Going home to the gangsters: a preliminary study on the potential link between reintegration support and recidivism amongst female offenders

Jessica Leigh Thornton

Abstract

Purpose – *As the subject of female criminology in South Africa has only recently been dealt with in a qualitative manner, this paper aims to explore if there is a potential link between rehabilitation, reintegration support and recidivism as females are often placed back into the environment which prompted their criminal behaviour, further excluding them from rehabilitative reform, which might lead them to recidivate.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The research adopted a qualitative approach using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six participants that were chosen purposively.*

Findings – *The paper notes a potential link between rehabilitation, reintegration support and recidivism as the female prisoners are imprinted with criminal dispositions since rehabilitation within the correctional facility has no implementation process to ensure that restoration can continue after they have been released.*

Research limitations/implications – *Due to the limited number of the incarcerated female population and the scope of the preliminary study, the sample comprised of only six female offenders. As such, it contributes to the larger discourse of female criminality, but does not offer any recommendations.*

Practical implications – *Provides an understanding of the conditions in which the females are released. Allows for the inclusion of the female's voice on, and reflection of, rehabilitation and recidivism. Notes a link between rehabilitation, reintegration and recidivism. Creates a pathway for further research in the exploration of a gendered reform approach.*

Originality/value – *While the subject of female criminology in South Africa has only recently been dealt with in a qualitative manner, this study offers an insight into how females who offend are often placed back into the environment which prompted their criminal behaviour.*

Keywords *Female offenders, Gangsterism, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, Recidivism*

Paper type *Research paper*

Jessica Leigh Thornton is based at the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

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Introduction

The number of females in correctional facilities has increased globally by 17% and in Africa by 24% since 2010 (Penal Reform International and Thailand Institute of Justice, 2021, p. 41), yet there have been minimal studies conducted on the gendered experience of offenders who are female. This has impeded a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the subject of female criminality (Dastile, 2015, 2017, 2010, p. 95). While some studies in South Africa have started to explore the subject of female offending, this has largely been central to understanding the needs of female maximum-security offenders and the negative conditions in correctional facilities such as overcrowding, violence, victimization, sexual abuse and substance abuse (Artz *et al.*, 2012; Walser *et al.*, 2012; Mkhize, 2003; Sable *et al.*, 1999). Whilst these studies provide valuable insights into

correctional centre life for females, very few of them have been able to provide an in-depth understanding of the experience and conditions of women in regard to their rehabilitation and post-release.

It has been noted that females who offend are often discriminated against, overclassified, isolated, stigmatized, pathologized and more invisible as they are by percentage a smaller population within correctional facilities (Haffejee *et al.*, 2006). As a result, they are often offered fewer rehabilitation programmes and training schemes (if any), further oppressing and marginalizing them (Barberet, 2014, p.160). This seemingly leads to neglecting the needs of offenders who are female in terms of rehabilitation, service delivery and research. Even more so, policy reform, advocacy, security and rehabilitation programmes in South Africa continue to be based on research and theories that were developed to explain the experiences of men, while female offenders are seen as the "special category" of inmates (Jules-Macquet, 2015, p. 16). Yet, the experiences of rehabilitation, reintegration and recidivism of women are remarkably different.

Qhogwana and Segalo (2022) noted that along with the rehabilitation of women in correctional facilities, the approaches and structures recreate inequities in their incarceration experiences. Even the term rehabilitation is used without a clear and consistent definition, as there are, in fact, different conceptions and relationships within rehabilitation (Forsberg and Douglas, 2022). This is because in moral and legal philosophy pure rehabilitation theories – where rehabilitation is the sole legitimate function of criminal justice – are no longer popular as they tended to ignore the type of offence and the offender's perceived and gendered needs, while also failing to assess offenders as moral actors responsible for their actions (Forsberg and Douglas, 2022). However, in the case of women re-entering violent communities, the option for reformed behaviour and desistance is slim as what is found is a "lack of active participation in rehabilitation processes; exclusion through language and religion; and enforcement of domestication for incarcerated women [...] disparities in correctional rehabilitation that disadvantage women offenders" (Forsberg and Douglas, 2022). From this, it is possible to draw a link between rehabilitation and recidivism. Once the female offender enters the corrections system and engages with rehabilitation programmes that may not necessarily be suited to their specific and gendered needs, issues such as substance dependency, mental illness and domestic violence still present themselves post release which may lead to the female reoffending (recidivism).

Even more so, an understanding is needed of those who are reintegrated back into the society which prompted them to commit the crime post-release as the nature of adjustment after release depends on factors such as previous involvement in crime activities, the nature of the individual, duration of incarceration and circumstances of release (Sanyal, 2019). If the women are released back into the environment which lead them to offend without adequate rehabilitation or reintegration support, the likelihood for them to reoffend remains constant. Thus, it is important to bring to light women's experiences of reintegration so that policy can be reformed for their unique socioeconomic backgrounds, especially if these backgrounds are seemingly the root cause of their criminality and recidivism (Steyn and Booysen, 2018, p. 33; Dasile, 2017, p. 166; Luyt and du Preez, 2010, p. 88). Of vital importance is moving away from theories and programmes that are male centred and the beginning of inclusion of the voices of females to better assist their conditions within the correctional facility and once they have been released. Without this inclusion, ineffective rehabilitation programmes and poor reintegration support could lead the female to reoffend, leading to a life of recidivism.

This preliminary study, supported by the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences with ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria (REF: HUM020/1120), attempts to explore the phenomenon of female criminality and whether a link between reintegration, rehabilitation and reoffending exists among female offenders in Gqeberha, South Africa. The study draws on interviews with a sample of six female offenders from

known gang areas. The preliminary research is threefold: firstly, it provides an overview of the situation in Gqeberha to gain a better understanding of the conditions the females are faced with pre- and post-release; secondly, it outlines the theorical framework and methodology adopted in the ethnographic investigation; and thirdly, it offers the experiences of the female offenders to assess whether there is a potential link between rehabilitation, reintegration support and recidivism amongst those from known gang communities.

The Northern area of Gqeberha

In South Africa, the apartheid regime (a system of institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa that existed from 1948 to 1994) separated the population according to ethnicity and passed the Group Areas Act in the 1950s. This resulted in the major relocation of people of colour (black Africans, Chinese, Muslims and mixed races). One of these areas of relocation is what is known as the "northern area" of Gqeberha. Here, people of colour were forced to live in small, overcrowded and neglected conditions. The Group Areas Act, passed by the National Party of South Africa, was seen as key in the destruction of the resettled communities and further saw the rise of the "dehumanized and dismantled [lives] of those who suffered at the hands of such a brutal law" (Du Plessis, 2013, p. 2). Some of the effects of this system still felt today include socioeconomic conditions such as low-cost and inadequate housing, over-crowding, lack of services and resources and poor healthcare and education (Maphumulo and Bhengu, 2019). Since their establishment under the apartheid regime, these areas have proved to be a fertile breeding ground for gangsterism.

One of the greatest impediments to the collection of accurate gang-related data is the lack of a national uniform definition of a gang, as there is no single generally accepted definition of a gang or gangsterism. The definitions have varied amongst different scholars such as Felson (2005), who defines gangs as local groups of youths who intimidate others with very overt displays of affiliation, while Standing (2005) defines gangs as principally, but not necessarily exclusively, comprised of individuals under the age of 25. Standing's definition also refers to gangs as groupings that display a measure of institutional continuity that is independent of their membership and routinely engage in violent behaviour patterns that are considered illegal and/or illicit by the dominant authorities and/or mainstream society. This definition suggests that gangs are organized around age, levels of ritualization and criminality (Magidi, 2014). Gangsterism, and more particularly street-gangs, can be described as "expressions of social cohesion in peripheral communities [. . .] portraying violent criminal fraternities that have alarmingly powerful memberships and constitute sophisticated criminal networks" (Daniels and Adams, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, gangsterism is an "anti-social way of life that pitches loyalty to the gang against loyalty to institutions of civilized society, such as the school, the family, the church and the justice system" (Standing, 2005). Standing (2005, p. 12) further states that gangsterism is "a culture of extreme masculinity and gross disregard for women, which is expressed through the celebration of rape and exploitation of women for the sex industry". Furthermore, Crawage (2005) defines gangsterism as the evolution of an urban identity determined along racial and economic lines and includes the formation of groups with the aim of committing violence and crime, as well as to defend themselves physically against the violence of other groups. The National Institute of Justice (2011) Information Centre defined a gang as a group of three or more individuals with a common name, symbol, manner of dress or other commonality who, as a group or individuals, engages in or has engaged in a pattern of criminal activity. The Centre believes that gang formation is influenced by geography, ethnic background, identity and recognition, fellowship and brotherhood, ideology, intimidation and protection. Whereas, personal factors leading to an individual joining a gang unit can stretch from an affiliation to power, pride in their second family, status and

prestige in rank, Hollywood-type romanticism of adventure, mutual bonds of support in self-preservation, the lure of financial gain, short life expectancy and limited life options and the most powerful influence as peer pressure (National Institute of Justice, 2011).

Gang activity in the northern area of Gqeberha is an entrenched social system rather than a mere criminal scourge, as it is a response to the systematic violence, exploitation and disempowerment of people of colour. Data compiled by Crime Stats South Africa (2022) suggests that Gqeberha may not be "the friendly city" (SAHO, 2021) after all, as the city has some of the highest rates of violent crime throughout the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Murder, rape, sexual assault and house robberies have all shown significant increases in the past few years (Atlas Security, 2019). Crime statistics in Nelson Mandela Bay for reporting period 2018/2019 indicate that reported cases have increased by over 800 incidents for murder, rape recidivism, sexual assault, car hijacking and robbery (Atlas Security, 2019) (see Appendix).

Gqeberha is fraught with murder, gang activity, rape and robbery. Today, the northern area is regarded as a no-go area with reference to it being the crime capital of Gqeberha (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Residents in the area are greatly affected by gangsterism, high unemployment rates, persistent substance abuse, undesirable high levels of violent crime, the demise of family values and other socio-economic issues (Petrus, 2017).

Given the complexity and vastness of the northern area, and the fact that there is little formally collected and systematically analysed data on gangsterism in the Eastern Cape, the preliminary research focused on the smaller community of Helenvale which was built in the 1960s under the Groups Area Act. Helenvale, a suburb in Gqeberha and commonly known as Katanga (derived from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its climate of excessive fighting), is known for extreme gangsterism and violence (Helenvale Center of Hope, 2023). The neighbourhood has an approximate population size of 21, 236 individuals and average households have up to six members, with 56% of households being female headed (Petrus, 2021; Petrus, 2017). Helenvale has an unemployment rate of approximately 70% and households earning an income of UD$50 or less per month (Petrus, 2021, pp. 469–483; Boswell *et al.*, 2016). The experience of violence averages 22% per month, with a breakdown of this being 48% violence at home and 52% violence on the streets, including robbery, stabbing, violent quarrels, shooting, rape and gang intimidation (Petrus, 2021; Boswell *et al.*, 2016).

When offending females are released back into these conditions, one has to question whether their rehabilitation and reintegration support is sufficient for them to pursue their daily needs in a "good" or "moral" way, or whether the lack of such support will catapult them to reoffend? Further research on this topic is desperately needed. Accordingly, the study critically explores the logic of corrective services relocating women back into the community that initially caused them to commit crimes. This situation is even more critical in South Africa, considering its slow administration of justice, where the use of "alternative" sentencing is increasingly used to relieve the pressures in correctional facilities. However, when the offenders are placed back into the society that promoted their criminal behaviour, it becomes difficult to govern. As seen in the preliminary interviews with the females, being placed back into their gang community with little support and inadequate rehabilitation, was counterproductive and often caused them to recidivate to make ends meet.

An issue here, would be the disengagement from the gangs. Decker and Pyrooz (2011) discuss the concept of "embeddedness", which critics the possibility of an individual being able to end an affiliation to a gang and the dependence on the gang. As such, the likelihood of a female linked to a gang (similar to those in the study living in gang communities or with gang affiliated loved ones) of reoffending remains constant as the road to desistance becomes blocked due to the increased embeddedness. Decker and Pyrooz (2011) also state that "post-exit validation" is where the pull factor to criminal behaviour is the strongest

as it is the most vulnerable state for re-engagement in gang activities. This further suggests that once offenders are released back into the gang communities from the correctional centre, there is a strong possibility that they will re-engage and recidivate, especially if there is no "post-exit" support. From this, Densley (2013) questions how these offenders may find new and alternative forms of meaning and occupation as not a stigma has been created and the women often carry criminal records, scars, ongoing vulnerability and a "residual territorial confinement into their uncertain futures" (Densley, 2013, p. 139).

Women living in gang areas

Gang activities, in the Western Cape, seemingly provide much needed social and financial support to women involved as various actors in a gang (Daniels and Adams, 2010; Standing, 2005). Generally in the USA, women are involved in criminal activities for the sake of survival and to support their families (Moore, 2001). Literature on gangs highlights patriarchal norms and values which underpin the subculture (Marzo, 2020). Yet, when considering the role or experience of women, where do they fit in the hierarchy? Do they have individual agency, and how is violence towards them experienced in the hierarchy? Miller's (2000) comparative study offers a deep insight into the landscape of living in a gang, in particular to the gendered experience of gang life in Missouri and Ohio. There is a strong focus on how social networks, family issues, family memberships of the gangs, victimization and gender inequality form pathways into the gang (Miller, 2000; Novich, 2019). The gangs shape the women's participation in criminal activity through the introduction of initiation rituals, rules, rivalries and gang activities. Sadly, this involvement lends itself to be a double-edged sword as it also paves a path to the risk of victimization and abuse (Miller, 2000). Miller's study speaks to the very real experiences of women in both disadvantaged and crime infested areas, such as Helenvale in Gqeberha.

The women encounter sexual assault and violence, which become a norm in their daily existence (Miller, 2008; Miller's, 2000, 2008) work depicts a life infused with danger and gender-based violence for women and how this shapes them as having the potential for crime. Often the women are ignored, excluded, disregarded, bullied and isolated by policymakers and reform programmes. Even the social structures of law enforcement in Helenvale leave them fending for themselves, instilling the idea that the violence they are experiencing is deserved (Miller, 2008). For these women, the world becomes a place of survival. Younger, more impressionable women get involved with gangs to access the so-called luxuries of their gangster boyfriends, as seen in Cape Town, South Africa (Shaw and Skywalker, 2017). In addition to this, Vetten (2000) identified that the main roles of South African women in gangs are to be drug and firearm couriers since male police officials cannot body search a female. This too has been the case in Helenvale where the women move weapons and drugs between different gang member affiliated to their partner's gang. The women also shoplift, launder money and sell stolen goods, focusing more on the economic criminal opportunities rather than violent crimes (Vetten, 2000). In South Africa, and even globally, women tend to be viewed as either the victims of, or accessories to crime (Dziewanski, 2020). Women may use their position within the gang as a response to intersectional oppression and as a means to empower themselves through protection, status, income and so on, as seen in US studies (Belknap and Bowers, 2016). Yet, this also catapults them into a space of victimization and abuse that leaves them stuck with the life playing out on the streets (Dziewanski, 2020).

Furthermore, Shaw and Skywalker's research (2017) in Cape Town, highlighted that women engage with the gangs to find a sense of belonging in the disjointed and violent communities. Here, the gangs become akin to family, a family that provides resources and security, where not joining a gang could make you more vulnerable (Shaw and Skywalker, 2017; Couper, 2016) identified four super-ordinate themes in why females get involved in gangs in the UK, namely, "the circle of life" (getting involved); "survival" (being involved); "a double-edged sword" (getting out); and staying out. The women get involved because they

have grown up around gangs and the structural systems in the community have failed to meet their needs (Couper, 2016). However, the "sexism, and experiences of violence and betrayal within relationships, made it extremely difficult for these young women to survive, and thrive, within this context. These negative experiences lead them to question life within the gang. However, getting out was described as a complex process, particularly because of the permanency of gang involvement and adverse social contexts" (Couper, 2016, p. iii). The women in this study live in an environment where both physical and verbal violence is widespread. This environment is shaped in turn by the women's exposure to violence. It brings forth questions around the consequences of women's participation in gangs and the implications between violent women and violence against women. However, there is still limited knowledge on the experience of violence as habitus with regard to women who need to be re-socialized and reintegrated into these communities once released from incarceration. Still less is known about the risks associated with and link between poor integration support and recidivism. Therefore, this study aims to explore this possible link amongst females who offend as the above suggest similarities seen in the different studies in global and local case studies.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Given the vast amount of literature on crime, criminal behaviour and related discussions on psychological anthropology in analyses of crime and deviant behaviour, Bourdieu's (2014, 2008, 2005) theory of habitus offers a unique perspective to understand female rehabilitation, reintegration and recidivism. Although wide in framing, Bourdieu (2014, 2008, 2005; Gillespie, 2019) offers a sufficiently inclusive but also meaningful analytical tool in understanding that cultural settings (such as the gang) produce and reproduce behaviour and how this (re) production effects an individual (female offender) of a given habitus. Bourdieu (2014, 2008, 2005) draws attention to the nature of social relations, the role of domination and the skilfulness of agents and allows for researchers to analyse more deeply the experiences of the females who are reintegrated back into the crime infested community or habitus (Dandoy, 2015; Fleetwood, 2014; Fraser and Atkinson, 2014; Ilan, 2015; Caputo-Levine, 2013; Deering, 2011; McNeill *et al.*, 2009). The concept of habitus is a learnt system of preferences based on strong cognitive structures that are produced by historical and social conditions (Bourdieu, 2014, 2008, 2005; Shammas and Sandberg, 2015). In this case, the northern area of Gqeberha is seen as the field of habitus. Bourdieu (2014, 2008, 2005) views fields as contested and influenced by ever-evolving cultural behaviour in any given space. The fields influence agents, shaping and modifying their character as they pass through them. Given the frame of "habitus", it is possible then to argue that females placed back into the environment that caused them to offend will at some point or another have their habitus disrupted. It is only if they received adequate rehabilitation and have genuine support that they might not reoffend after the disruption. Bourdieu's (1982) work on social hierarchies (fields), sees the class structure of a particular formation as an objective network that is related in terms of cultural and economic positions (inequality and suffering). That is, his is a structuralist interpretation of social space where individuals are reduced to their role in the structural relations that they encapsulate (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Here, individuals confront and compete against each other for a more advantageous position. This kind of network is seen in the hierarchy and structural violence displayed by gangs where the gang lifestyles are caught up in the community's social struggles (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The lifestyles are socially ranked and the misperception of social space (between the dominant and the dominated) sees symbolic violence over hierarchy and territory. The women, and especially the younger women, are seen to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the gang, so the women also compete for a higher habitus in the hierarchy for the sake of their survival and support. These learnt systems of habitus (produced by the historical and social hierarchy) become a response to intersectional oppression from the women, moving between the habitus fields for protection, status, income, space of victimization and abuse.

Using the above framework, the preliminary study also adopted a qualitative approach to explore and examine the lived experiences of the women's rehabilitation and reintegration back into their community habitus. The in-depth, semi-structured and individual interviews, between 1 and 2 h long, were based on the understanding of the habitus and symbolic violence to garner the depth of experiences, both told and presented. The interviews were conducted at the North End Correctional Center in Gqeberha, South Africa. In the preliminary study, six structured questions were asked to initiate the conversation before follow-up questions were asked, making allowance for reflection during the interview. These included:

Q1. What is it like in your home/neighbourhood?

Q2. What was your first encounter with crime?

Q3. Have you committed a crime before this offence?

Q4. What is your experience like with the gangs in your community?

Q5. What did your engagement with rehabilitation programmes involve?

Q6. What was it like when you were released back into your community?

The interviews were then transcribed and thematically analysed to allow for the inclusion of the female's voice, stories and reflections, allowing for interpretation of commonalities and differences in each of the unique transcripts. The analysis of the data was inductive and focused on key common and recurring themes that emerged from the coding scheme. The analysis was done by developing a coding scheme and then extracting key quotes to fully develop these themes. The themes that emerged from the preliminary data were:

- Interpersonal and community violence.
- Rehabilitation and practical life.
- Recidivism and ease of access.
- The trapped environment and socializing agents.
- Community support and self-reliance.

Due to the limited number of the incarcerated female population and the scope of the preliminary study, the sample comprised of six female offenders. The type of offence ranges from attempted murder to possession of illegal substances. At the time of conducting the research, there were only 11 female offenders at the Correctional Facility. Out of these 11, only 7 were suited to the criteria as the women were chosen purposively since they had to be aged 20–60, from the northern areas and have at some point been released back into their community. One of the offenders did not want to be a part of the study as her boyfriend (a known gang leader) would not agree to the questions. In addition, considering the context, individuals, impact and risks that were attached to the study, consent and permission involved multiple levels of stakeholders, namely, the Department of Correctional Services, the head of the correctional centre and the individual consent from the offender. Bearing in mind that the participants are from known gang areas, the consent detailed the anonymity and the confidential nature of their responses. The female offenders were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The consent ensured that the participants were fully aware of the study and of their rights. As such, pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities.

Experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration: a potential link to recidivism?

The account below gives an ethnographic account of the experiences of the six offenders. It delves into who the women are, their unique vulnerabilities, experiences with past violence (family crime history and previous sentences), substance abuse, health and mental well-being and experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The findings mostly

deal with the dire issue of re-socialization and reintegration with a brief focus on rehabilitation. This was seemingly due to the presence correctional staff in the interview area. The preliminary study found that the community is gripped with intense fear and the women in the study often sleep on the floor as bullets flying through the walls of houses has become a daily norm. Community members call themselves "prisoners in [their] own homes".

Interpersonal and community violence

Tammy, a 25-year-old recovering drug addict mother of one, stabbed her neighbour after an argument broke out about money. When asked about her experience at home, Tammy recalled that it is normal for arguments to turn violent in her neighbourhood and that most of the people she knew would throw things at people or grab whatever was around to hit the other person. She just happened to grab a knife and then "it happened; I stabbed him". Although this is her first offence, Tammy states that she sees violence everyday with her boyfriend (a known gangster). She tells a story of how there are "always drugs in the cupboard and people are in and out. Sometimes I see other women pay the gangsters without having any money":

> This is my first time. But I was scared in there (jail). I don't want to go there again with those other women. It wasn't my fault. I did some of those short programmes inside for my drugs. It did help a bit, but I am back here and there are drugs in my boyfriend's drawer. It is easy to slip back on it.

The northern area has experienced massive amounts of interpersonal violence and is becoming an extremely violent community (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). The neighbourhood is home to a juxtaposition of deprivation and indulgence, and individuals become violent not because they are poor, unemployed or stigmatized as a drug addict, but because they have the potential for violence. Violence is socially endorsed in the community as a tool for resolving disputes and enforcing change (Hoglund, 2001). This stems from its historical roots in the apartheid regime using violence and oppression to maintain power and social order, while liberation movements led to violent campaigns to attain political change (Rauch, 1992; Martin, 2012). The tangible conditions these women are faced with back in their community are in contrast with the prescriptive rehabilitation and reform programmes as the previous social behaviour and community ills continue to play out. One participant confessed in a drug rehabilitation programme that at the time she was using drugs and "one thing led to another. I was looking for money for more drugs and hurt someone. I took their life so I could buy drugs. I didn't want to do it, but it happened. I was involved in a dangerous lifestyle, and she was just in the way of getting what I needed". It has been noted that women who have experienced trauma and adversity internalize risk taking behaviours and may turn to drugs to self-medicate these internalizing problems (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). In addition, gender-based violence, such as sexual abuse, intimate-partner violence, non-partner assault as well as trafficking, is significantly higher among women who use drugs, with drug use often linked to their sexual exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). However, the relationship between women and drug use is not fully understood in terms of the rehabilitation and recidivism as women may not only be victims, but also active participants since "a higher proportion of women than men are in prison for drug-related offences" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, p. 9).

The trapped environment and socializing agents

Gabie, the second participant, is a 32-year-old female. She has been convicted of theft three times, prostitution twice and possession of illegal substances four times. She lives in a household with gangsters in Helenvale. Both her brothers are also known gangsters. Gabie

often helps the house move drugs around the neighbourhood. She would not state if she also used the drugs. Gabie is currently on parole:

> It's that place. Helenvale, where we live. The gangs are all over, in each street there is another gang. It doesn't help if we want to be better people, we just get sucked back in. They help us sometimes with protection and money for things we want. We have to do these things to survive on the streets.

Both self and group interests (actors in the habitus) wear down the desire for retribution and positive reinforced behaviour where honour and responsibility or dishonour and shame unfold on the streets, literally strengthening cultural resistance identities, valorization of urban spaces and marginalization (Hagedorn, 2005). The data suggests a desire to reform behaviour, yet the social structures and symbolic violence do not allow for it. According to Bourdieu (2014, 2008, 2005), gangs are rooted in bounded territorial confines that confer a sense of belonging and support. Members' identification with the group is fluid and highly dependent. The participant commented that the home is where she is meant to feel safe but she does not. Here, the concept of home as a safe haven has become a fortress of potential violence with exterior influences that may cause them to commit further crime. The participant noted that even though she engaged in some rehabilitation programmes, these do not play out practically in real life when the drugs and self-interest motives are still around. This means that being released back into the environment which promoted the offence could potentially be fertile for recidivism. It has been noted that there are a number of ill-fated collateral consequences that are likely to occur when being released into a violent community such as ongoing abuse, family violence, the spread of infectious diseases, homelessness and community disorganization (Petersilia, 2000). This suggests that the implications for safety and risk management are major considerations in re-entry that have been ignored for these women as it may affect their socialization and future trajectory cases of crime (Petersilia, 2000).

Recidivism and ease of access

The third participant had been incarcerated twice for petty theft. Charlene, a 25-year-old sister of a known gangster, claims she had to steal for her brother. Charlene stated that when they are released, they still need to protect and provide for their families, however, many of the ladies find difficulty in securing employment once released. She further indicated that if she is unable to find paid work, she might reoffend to get money she needs for her family as there might be no other means.

Often, the participants in this study felt trapped by the needs of their family members. This added stress, in an already stressful habitus, either encourages the offender to engage or disengage in risk-taking behaviour. A lack of employment might further prevent the offender from engaging meaningfully in a practical way in their environment, leading them to continue their previous risk-taking behaviours like selling illegal substances. Often, women are used as the middle person for these activities in gang communities. The environment, or habitus, is active in influencing potential unhealthy behaviour, causing the participants to reoffend as it becomes a catalyst that drives them to follow old habits. This is often even more so for females, as they might reoffend to provide for their children and to sustain emotional needs. This is in line with Bevan and Wehipeihana (2015) who state that incarcerated women shape their identities around their role as mothers, daughters and partners. Their role then serves as a motivation and driver to prioritize the emotional and financial needs of their families, above their own needs (Bevan and Wehipeihana, 2015). Thus, it is important to consider interventions that are designed to meet multiple needs (emotional, practical, addiction and support-related needs of women) to comprehend any underlying motivators of their offending. However, can this be the case when the women are

placed back into the same environment that caused them to offend and with little to no support in their desistance?

Stacey, a participant aged 42, has had prior convictions since her early 20s and has lived with many criminals before. She is addicted to both *tik* and mandrax tablets:

> This time I was caught shoplifting. I have a mother, brother and three children, but I have to support myself and the kids. The reason I shoplift is to support my drug habit. Before I had those courses to learn how to control my anger and to respect myself and others. I don't think they were very good because look I am still here. Where I am from is full of gangs and drugs. How do you think leaving a place that's supposed to rehabilitate you and in a way reform your behaviour going back into that environment? I know what I did was wrong. And outside I try my best to change now. I forgive myself. And I think the community is, it's a 50/50 thing. But me, myself, I must be strong on the outside for my children to be a better person better mother. It has been hard.

Ease of access to drugs and other criminal activities has the potential to reproduce the ability to slip back into old habits and reoffend. The women are socialized into crime and see that as their only option to make a living and that this lifestyle is how best to survive. It could be surmised that the gangs work with these marginalized offenders, making them feel like their assistance is a welcoming solution in their moneyless habitus. When talking about the issue of gangsterism, the individuals seemed to describe the gangster lifestyle in a parallel fashion. On the one hand, they idolized the lifestyle of the gangster, and on the other hand, they despised and feared them. The gangsters are said to have "diamonds and rings on every finger" and "homes that glitter with beauty". Young boys "wash the feet" of the gangsters who "walk across the street like they own it". The participant shared that parents mourn their children who "fall into the hole of gangsterism" or who are "sought by the toyboys" as they are "gone to the realms of the dead". This supports the argument of Miller (2000, 2008) as to why women may join gangs and how they are viewed in these gangs.

Community support and self-reliance

Jade, a 30-year-old, gives further insight into what it is like being back in the northern area after being released from her second sentence:

> I'm even afraid to walk in the street anymore because I know before what happened at my house. The way I see it is that the Lord can't always be on your side. Things just worked out differently. You get time to think about all the wrong stuff you did and how you can make yourself such a better life and don't go back to the past.

The female offenders have suggested that they do wish to behave in good faith, but struggle and psycho-social context might not always allow for the individual growth and development from rehabilitation programmes to occur simultaneously. The desire to return home to their communities but to operate in different, more positive ways presents with challenges within the habitus that may lead to risk-taking behaviour.

Participant six, Mae, is in her fifties and has been convicted over 10 times. Unfortunately, she was abused by her uncle when she was younger and has for as long as she can remember been addicted to drugs:

> When I couldn't get what I want, I do a crime to be able to get it. My family don't like it because it's not my first time. I keep on doing the same thing and my family suffer. I promised myself many times that I won't do it again but then I am back here, and the hustle is real. No work. There is nothing for my children. I can't see them have nothing. So, I must find a way.

Rehabilitation and practical life

A habitus can be a socializing agent for the female offender. The environment can influence both the frequency and type of behaviour in a response to a stimulus, such as risk-taking

behaviour in light of fulfilling a child's need. The women call the neighbourhood a "pit of crime" and a place to "fear". Life is not easy for the residents as "decisions are rested on women and children". The participants said that nothing good can come from Helenvale while "gangsterism, poverty, teenage pregnancy, corruption and exploitation of the people" continue to reside there. One participant sarcastically states that nothing is funnier than the old man who thinks he can have any girl and forcefully tries to have any girl. Domestic abuse is a daily occurrence in Helenvale and has become a form of control of the women in the area. Women are called "lazy bitches" and are physically assaulted as "the love rain falls, hard, endless and painful". As Miller (2008) noted, women experience many types of abuse and violence within gangs and see this as the norm in their relationships. When released back into the violent communities, the abuse may persist and could result in them reoffending as it has shaped their identity as such.

Gangs are established by the agonistic interplay between distinct fields (habitus) in relation to any other group that is also vying for supremacy in the same area. Bourdieu's (2005) theory of habitus offers an alternative between the internalist (a gang's symbols, behaviours, dispositions and may threaten to neglect how their existence is circumscribed) and externalist (poverty, marginalization or mass unemployment may give rise to the presence of gangs) accounts of spheres of social action. Bourdieu establishes an indirect causal link between positions in social space and practices by means of the concept of habitus (socially constituted system of dispositions). The gang habitus is "endowed with its own laws, its own *nomos*, its own law of functioning, without being completely independent of the external laws" (Bourdieu, 2005). The habitus is differentially formed and aligned to each actor's position in social space and is empirically variable and class-specific – the experience of a particular class condition characterized by a "given location in social space [which] imprints a particular set of dispositions upon the individual" (Weininger, 2003). Here, the female offender is imprinted with criminal dispositions as rehabilitation within a correctional facility has no implementation plan for how this restoration can continue after she has been released. As this process of rehabilitation ends, the female may go back into the same kind of social climate that contributed to the criminal behaviour and the goal of re-socialization is missed. The lack of community support for reintegration is also a major concern as life within the correctional facility may have shattered family bonds. This consequently causes possible guilt and constant worry about the inability to care for children and elderly or ill parents.

Although the preliminary research has offered a brief insight into the link between integration support, influence by the habitus and recidivism, implications for both rehabilitation and resettlement for female offenders should be explored in future work.

Conclusion

Women offenders are not just offenders. In the northern area, a juxtaposition of relations is found as the women are friends, sisters, mothers, daughters and neighbours with known gangsters. Yet very little is known about their experiences of rehabilitation and reintegration back into their communities. Do the communities support their reformed behaviour or do these relations influence and alter their experience of reintegration and rehabilitation? It is this "peeling" that can breakdown certain assumptions, opinion and views of female offenders, and further "peel-off" the way they understand their unique world. Most of the participants have issues with substance abuse to which their criminal behaviour can be linked and without supportive integration and re-socialization infrastructure, chances of desistance are slim. Given the very real experiences and hurdles the women face on reintegration, a more critical focus and research engagement is required for further research on the topic. It must be noted that since this work is preliminary and contributes to the larger discourse of female criminality, further research would benefit from studying the conditions experienced within the correctional facility, rehabilitation programmes, what support and engagement the women have access to

when released, as well as on the themes mentioned above. The recommendation for future research would be to replicate the research design with a larger sample. Further research on the experiences of female offenders is greatly needed in the exploration of a gendered reform approach that ensures that female offenders are successfully able to meet their conditions in safety and without the fear of recidivism.

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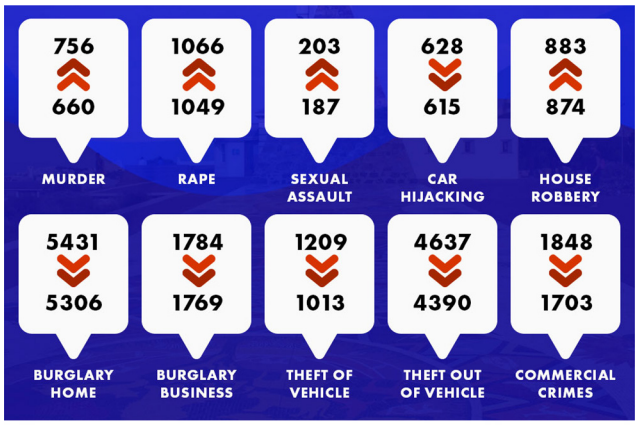
Corresponding author

Jessica Leigh Thornton can be contacted at: jessleighthornton@gmail.com

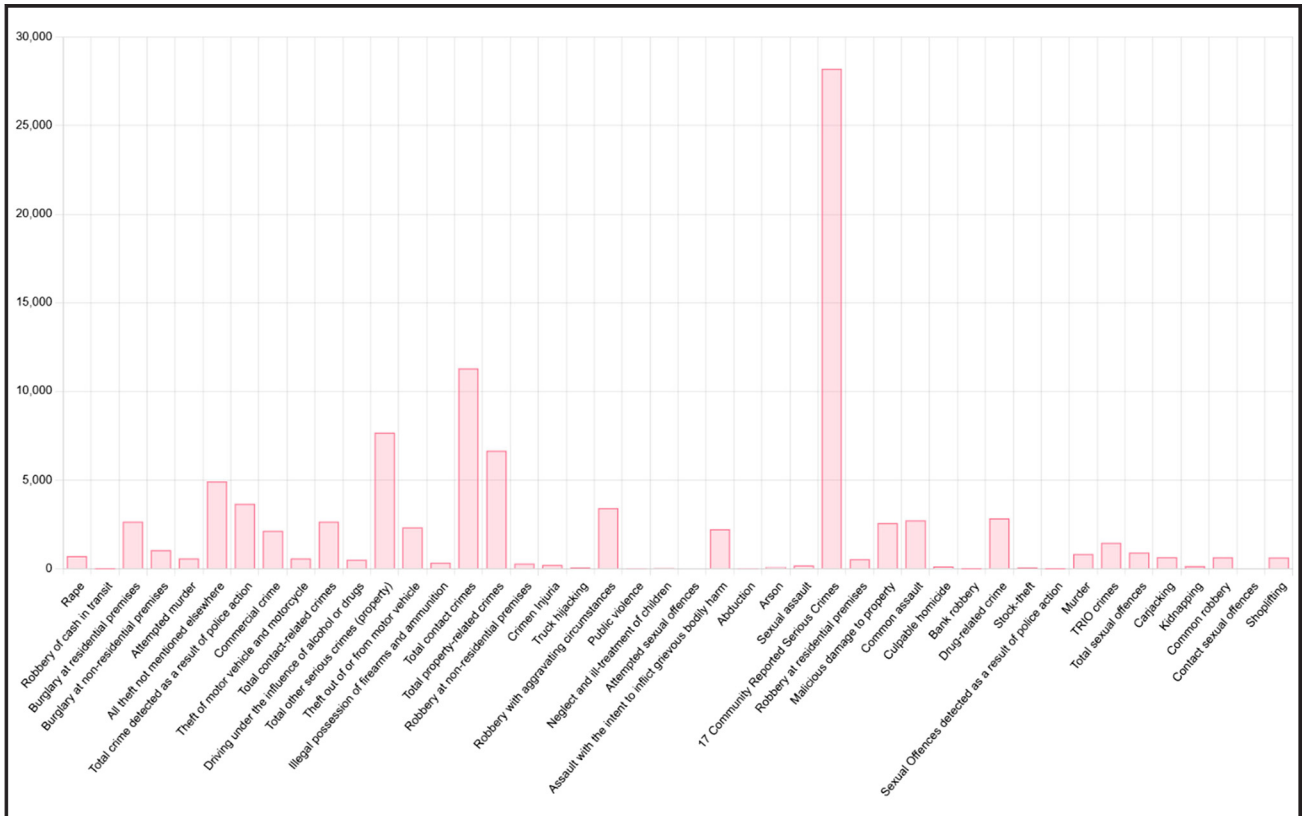
Appendix

Figure A1 Nelson Mandela Bay Crime Statistics for reporting period 2018/2019



Source: Atlas Security (2019)

Figure A2 Nelson Mandela Bay Crime Categories for 2022



Source: CrimeHub (2023)