence that emphasises the importance of programme quality, relevance, and individualised support for successful rehabilitation (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006).

Notably, religious programmes emerged as a positive influence for many inmates, indicating that behavioural transformation often extends beyond formal skills training to include moral and spiritual dimensions. Moreover, the few inmates who received practical job training or skills expressed better post-release outcomes, such as gaining employment or staying occupied, factors known to reduce the likelihood of returning to crime (Visher & Travis, 2011).

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