

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Perception of Ex-Convicts Reintegration in Idemili-North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The manner in which marginalized members of a society is perceived or treated in social interaction seems to shape their wellbeing and subsequent actions. This paper examined public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Idemili-North LGA of Anambra State, Nigeria. Desistance and reintegration theories served as theoretical guide. Descriptive survey design and multi-stage sampling techniques were employed. The sample size was 398 adult residents and major instrument of data collection was structured questionnaire. Through the aid of SPSS, data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages, Likert scale and mean scores, while hypotheses were tested using chi-square (χ^2) and z-test. The findings revealed among others that residents' had negative perception about ex-convicts which ranges from being criminals, unrepentant offenders to evildoers. Socio-cultural factors influencing such perception were the belief that once a criminal is always a criminal, that associating with ex-offenders could attract wrath of the gods, societal non-recognition of ex-convicts in social functions, societal silence over the affairs of ex-convicts after their release, and denial of the civic right to vote or hold public offices. This paper concluded that perceptions hold by the people indirectly discredits the efficacy of correctional services given to ex-offenders and portends danger that could lead to recidivism. This brings the need for adequate public sensitization to discourage the perception that ex-prisoners are criminals. This can be centred on the efficacy of the Nigerian Correctional Service programs in rehabilitating ex-prisoners through outreach in villages, markets, churches and even through the media.

Keywords: Ex-convicts, Ex-Offender, Public Perception, Reintegration, Imprisonment.

1. Introduction

The manner in which marginalized members of a society is perceived or treated in social interaction seems to shape their wellbeing and subsequent actions. Such persons like ex-prisoners (ex-convicts), often appear not to enjoy social justice, fair treatment and equal opportunity. They are rather faced with discrimination, social exclusion and lack of support, which makes reintegration into mainstream of events

in the society and return to a successful civil life very difficult (Schneider & Weber, 2020).

Ex-convicts re-integration is a complex process that has over time focused on the intervention of prison or correctional service officials, social workers and counsellors. In recent years, more emphasis has been placed on designing comprehensive interventions that are based on continuity of care or consistent assistance to offenders within and beyond prison

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(Ajala & Oguntuase, 2011). This is to aid transition from confines of the prison to the community space and reinforce the gains achieved through correctional treatment until successful reintegration is completed (Fox, 2002). An effective re-integration process is expected to prepare not only the ex-convicts but also the family and society at large to accept and support the transition process (Raboloko & Maripe, 2019). The negligence or non-incorporation of other members of society into the reintegration process appears to be making life uneasy for ex-convicts.

Available research indicates that public attitudes toward ex-convicts are informed by behaviour about actual or perceived threats and social cohesion and moral order (Spratt & Doob, 2009; Jackson & Bradford, 2008; Andrews, 2015). Community knowledge of and confidence in the ability of the criminal justice system (CJS) to effectively respond to crime might impact public support for reintegration (Andrews, 2015). The perceived failure of this seems to be forcing Nigerians to react negatively upon hearing of release of ex-offenders into the society. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, 2018) reported that mixed reactions greeted Federal Government of Nigeria's release of some alleged repentant Boko Haram members who had undergone rehabilitation into the society. Iroanusi (2021) observed that the release triggered outrage and debate from citizens across the country. The public perceives the release as a threat to civilian population as the former fighters could possibly return to the terror group to commit more atrocities.

There is ample evidence on public perception of offenders or ex-convicts across cultures. Igbo (2007) observed that offenders in pre-colonial African societies were perceived as enemies of the gods and the land. This was due to the belief that their offence could attract the wrath of the gods on the whole society. Therefore, violators of laws of the land were perceived and treated as outcasts, evildoers and wicked, thereby making reintegration into the society difficult (Igbo, 2007; Osayi, 2013). Moreso, many communities in Africa seems to have not discarded all the negative labels they hold against ex-convicts and therefore, still perceive them as criminals (Raboloko & Maripe, 2019). They noted that men and women alike share similar perception about ex-offenders. Ekpe and Mammah, as cited in Osayi (2013) argued that many families of the Igbo speaking societies stigmatises, disown and deny their members who had been to prison some family rights or inheritance.

Again, members of the public seem to find it difficult to freely associate with ex-convicts or give them a chance to operate as law abiding citizens. The rejection or neglect from those who are supposed to enhance their smooth re-entry into normal life seems not to help the situation. This might complicate the plights of ex-convicts, especially when they return back to the society.

In different parts of the world, it does appear that ex-convicts face multifaceted challenges and experience hardship that tends to impede a crime free lifestyle. In Botswana, it has emerged that ex-convicts remain largely unemployed, stigmatized and discriminated against (Raboloko & Maripe, 2019). In Nigeria, evidence has shown that government has little or no provision for the employment and proper reintegration of discharged prisoners into the social system (Ugwuoke, 2010). This has been linked to the perception of personal factors of the ex-convicts such as low self-esteem, low motivation, skills deficit, lack of training, mental illness and substance abuse, lack of stable accommodation, and most especially, absence of family support (Graham, Shinkfield, Lavelle & McPherson, 2004; Ugwumba & Usang, 2014).

However, there have been intervention efforts toward the re-integration of ex-convicts in Nigeria. The government had at different times granted presidential pardon to some notable but erring members of the public and even gave some of them vital positions, especially the political elites. Others have been granted amnesty and rehabilitation training overseas just to prepare and empower them to live a crime free life. In spite of these noble efforts to present the affected individuals with a clean sheet of record, little or nothing seems to have been done to assess how members of the society perceive or treat ex-convicts in the reintegration process. This is because despite the positions they might later occupy, many members of the public may still see them as offenders (criminals) and could at any given time ridicule or avoid associating with them.

Davis, Bahr and Ward (2012) observe that a deepened understanding of offender reintegration allows professionals, the family and communities to better support their adjustment upon release, which in turn reduces their chances of recidivism. This suggests that public lack of understanding on the essence or need for collaborative effort in the reintegration process of ex-convicts, could pose a threat to the entire system. The rejection and unwholesome perception that usually greet their release could be a

pull factor to crime re-entry (recidivism). Given that successful reintegration of ex-convicts is central to crime reduction, it is important that the science of offender reintegration and public perception of the process be thoroughly understood. It is against this background that this paper examines public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Idemili-North LGA of Anambra State, Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problem

Irrespective of the circumstances that surround social existence of certain individuals, all human beings aspire to live a fulfilling, satisfying and meaningful life. Offenders released from correctional institutions could sometimes be confronted by socio-cultural, economic and personal challenges that tend to become obstacles to a crime free lifestyle and re-entry process. Some of these challenges might be as a result of the consequences of incarceration and the difficulty of transiting back into the community (Ajala & Oguntuase, 2011).

It has been observed that upon release from prison, ex-convicts usually face myriad of challenges. These barriers become an impediment to rehabilitation and increase their chances of re-offending. Davis et al (2012) noted that the prison environment is markedly different from mainstream society. Therefore, when being released, ex-convicts are plunged into an environment that is quite different from that of the prison and they struggle to cope. Furthermore, given the dynamic and ever-changing nature of society, ex-offenders who spend long periods in prison are released into an environment that is very different from their former environment before imprisonment. This appears to pose a serious challenge for their smooth reintegration process.

In Anambra State, it has been observed that discharged prisoners find it difficult to reintegrate into the society because of some social and cultural factors (Osayi, 2013). He posits that strong cultural belief system among the people continues to influence their worldview, especially on how they relate and perceive discharged prisoners. The understanding of these causal factors and formulation of strategies that would enhance public behaviour towards ex-convicts may not just help to sustain rehabilitation process, but could help in reducing recidivism (habitual offenders). The proximity of Idemili North to Onitsha, the commercial hub of Anambra State and by extension, Nigeria has made the area a hive of activities and crime. Much of the criminals operating in the area appear to be

ex-convicts from within and outside the State. The Anambra State Broadcasting Service (ABS, 2021) reported that the police in conjunction with local vigilante group re-arrested three robbery suspects at Nkpor in Idemili North LGA following a distress call. In addition, report by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2016 revealed that an average of 31.3% of released offenders from the Nigerian Prisons between 2007 and 2014 returned back to crime and prison few years after their previous release (Idowu & Odivwri, 2019). Anambra State is inclusive.

One of the intervention approaches adopted by successive governments in Nigeria has been executive pardon order. This provision vested some powers to the President and Commander-in-Chief, as well as to State governors to pardon and release some convicts using their discretion. The recent pardon and release of some former Boko Haram members by FGN received unwholesome public reactions (BBC, 2018; Iroanusi, 2021). This is in view of the danger the group represent in the society, and in spite of the alleged rehabilitation, many members of the public still perceive them as terrorists. While some research efforts have been made towards understanding the factors affecting reintegration of discharged prisoners, effectiveness of after-care-services, and process of offender reintegration (Osayi, 2013; Davis et al., 2012), it does appear that little or much has not been done in the aspect of public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Idemili-North LGA of Anambra State.

3. Objectives

The broad objective is to examine public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Idemili-North LGA of Anambra State. The specific objectives are to;

1. Examine how residents of Idemili-North LGA perceive ex-convicts reintegration into the society.
2. Identify the socio-cultural factors that influence public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Idemili-North LGA.

4. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided this paper;

1. H0: Female residents are not likely to perceive ex-convicts as criminals than their male counterparts in Idemili North LGA.

H1: Female residents are likely to perceive ex-

convicts as criminals than their male counterparts in Idemili North LGA.

2. H0: Socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts reintegration are not likely to differ significantly among residents of Idemili-North LGA.

H1: Socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts reintegration are likely to differ significantly among residents of Idemili-North LGA.

5. Literature Review

5.1 The Concept of Reintegration

Imprisonment and reintegration are like two sides of the same coin. It is almost impossible talking about reintegration without a mention of prison or imprisonment. Imprisonment has been defined as a term of judicial sentence available for a convicted offender of adult age, involving incarceration in prison for either life or a specified period of time (Ugwuoke & Ojonugwa, 2014). They posit that the rationale for imprisonment in Nigeria is evident in decree No. 9 of 1972 which assigned prisons with the responsibility among other functions, to teach and train prisoners to become useful and law abiding citizens upon discharge. Similarly, Igbo (2007) noted that the Nigerian prison service is today assigned the onerous responsibility of ensuring the safe custody of offenders as well as their reformation and rehabilitation. According to Walsh and Poole (1997), imprisonment became the dominant form of punishment with the birth of the classical school, as it has replaced the cruel and unusual death sentences of most crimes of the eighteenth century Europe. While imprisonment is a prescription, prisonisation is the process of living within a confinement known as a prison (Usang, 2019).

The Nigerian Correctional Service, formerly known as Nigerian Prison Service is an institution made to administer penal treatment to adult offenders. On the basis of imprisonment policy, the prison service was established to manage prisoners in prison yards, with its secondary aim of providing rehabilitation and correctional facility for those who have violated the rules and regulations of the society. The main aim of establishing prison institution all over the world, Nigeria inclusive, is to provide rehabilitation and correctional facilities for those who have violated the rules and regulations of their society. However, the extent to which this maxim is true in practice has been a subject of controversy. A casual observation of

inmates in Nigeria prisons pre-supposes that there are some problems in the system, hence, the institution's inability to live up to its expectations (Ugwumba & Usang, 2014).

Re-integration, as the name connotes appear easy to understand but has proven diverse in meaning in different perspectives. The concept of re-integration of an ex-convict refers to the process of returning to the society and the acceptance by the stakeholders in the society (Idowu & Odivwri, 2019). They stressed that re-integration is the coming back of the prisoner into the community to continue normal life (including gainful employment) after being discharged from incarceration. Reintegration was also conceived as the vehicle through which ex-prisoners may embrace and be embraced into the communities to which they return post-incarceration (Andrews, 2015). Reintegration considers how the social environment of the ex-prisoner – the community – impacts on either recidivism or desistance from crime.

As good as it may sound, ex-convicts in Nigeria appears to be deprived opportunities of employment and other social benefits in the society. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2006) conceived social re-integration from a prison perspective and described it as the ability to assist in giving moral, vocational and educational development to the imprisoned individual via working practices, educational, cultural and recreational activities available in the prison. It includes addressing the special needs of offenders with programmes covering a range of problems, such as; substance addiction, mental or psychological conditions, anger and aggression, among others which may have led to offending behaviour (Harish, Chittoo & Bhoola, 2011). To Nwune, Ajah, Egbegi and Onyejebu (2019), rehabilitation, reformation and reintegration are processes involved in treating offenders so as to integrate them back to the society. Nwune et al lump the concept of three R's together to mean integration of ex-offenders back to the society. While one may seem to agree with their view, another may choose to divorce the concepts and giving more emphasis to reintegration as the core essence of integration back to the society.

The re-integration of ex-convicts is a concept of global and national concern, yet seems to be a forgotten phenomenon. It is usually assumed that families of prison inmates are prepared for the release from custody of their incarcerated member. While the family may be longing to see their member that was convicted of

a crime, it may be traumatising on the part of the ex-convict when released from the prison. The thinking about the known and anticipated behaviour of the ex-convict may affect the acceptance and support needed by the ex-convict. This may complicate relationship problems and may perpetuate the negative labelling which affects positive integration. The unpreparedness of families and communities may be hostile than being in prison, leaving the ex-convict with no choice but to re-offend and be reconvicted, thereby becoming a recidivist (Raboloko & Maripe, 2019).

According to Birabil and Harry (2021), the problem of ill-conceived rehabilitation programmes, absence of functional rehabilitation centers to help inmates acquire useful skills for self-reliance and lack of reintegration strategy to guide them back to successful re-entry to the community upon release are leading to high rate of recidivism among ex-convicts in Rivers State. Andrews (2015) in a study that assessed community readiness to support ex-prisoners reintegration in Victoria posits that there was openness within the community to support reintegration process. That suggests that the level of participant support for reintegration was promising.

5.2 Conceptualising Ex-Convict

The term “ex-convict” has been used interchangeably with ex-prisoner, as well as ex-offender. While they may appear to mean the same, efforts have been made to deconstruct them. This because is because while an ex-offender could be someone that just offended another person again without being incarcerated, ex-convict on the other hand involves being convicted in a law court and sentenced. Collins (2021) simply defines an ex-convict as a former prisoner. Osayi (2013) conceived ex-convicts as released prisoners for onward successful life in the society. As good as it sounds, many factors often impede on the essence of the release and makes smooth re-entry into the society difficult. According to Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP, 2008), individuals who have in the past committed a fraudulent or dishonest act, or who have demonstrated other past behavior which landed them in custody and casts doubt upon their credibility or honesty upon release can simply be regarded as ex-convicts.

Criminal recidivism is enhanced due to the challenges of societal re-integration of released offenders. Released offenders lack the social assistance in order to desist from criminal recidivism (Idowu & Odivwri, 2019). Ideally, the after-care services to ex-convicts

should involve the offender’s family members and the community in the process of re-entry by monitoring them for some time in order to ensure successful re-integration into the society. However, they face unique set of challenges such as difficult time in securing employment due to their previous activities (HVRP, 2008). This is not unconnected with societal perception and attitude towards them based on what they did in time past, but with proper support and guidance these challenges can lead to competitive employment success.

In Nigeria, severely inadequate government rehabilitation programs routinely fail to successfully reintegrate ex-prisoners into the society (Yekini & Salisu, 2013). Failure to successfully reintegrate ex-convicts into society is strongly correlated with recidivism, thereby creating a vicious cycle of many offenders (Osayi, 2013; Schneider & Weber, 2020). In addition, high rate of recidivism is a threat to good governance in the country. This brings about the need to take rehabilitation and support for ex-convicts further from prison walls down to the society where they are expected to start-up again. The manner in which the society they come from perceive or relate with them could determine whether or not they would become better or return to crime.

5.3 Public Perception of Ex-Convicts Reintegration

Aside from the negative attitude towards ex-convicts, stigmatization becomes another hurdle they have to overcome in their daily lives. Ex-convicts live with the mark of a convict for almost forever after they have served their incarceration. Link and Phelan (2001) indicated that ex-convicts are stereotyped, labelled, discriminated against and lose social status. Thus, they keep facing invisible punishment which has the potential of slowing their successful integration in the society. Stigma poses a negative effect on ex-convicts as it lowers self-esteem, weaken social unity and may even encourage further crime (Kobayashi et al., 2001; Le Bel, 2012). The implication of such negative labelling and stigmatization is the avoidance behaviour put up by ex-convicts.

Chikadzi (2017) who examined the challenges faced by ex-offenders during reintegration revealed that major challenges facing ex-offenders in the area were rejection by family members and stigmatisation by society, inability to break into the labour market, struggling in adjusting to a new environment after spending many years in prison, inferiority complex which affects their mental health and lack of/or

inadequate after-care services. This is predicated upon negative perception and attitudes display towards ex-offenders. Similarly and in Gombo State, Nigeria, a study that assessed the information and knowledge about the challenges ex-convicts face in reintegration and support from the community before and after release showed that ex-convicts returning home from prison were yet perceived on basis of their offences, substance-abuse histories, mental and physical health, etc. These factors were in turn influence the community support that was available and the level of acceptance that was given to them as they transit into the community (Obum, Yunusa & Galdi, 2017).

In Kogi State, Nigeria, Ugwuoke and Ojonugwa (2014) reported that public stigmatisation causes recidivism and therefore making reintegration difficult. The study further disclosed that despite the official claim of operating on the principles of rehabilitation and reformation, Nigerian correctional institutions are still largely retributive in nature. The implication is the negative perception is still aided within the mind of the public, especially against the inmates.

There is evidence that employment gives sense of fulfillment and acceptance in a society. However, Angell, Matthews, Barrenger, Watson and Draine (2014) were of the view that ex-prisoners are likely to face a challenge in finding jobs and in some cases obtaining financial benefits. Thus, employment becomes one of the hindrances for ex-convicts. In cases where ex-convicts were found to possess the requisite skills needed for the job, the society still perceives them as criminals and untrustworthy (Wiafe, 2021). In effect, ex-convicts face hostile attitude when it comes to having employment or engaging in gainful economic activity which is not crime-related.

Negative perception or discrimination against ex-offenders usually occur when employers base their evaluation of an individual applicant on group-level information, such as ex-offenders on average being less reliable or ex-offenders on average having lower productivity than non-offenders (Ahmed & Lång, 2017). In Ghana, Wiafe (2021) observed that individual business owners have a very negative attitude towards employing ex-convicts. This suggests that the employability chance of ex-convicts is relatively slim. Those whose disposition seems to employ ex-convicts hinged their possible reasons on level of education, nature of offence and age of ex-convicts. The unwillingness to employ ex-convicts was based on factors such as personal experience, public perception of an ex-convict (stigmatization)

and bad publicity to the organization. This tells of how societal perception of ex-convicts usually shapes their world and in particular, career. Based on this, it is clear that many employers still perceive ex-convicts as criminals and distinguish job applicants with a criminal background from job applicants without a criminal background, hence, ex-offenders are discriminated against in the labor market.

The community may be thought of as cautious when it comes to support for reintegration. The public appears either willing to consider or already perceives reintegration as a sentencing objective (Andrews, 2015). He noted that the public is usually willing to support abstract reintegration to a greater degree than it is willing to be personally involved in the reintegration process. This was attributed to the negative perception they have against reintegration as still sentencing of the offender. Ex-convict participants in a study by Chikadzi (2017) noted that after prison their family members and people from the community rejected and ostracised them, which made it difficult for them to readjust to life after imprisonment. They attributed the rejection to wrong notion that they were not changed persons and the following were what they had to say;

“Problem lies with family because you can’t force them to love you and there is no programme that can be offered to family to love you”. Ex-convict A.

“After release, my mom’s sister contested the fact that I should never get parole, but her request was denied by the parole board; my uncles do not want anything to do with me – they would rather leave me beaten up and left lying on the road side. They don’t care”. Ex-convict B.

“The community where I come from they are just talking behind my back ... they say I was supposed to be given a longer sentence and most of them they don’t like me”. Ex-convict C.

“When I got a job they dismissed me and when I found another job the very same thing happened; they did police verification and dismissed me and told me that I should sort out my things” (Culled from Chikadzi, 2017).

The above responses depict a clearer implication of negative perception of ex-convicts. It could do more harm than good and even sustain dehumanisation of the ex-convicts. The essence of imprisonment is to correct, reform and rehabilitate offenders, therefore, turning to reject or discriminate against the same people believed to have been rehabilitated discredits the institutionalised process.

5.4 Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Public Perception of Ex-Convicts Reintegration

In prison community, there seem to be basic social and cultural characteristics which do not exist in the larger society. The distinct culture and way of life in prison epitomises a complete design capable of changing the attitude of individual members for good or bad depending on personal experience, social network action and training (Ugwumba & Usang, 2014). It does appear that the way of life in the prison provides the means and ways for the adjustment process of inmates. The dynamic nature of the prison culture is one, which consists of all sorts of value reorientation and internalisations that are capable of determining how an inmate is perceived within and outside of confinement (Obioha, 2010).

Studies have shown far ranging implications of social and cultural factors to the reintegration of discharged prisoners in the society. Immerwahr and Johnson (2002) in their study of perception of discharged prisoners noted that ex-prisoners reintegration into the community was a rarely discussed issue. Nobody seemed to care about what happened to prisoners that were released into the community – how they were treated and whether they would be able to rebuild their lives. The respondents believed that while prisoners had very little chance to learn useful skills in prison, they had ample opportunity to acquire and reinforce negative behaviors. The study painted a predictable and distressing picture of prisoners leaving prison with few new positive or marketable skills and many bad habits. They have no supervision and have a hard time finding a job including their inability to vote, and drive, etc contribute to their frustration and drive them back to crime. All of these, most of the respondents believed, lead to high rates of recidivism and a ‘virtual revolving door’, with people going back into prison almost as fast as they leave it.

Ex-convicts usually respond to the obvious socio-cultural implications of their new status which invariably attracts limited social and economic prospects, by placing themselves in tight-knit insular networks of family and close friends for both material and non-material benefits that are essential to daily life (Osayi, 2013). He argued that successful re-entry of ex-offenders require help from individuals and organizations that have the capacity to provide necessary assistance and/or employment opportunities.

Igbo and Ugwuoke (2003) were of the view that poor

environmental conditions of many Nigerian prisons and the negative attitude of the public towards ex-convicts influence their perception of them. These bring about discrimination in socialisation and outright avoidance by many people. There is the wide attitude of not recognizing most of the ex-convicts in social functions and thereby making their reintegration difficult, if not impossible. Ugwuoke (2010) posits that the uncooperative and antagonistic attitude of the society together with the social stigma attached to “ex-convicts” makes their reintegration nearly impossible and therefore crime becomes their only source of solace and livelihood.

Ex-convicts in Nigeria are normally set free without proper arrangement for their rehabilitation and reintegration in the society. To compound their situation, the law itself denies them some civic rights as free citizens and are not allowed to hold public offices as they are seen as being untrustworthy and unreliable (Osayi, 2013). In the views of Ekpe and Mammah (1997), all that are connected with discharged prisoners bear an odious stigma towards them. These pose a serious social and economic challenge to their reintegration and crime free life.

It has also been asserted that ex-convicts experience of hostile attitudes lead to many challenges and issues that impact on their welfare (Evans, 2007). He points to unbearable discouragement, lasting exclusion from economic and social participation, return to drug addiction, homelessness and at the end of the prison as emanating negative attitudes from the communities towards ex-prisoners. In a study by Wiafe (2021) which was carried out in Ghana disclosed that there was a high level of un-willingness among SME business owners to employ ex-convicts. This is attributable to negative inclination toward ex-convicts.

The social characteristics of neighborhoods, particularly poverty and residential instability influence the level of crime. The most recently available figures indicated that there are about 230,000 homeless people in the United States. The number is higher as many cities report a shortage of affordable housing (Petersilia, 2000). He argued that an estimated one-fourth of homeless people had served prison sentences. In California, 10 percent of all parolees are homeless, but in urban areas such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, the rate is as high as 30 to 50 percent. This may scenario might even be worse in Nigeria as there is growing population and lack of statistics on decent affordable accommodation for citizens, inclusive of ex-convicts. Many Nigerian landlords are likely to

reject an ex-convict if happens to know and such discrimination could bring about a sense of rejection. This could in turn affect reintegration process of ex-prisoners.

Iidowu and Odivwri (2019) in their study in Ondo State, Nigeria, revealed that criminal recidivism in Nigeria was being influenced by ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the nation's correctional centres (prisons) due to its poor conditions. It again showed that released offenders lack the social assistance in order to desist from criminal recidivism and public negative reactions made things worse for them. In Botswana, Raboloko and Maripe (2019) observed that after release of ex-convicts, they faced an enormous mountain which was difficult to climb without adequate assistance. They further established that preparation for release and integration process in the country was inadequate. They argued that communities in the area had no interventions in place to receive, integrate and support ex-convicts, thus leaving them to be stigmatised against.

Further still, Osayi (2013) made an effort to identify socio-cultural factors affecting the rehabilitation and reintegration of discharged prisoners in Anambra State, Nigeria and the study argues that ex-prisoners find it difficult to reintegrate into the society because of some social and cultural factors. However, the study failed to clearly highlight those factors, thus, creating a lacuna which this paper tries to fill.

5.5 Theoretical Thrust

This paper reviewed desistance and reintegration theories. The theories are considered relevant and suitable.

5.6 Desistance Theory

Desistance theory is the study of how and why people stop offending. It looks at the factors that contributes to reform of ex-offenders' (ex-prisoners') or that enabled them to desist from crime. 'Desistance' under the theory, refers broadly to the movement away from criminal behaviour. It also implies the process of ceasing criminal behaviour by a person who has been an offender. Laub and Sampson (2001) conceptualised desistance as processes that cause and support termination of offending behaviour. Maruna (2001) argues that desistance is not the 'termination point' at which offending ceases, but an ongoing, dynamic and interactional process.

Desistance theory draws on theories of delabelling and reintegrative shaming. According to Maruna,

LeBel, Mitchell and Naples (2004), the process incorporates both primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance refers to any period of time when the offender engages in crime-free behaviour. This is desistance at its most basic level, corresponding to an absence of re-offending. Like labelling theory's secondary deviance, 'secondary desistance' is distinguished from the behaviour of non-offending, to taking on of an identity of a changed person. Under secondary desistance, the offender and his or her community recognises and acknowledges that the offender as a person has changed (Maruna, et al., 2004).

In application to this paper, for an ex-convict to desist from wrong doing or be certified a changed person, there are factors that are expected to support the process. These could comprise the prison, the family, community and the ex-convict himself. It is the view of desistance theorists that an offender must show determination to change; therefore, it is not solely the prison or societal responsibility. Where the ex-offender is showing interest to live a crime free life, the family and community alike are expected to help the person instead of rejecting or discriminating against. Again, where an ex-offender is released for reintegration into the society, it is the duty of the residents to discard every form of negative perception and help the person to find his feet again.

5.7 Reintegration Theory

Reintegration theory is premised on the belief that crime represents a breach or absence of community support and one of the advocates of this theory is Braithwaite 1989 (Padayachee, 2008). Rather than solely blaming offenders for crime, proponents of reintegration theory argue that society is responsible for creating conditions that breed criminals. According to Muntingh (2005), the rationale for reintegrating offender is based on two moral premises. Firstly, it is better for people to be in harmony with one another, and secondly, wherever harmony and community are absent, they should be actively pursued. Muntingh (2005) further noted that punitive approach stigmatises and belittles offenders. This results in a further breach of community and disruption of harmony in society. To this end, reform and reintegration of offenders should always be the ultimate aim of incarceration.

In application therefore, reintegration theory tries to point to societal role in crime perpetration and dissuade the blame game of the community. It perceives the society as an accomplice in crime commission and

therefore must help in treating and rehabilitating the offenders, especially in ensuring that they reintegrate successfully. Some of the conditions that breed criminals which many societies create is non-provision of jobs, discrimination against ex-convicts from getting employed and avoidance or even the believe that they are forever criminals, even after being released from correctional facilities. This forms the basis for secondary punishment which dehumanises the affected individuals. The sense of not being welcomed anymore as part and parcel of a society is enough to depress an ex-convict. The depression could trigger anger or hate, thereby leading to terror against the society. Therefore, instead of blaming ex-convicts or labelling them as evil (criminals), the society is expected to understand that the failure of one is the failure of all. As a result every member or institution should cooperate to give ex-convicts a sense of welcome, responsibility and love. Through this, the gains of rehabilitation received by at the correctional service centres would be sustained.

6. Methodology

This paper adopts descriptive survey design. This study was carried out in Idemili-North LGA of Anambra State. Idemili North is one of the 21 LGAs of Anambra State. The major towns that make up the area are Abacha, Abatete, Eziowelle, Ideani, Nkpor, Obosi, Ogidi, Oraukwu, Uke, and Umuoji. Idemili North LGA shares borders with Oyi, Dunukofia, Njikoka, Anaocha, Idemili, and Onitsha South LGAs. The vast majority of inhabitants of the area consist of members of the Igbo ethnic national. Igbo and English languages are commonly spoken in the area, while Christianity is the widely practiced religion among the people. Popular festivals held in Idemili North include the Uzo-Iyi and the Imoka festivals,

while the area also has a popular tradition that forbids its dwellers from killing python found in the vicinity (Manpower Nigeria, 2021; Wikipedia, 2021). Idemili North LGA has a total area of 390 square kilometres and has the River Idemili flowing within its territory. Idemili North LGA is a trade hub with the area hosting several markets such as the popular Uke and building materials markets. These and its proximity with Onitsha, the commercial hub of Nigeria have made the area centre of attraction for both the good and bad, hence, crime thrives. The study's target population was ninety-seven thousand, six hundred and forty-four (97,644), while study sample was three hundred and ninety-eight (398) adult residents. Multi-stage sampling technique which involves successive random sampling of probability and non-probability methods was used to select respondents. This helps in selecting towns, villages, households and respondents. Structured questionnaire was the major instrument of data collection. Data were sorted, coded and processed through the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Through the application of descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages, Likert scale and mean scores data were analysed. Hypotheses were tested using chi-square (χ^2) inferential statistics and z-test. Out of the 398 copies of questionnaire administered, three hundred and seventy-four (374) that were properly filled were retrieved and used for analysis. This represent 94 percent response rate and was considered adequate enough for data analysis.

7. Results and Discussion

The respondents' socio-demographic characteristics were presented and analysed in Table 1;

7.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table1. Distribution of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (n=374)

Variables	Frequency (n=374) & Percentage (%=100)	Mean (x)
Gender		
Male	196 (52.4%)	
Female	178 (47.6%)	
Age		
18-28	81 (21.7%)	
29-39	43 (11.5%)	
40-50	189 (50.5%)	41
51 & Above	61 (16.3%)	
Education Qualification		
No formal education	15 (4.0%)	

Basic education	68 (18.2%)	
Secondary education	190 (50.8%)	
Tertiary education	77 (20.6%)	
Others	24 (6.4%)	
Occupation		
Not working	9 (2.4%)	
Students	42 (11.2%)	
Civil Servants	56 (15.0%)	
Business/Trading	183 (49.0%)	
Artisans	64 (17.1%)	
Others	20 (5.3%)	
Marital Status		
Single	141 (37.7%)	
Married	212 (56.7%)	
Once Married	21 (5.6%)	
Religious Belief		
Christianity	334 (89.3%)	
Islam	17 (4.6%)	
Others	23 (6.1%)	

Source: field survey, 2021.

Table 1 displays the analysis of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. The results showed that majority 196 (52.4%) were the males, implying that men were more than females. Their average age mean was 41 years and majority of them 189 (50.5%) fell within the age bracket of 40-50 years. This means that the respondents were adults and matured. The highest educational qualification of the respondents 190 (50.8%) was secondary education, and this is not surprising since the study was conducted in Idemili North which is predominantly dominated area for business people. Many business people usually leave school after secondary school and move to learn trade. This was confirmed by the finding which indicated that Business/Trading 183 (49.0%) was the major occupation of the respondents. A small fraction of them 9 (2.4%) were not working; perhaps, they were

either unemployed or retirees. Again, the marital status of the majority 212 (56.7%) was married, suggesting that the respondents were having responsibilities and family to cater for. Lastly, close to 90 percent of the respondents 334 (89.3%) were Christians, implying that the study area was dominated by Christians of different denominations. The implication is that it could shape the respondents perception and approach towards ex-convicts. This is in view of the Biblical teaching that implores Christians to love others as themselves.

7.2 Residents Perception Of Ex-Convicts Reintegration In Idemili-North Lga

The respondents' awareness and perception about ex-convicts reintegration were assessed. The result is presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Awareness and Respondents Perception of Ex-convicts

Questions and Responses	Frequency and Percentage
<i>Do you understand what ex-convicts reintegration is?</i>	
Yes	351 (93.9%)
No	23 (6.1%)
Total	374 (100%)
<i>If "Yes", which of these simply describe your perception about an ex-convict?</i>	
Rehabilitated offender	73 (20.8%)
Changed person	59 (16.8%)
Criminal	132 (37.6%)
Recidivist (unrepentant offender)	87 (24.8%)
Total	351 (100%)

<i>How do you relate or could possibly relate with an ex-convict in your area?</i>	
Render care, support or assistance to enable the person forget the past	25 (6.7%)
I cannot endanger myself because they can never live without crime	97 (26.0%)
They are like everyone of us and there is nothing wrong relating with any	34 (9.1%)
Their release will always be a threat and I am not ready for that	104 (27.8%)
They are evildoers and deserve to be left to suffer what they did	91 (24.3%)
Can't say	23 (6.1%)
Total	374 (100%)

Source: field survey, 2021.

Table 2 tried to assess the respondents' level of awareness on ex-convicts reintegration and their perception about the ex-prisoners. The table disclosed that close to 95% of the respondents 351 (93.9%) affirmed that they knew what reintegration was, while a small fraction 23(6.1%) appears not to know. This suggests that majority of the respondents had knowledge about ex-convicts reintegration and the prevailing perception among them was that ex-prisoners are criminals, unrepentant offenders (recidivists). This equally indicates that residents of Idemili-North were engrossed by the tag ex-convict and never let go of the negative perception even after those people must have served their terms. This is in line with the findings of Chikadzi (2017) who reported that ex-prisoners in some African communities were rejected and ostracised due to wrong notion that they were not changed persons.

In a view to ascertaining their perception about ex-convicts, the largest number 132 (37.6%) of those that said they knew about ex-convicts reintegration informed that they perceives ex-convicts as criminals. This was followed by 87 (24.8%) of those that see ex-convicts as unrepentant offenders (recidivists). However, what appears as hope was found from 73 (20.8%) who were of the view that ex-prisoners were rehabilitated offenders, and changed persons 59 (16.8%). This implies that even in the midst of rejection or negative thoughts there could still be people who may welcome or relate with ex-convicts. Although small in proportion, yet significant to impact on their wellbeing and reintegration process. In relation with ex-convicts, the result showed that

104 (27.8%) which formed the majority perceived ex-convicts release as a threat and therefore not ready to have any dealing with them. In affirming this negative perception among the people, 97 (26.0%) aired their minds that they cannot endanger their lives because they believed that ex-convicts can never live without crime. This view could have been informed by fear and lack of proper sensitization that an ex-convict can completely be a changed person.

Again, 91 (24.3%) held the opinion that ex-offenders were evildoers and deserve to be left to suffer what they did. This erroneous perception attests to how destructive some unfounded cultural beliefs can be on ex-prisoners re-entry. Those that held such view are trying to say that an evildoer can never change and this may not be true, because a proper rehabilitation has the potency to bring about a total turn around for good. Nonetheless, while 34 (9.1%) were of the view that ex-convicts are like everyone else and did not see anything wrong in relating with them, about 25 (6.7%) posited that they can render care, support or assistance where necessary to enable ex-offenders to forget the past. Perhaps this group was the most informed and knowledgeable about the power of rehabilitation, or could have been influenced with this positive thought by their religious teachings.

7.3 Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Public Perception of Ex-Convicts Reintegration in Idemili-North Lga

The socio-cultural factors influencing respondents' perception of ex-convicts reintegration were examined. The responses are presented and analysed in Table 3:

Table 3. Socio-cultural Factors influencing Public Perception of Ex-convicts

S/n	Statements on ex-convicts	SA 5	A 4	UD 3	D 2	SD 1	N	X	Decision
i.	Associating with ex-offender could attract wrath of the gods	148	161	6	44	15	374	4.02	Accepted
ii.	Attitude of non-recognition of ex-convicts in social functions is a better punishment for them	111	174	23	39	27	374	3.81	Accepted

iii.	Once a criminal is always a criminal and deserve not to be trusted anymore	197	108	9	7	53	374	4.04	Accepted
iv.	Ex-convicts are rejected people, that is why society is silence over their affairs after release	127	150	18	41	38	374	3.76	Accepted
v.	Since they are not allowed to vote or hold public offices, I do not have anything to do with them	81	93	21	100	79	374	3.00	Accepted
Grand Mean								3.714	Accepted

Source: field survey, 2021.

Table 3 displays the analysis and result of socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts. Findings revealed that respondents believed that once a criminal is always a criminal and deserve not to be trusted. Idemili is an ancient town with abundant cultural practices and traditional beliefs. These have shaped the peoples worldview. There is the belief among them that until the affected person is purified they do not see such a person as someone that can be trusted. This view was corroborated by the outcome of the mean score (4.02), suggesting that associating with ex-offenders could attract wrath of the gods. In the traditional Igbo society, especially in Idemili, criminals are usually ex-communicated and banished from the land. Such a person and his descendants are usually seen as outcasts and should be avoided to avoid having the gods to contend with. This finding therefore, suggests that this traditional belief is still being held unto by some persons till date and that people never too come to terms with the power of education in rehabilitation.

Again, the societal attitude of non-recognition of ex-convicts in social functions also influenced the way they perceived them ($x=3.81$). This brings about class and inequality, which simply shows who is who in a society. This may be traumatising to the ex-prisoner and thereby damaging the gains of rehabilitation from correctional centres. In addition, the societal culture

of silence on the welfare of ex-convicts shaped public perception about them as rejected people ($x=3.76$). This finding tries to show that there are certain actions that may turn to be having negative effects without the initial thought of those responsible. Similarly, the deprivation of ex-convicts the civic rights to vote or hold public offices received a positive sign as one of the influencing factors. This means that because they were not constitutionally allowed to vote or be voted for, or even occupy any public office, this shapes public perception of them as rejected people. This brings about negative tag and possible stigmatisation. This align with the findings of Osayi (2013) that challenges facing ex-convicts were compounded by the denial of some civic rights as free citizens and are not allowed to hold public offices as they are seen as being untrustworthy and unreliable.

8. Test of Hypotheses

The formulated hypotheses were restated and tested in this section.

8.1 Presentation And Test Of Hypothesis One

H_0 : Female residents are not likely to perceive ex-convicts as criminals than their male counterparts in Idemili North LGA.

H_1 : Female residents are likely to perceive ex-convicts as criminals than their male counterparts in Idemili North LGA.

Table 4. Analysis and result of hypothesis one

Gender	If "Yes", which of these simply describe your perception about an ex-convict?			Total	Chi-Square $X^2 = 49.582^a$ N = 351 df = 1 P=.210, >0.05 Sig.
		Non-Criminal	Criminal		
Male	Count/% within	69(19.6%)	72(20.5%)	141(40.1%)	
Female	Count/% within	63(18.0%)	147(41.9%)	210(59.9%)	
Total	Count/% within	132(37.6%)	219(62.4%)	351(100.0%)	

Source: field survey, 2021

Table 4 shows the analysis and result of hypothesis one. The test result revealed that computed chi-square was 49.582, with a p-value of .210. This indicated that the p-value was greater than the significance level set at .05 ($p=.210$, >0.05 sig.). Since, the p-value was higher than significance level, it presents the reason to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate. This

implies that female residents are likely to perceive ex-convicts as criminals than their male counterparts in Idemili North LGA. What this means is that gender is not a precursor to perception and that whether male or female, people can perceive ex-convicts in either ways depending on other influencing factors or intervening variables.

8.2 Presentation and Test of Hypothesis Two

H_0 : Socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts reintegration are not likely to differ significantly among residents of Idemili-North LGA.

H_1 : Socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts reintegration are likely to differ significantly among residents of Idemili-North LGA.

Table 5. Z-test parameter estimation of hypothesis two

	B	Std. Error	df	Sig.		
Associating with ex-offender could attract wrath of the gods	1.740	.205	1	.010		
Attitude of non-recognition of ex-convicts in social functions is a better punishment for them	3.821	.873	1	.000		
Once a criminal is always a criminal and deserve not to be trusted anymore	1.149	.600	1	.003		
Ex-convicts are rejected people, that is why society is silence over their affairs after release	1.052	.329	1	.012		
Since they are not allowed to vote or hold public offices, I do not have anything to do with them	2.117	.481	1	.040		
Model Summary^b						
Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	z-cal	df	Sig.
Socio-cultural factors	374	7.9284	.63938	2.612	1	.151
		5.0021	.37293			

Source: field survey, 2021

Table 5 displayed the z-test result of hypothesis two on the socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts reintegration in Idemili-North LGA. The result showed that virtually all the variables bore different significant values, which were below the 0.05 level. However, the model summary indicated that the z-calculated was 2.612 and the general p-value was .151. This suggests a disparity in the significant level of the factors influencing public perception of ex-convict. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate was accepted, implying that socio-cultural factors influencing public perception of ex-convicts reintegration are likely to differ significantly among residents of Idemili-North LGA.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper submits that residents' of Idemili North LGA were aware of ex-convicts reintegration, yet had negative perception about ex-prisoners, especially as criminals or unrepentant offenders. The release of ex-prisoners was perceived as a threat to anyone associating with them. That was as a result of some social and cultural practices that had over the years shaped the worldview of the people. The beliefs held by the people are likely to mar rehabilitation efforts of correctional services and ex-convicts reintegration. Those factors differ among the people and affected how they react or respond to issues pertaining to ex-

convicts. In conclusion therefore, the perceptions hold by the people indirectly discredits the efficacy of correctional services given to ex-offenders and portends danger that could lead to recidivism. Therefore, this paper recommends that;

1. There is need for adequate public sensitization to discourage the perception that ex-prisoners are criminals. This can be centred on the efficacy of the Nigerian Correctional Service programs in rehabilitating ex-prisoners through outreach in villages, markets, churches and even through the media. The resounding message and scenes of impactful rehabilitation processes could help members of the public have better understanding.
2. Some harmful cultural practices or beliefs should be discouraged through effective legislation, especially the erroneous notion that associating with ex-offenders could earn someone wrath of the gods.
3. Government should grant ex-prisoners the civic right to participate in electioneering process and to equally hold public offices where they merit it, and society should be made to begin to recognise ex-convicts in social functions just as every other citizen. This will help eliminate the negative label or stigma imposed on them.
4. There should be equal playing ground in job recruitment and placement. The idea of disqualifying

someone on ground of past criminal record should not continue. It is not just depriving and dehumanising, but poses a serious threat to the reintegration process.

5. Communities should be incorporated into the reintegration process. This is in view of the fact that they are the ones the ex-offenders are going to meet and live with. Therefore, their leaders should be involved and made to assist in assessing and supporting the affected persons. By leading the process, residents would then see the need to cooperate in assisting the ex-convicts in the reentry process.

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