Community Reintegration of Offenders at an Overcrowded Rural Correctional Facility: Work Experiences of Correctional Officials

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Abstract: Community reintegration of offenders is one of South Africa’s methods of rehabilitating offenders who have served a portion of their sentence in a correctional centre. However, overcrowding in the rural correctional facilities that have limited resources have exposed the correctional officials to enormous work-related challenges. This paper discusses the work-related challenges experienced by correctional officials at Rooigrond Correctional Centre, a rural correctional centre in North West Province in South Africa. This study employed a qualitative research approach and a descriptive research design to capture the challenges experienced by correctional officials during reintegration of offenders at Rooigrond Correctional Centre. Due to the different ranks of the correctional officials who participated in the study, a quota sampling technique was used to involve ten correctional officials in face-to-face interviews. Thematic data analysis was used, which showed that correctional officials experience a plethora of challenges which have an impact on work and personal levels. This paper makes significant conclusions and recommendations to improve the work-related experiences of the correctional officials in overcrowded, low-resourced rural correctional facilities.

Keywords: work experiences; community reintegration; correctional officials; low-resourced correctional centre; challenges; Rooigrond

1. Introduction

Offender reintegration has emerged as a policy challenge within the field of corrections due to the rising number of offenders who are released from correctional centres each year. The issue of overcrowding in correctional centres is a global concern that impacts the workload of correctional officials, the rehabilitation of offenders, and decisions regarding the community reintegration of said offenders. More than 11 million individuals are incarcerated worldwide (Nkosi and Maweni 2020). Approximately 102 countries have reported custodial occupancy levels exceeding 110% (Nkosi and Maweni 2020). This high level of occupancy poses significant research inquiries that necessitate systematic investigation to obtain solutions in the form of best practices. Research has uncovered that overcrowding in correctional centres heightens the probability of releasing offenders for community reintegration, in order to alleviate the strain on correctional facilities (World Prison Briefs 2020). Furthermore, research has indicated that overcrowding intensifies the workload of correctional staff and has adverse effects on rehabilitation programs, as offenders are expedited through the release process without undergoing proper rehabilitation procedures (Department of Correctional Services Annual Report 2021–2022).

In the West, countries with a high rate of incarceration, such as the United States of America and New Zealand, have recently become aware of a lack of opportunities for
released offenders in society, which could potentially increase their risks of reoffending. This issue requires thorough research to yield necessary insights for correctional centres worldwide. America stands among the countries with the highest incarceration rates globally, and 1 out of every 37 American adult residents is annually placed under correctional system supervision (Kaeble and Glaze 2016). Each year, offenders are discharged from correctional centres with a heightened likelihood of reoffending and returning to these facilities. Consequently, the reintegration of offenders into the community holds paramount importance (Benecchi 2021; Lotter 2023). The Office of the Press Secretary (2015) also highlights an increasing national emphasis in the United States of America on facilitating rehabilitation and minimising obstacles associated with community reintegration.

From an African perspective, Nkosi and Maweni (2020) affirm that correctional centres in Africa are often regarded as some of the world’s most problematic, characterised by violence, overcrowding, and a range of other issues including inadequate food and poor hygiene. To provide further insight into specific African nations, Nkosi and Maweni (2020) note that Nigeria detains approximately 74,000 individuals, Kenya detains 51,000, and Ghana detains 14,500 people within correctional centres that have limited resources. To exacerbate the situation, correctional centres are overcrowded and under-resourced across African countries (World Prison Briefs 2020).

Overcrowding in South African correctional facilities has fed into already insufficient rehabilitation and inadequate community reintegration programmes (Department of Correctional Services Annual Report 2021–2022). Steinberg (2005), as cited by Sibisi and Olofinbiyi (2021, p. 212), estimates that “with an overcapacity of more than 74,000 inmates in South African correctional facilities at the time, each inmate would be left with an average of only 2 meters squared of floor space”.

Overcrowding in correctional facilities continues to directly and indirectly impact, amongst others, the available bed space, maintenance of infrastructure, health condition of inmates, security management of inmates, safety of officials, and the capacity of the Department of Correctional Services to render development and rehabilitation programmes for offenders (Department of Correctional Services Annual Report 2021–2022). South Africa has a 75% overcrowding rate (The Borgen Project 2021). In 2021/22, the Department of Correctional Services (DSC) incarcerated 143,233 inmates but had bed capacity for only 108,804 offenders (Department of Correctional Services Annual Report 2021–2022). Correctional centres situated in the urban areas of South Africa are affected by the rates of overcrowding the most. For instance, “in the 2015/16 financial year, Johannesburg Correctional Centre’s Medium B was 233% full, which translated into a shortage of 1736 beds at the time. Pollsmoor Correctional Centre in Cape Town alone had a total shortage of 2448 beds in the 2015/16 financial year” (Sibisi and Olofinbiyi 2021). Drawing back from the 2015/16 reporting period statistics, overcrowding in the correctional facilities still remained a problem in the 2021/22 reporting period. South African’s correctional facilities are 31% overcrowded (Department of Correctional Services Annual Report 2021–2022).

Having interviewed offenders, Sibisi and Olofinbiyi (2021) have found that offenders’ physical, psychological, and social well-being in Durban Westville was negatively affected by overcrowding in the correctional centre. Mogoeng (2019) argues that in the North West province, Rooigrond Correctional Centre is a highly overcrowded correctional facility that is located in one of the most rural areas of the North West Province. Rooigrond Correctional Centre has an approved accommodation for 1038 inmates; however, 1170 inmates occupy the cells, which makes this facility 22% overcrowded.

It is important to delve more into the occupancy levels of the correctional facilities across South Africa. During an annual report by the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services in 2019, it was said that there were 29,679 inmates in correctional centres, with only 20,779 official bed spaces, with 16,520 males and 594 females in the Western Cape. This means Western Cape correctional centres are 20.94% overcrowded. Cruywagen (2022) states that the national overcrowding rate in South African Correctional centres is now 31.65%, versus the 2020/2021 rate of 23%. There were about 18,000 offenders serving life
sentences, as opposed to just 400 in 1995 (Cruywagen 2022). Felix (2020) notes that in the Eastern Cape, correctional facilities can accommodate 13,294 inmates, but there are 19,422, of which 6,186 are remand detainees (awaiting trial) and 13,236 sentenced offenders. This means that correctional centres in Eastern Cape are 46% overcrowded. Correctional Centres in Gauteng are 46.31% overcrowded and with a total bed space of 24,877, they are currently accommodating 36,397 (Felix 2020). Felix (2020) also mention that KwaZulu-Natal has the lowest overcrowding figure at 18.19%. The province’s correctional centres can accommodate 20,281 inmates, yet they house 23,970—of which 7,417 are remand detainees and 16,553 are sentenced offenders.

Considerable research has been dedicated to investigating the consequences of overcrowding in correctional facilities on inmates, with minimal attention given to its impact on the work of correctional officials (Nkosi and Maweni 2020). This represents a significant gap in the field of criminal justice studies, which the present research addresses. Given this research gap, the present study focuses on analysing the work-related experiences of correctional officials at Rooigrond Correctional Centre during the community reintegration of offenders. Due to the overcrowded nature of the correctional facility, the specific objectives that were set to achieve the aim of the study were firstly to describe how overcrowding affects community reintegration of offenders at Rooigrond Correctional Centre, and secondly to analyse how correctional officials at Rooigrond were affected by overcrowding of the correctional centre at professional and personal well-being levels.

2. Policy Frameworks Guiding Community Reintegration of Offenders in South Africa

The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) is on one of the legal frameworks guiding community reintegration of offenders in South Africa. Community rehabilitation is seen as an integral component of the sentence plan that must become part and parcel of case relationships between the offender, the community and the society at large (The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa 2005). Community reintegration of offenders is important as it helps to reduce recidivism (Olivares 2018). The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) states that the Department of Correctional Services intends using the term “after-care” to describe its services aimed at promoting the effective community reintegration of offenders back into their communities of origin. Restoration tries to bring the offender and the community together with the aim to reconcile the offender with the community, repairing harm caused by the criminal act with the objective of promoting reintegration of the offenders back into the community (The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa 2005). Rehabilitation is completed only if community reintegration is successful. The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) sees corrections as much more than just crime prevention, but also as a societal responsibility to which all sectors and institutions of society should contribute; it therefore encourages the community to become involved (The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa 2005). Fourie (2015) adds by saying to combat recidivism, community reintegration is seen as the most challenging aspect of rehabilitation, and the period of incarceration should therefore be used to rebuild the relationship between the offender, the community, and the society at large. The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) states that moral regeneration and the promotion of ethics enshrined in the Constitution require special attention to be paid to the creation of an environment that allows for self-discipline, social independence, ongoing family support and community support, as well as reintegration of offenders.

Singh (2016) shares that the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 (1998) recognises that the rehabilitation and community reintegration of ex-offenders is a societal responsibility. The same legislation further adds that civil society organisations have a critical role to play, because the Department of Correctional Services does not have strong post-release support services for ex-offenders (Singh 2016). One of the main challenges with community reintegration of offenders is that laws and policies assume that community integration and
reintegration programmes exist even if such programmes barely exist or are only accessible to a few. The few community reintegration services that are available are rendered in a fragmented manner, with each stakeholder providing its own services based on its own programme design, and limited services continue beyond a year for an offender who has exited parole or the aftercare system (Singh 2016).

A laudable intervention in the South African context is the inclusion of Section 27B (1) to the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 (1977), which reads that “one may apply for the expungement of the criminal record if 10 years have lapsed after the date of the conviction for that offence”. The Criminal Procedure Amendment Act 65 of 2008 sets out that an ex-offender can apply for the expungement of their criminal record ten years from the date of conviction provided they have not been convicted of any other offence during the ten-year period. This is aimed at ensuring that community reintegration becomes successful. The offenders are more likely to change and live a crime-free life when they feel they are part of the community. This is especially so when they are not treated as criminals and are able to access some resources and job opportunities.

3. Problem Statement

It is correctional practice in South Africa that offenders serve their sentences in correctional facilities and thereafter, be reintegrated into their families and communities. Overcrowding plays a significant role in various ways in the work of the correctional officials. Saferspaces (2023) states South Africa has a total number of 243 correctional centres, yet due to the escalating crime rates, they are facing overcrowding. This has given rise to various experiences among the correctional officials in South Africa.

Sadly, overcrowding in correctional centres does not only affect offenders but it also affects the correctional officials in many significant ways. Community reintegration of offenders is very demanding on correctional officials’ skills, time, and effort. It is, however, affected by a plethora of challenges experienced by correctional officials working at overcrowded facilities in South Africa. For example, correctional officials facilitate parole, victim–offender dialogue, and then integration of offenders back into the communities. The complexity of dealing with parole, victim–offender dialogue, and reintegration of offenders into the community creates many challenges for correctional officials. Correctional officials find themselves in between ensuring quality programmes and chasing deadlines and targets set by the Department of Correctional Services. In this process, officials are prone to stress and burnout (Chamberlain and Hompe 2020). Additionally, correctional officials are vulnerable to the danger of contracting possibly lethal sicknesses on account of job-related commands. Further, the allocation of resources to implement programmes has been found to be inadequately addressed in South African correctional services to ensure proper rehabilitation of offenders (Du Plessis and Lombard 2018). While much research has been performed on the experiences of offenders in crowded correctional facilities, there is a knowledge gap on the experiences of correctional officials working in overcrowded facilities and how they are impacted at professional and personal levels; hence, this study was devised.

4. Materials and Methods

Using a qualitative approach and a descriptive research design, this study captured the work experiences of the correctional officials in a crowded facility in South Africa (Igwenu 2016). The qualitative research approach and a descriptive design enabled the authors to summarise the officials’ work experiences from Rooigrond Correctional Centre (Chetty 2016; Rillo and Alieto 2018).
4.1. Sampling Procedure

From a population of correctional officials at the Rooigrond Correctional Centre, the study adopted quota sampling due to the different ranks at which the correctional officials were employed. Yang and Banamah (2014) are of the view that quota sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which researchers make a sample by including individuals that characterise the population. Quota sampling has enabled the authors to sample a subgroup that is of great interest in the study. For example, the authors divided the population by their ranks within the correctional facility, which comprised managers, social workers, and parole officers, as well as wardens. The authors chose the sample by looking at the fact that social workers, wardens, parole officers, and managers from different ranks were characterised by one thing, which was their participation in social reintegration of offenders. Ten participants were interviewed, and this number of participants was informed by the data saturation point where the authors discontinued interviewing participants as there was no new information emerging during the interviews.

4.2. Data Collection Methods

Data in the study were collected using one-on-one interviews with the participants guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (Reid and Mash 2014). A semi-structured interview schedule is merely a list of titles and related questions asked by the interviewer (Bearman 2019). The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions, which allowed the authors to elicit more information and be able to probe as a way of going beyond what was being said. The authors conducted one-on-one individual interviews, which allowed the correctional officials to define their individual experiences on how the social reintegration of ex-offenders was affected by overcrowding in correctional centres (Stinger 2014). Open-ended questions were asked to elicit more information and participants were given a chance to elaborate further on what they shared.

In accordance with research ethics, the authors obtained access from the gatekeepers, (Paticca-Harris et al. 2016), obtained informed consent (Manti and Licari 2018) from the correctional officials who were study participants, and obtained ethical approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the North-West University, ethics number NWU-00164-21-A1. Also, the authors obtained permission to conduct the study from the Provincial Department of Correctional Services and Rooigrond Correctional Centre. The authors maintained the confidentiality and privacy of the data obtained during the study (Surmiak 2018). The individuals’ real identities were not used; instead, pseudonyms were used to identify data provided from the participants. Therefore, the names of the participants in this study are not their true names.

4.3. Data Analysis

In this study, the authors utilised thematic data analysis, which emphasises a mutual process of analysing, investigating, and recording patterns of meaning in the data (Gupta et al. 2018). The authors utilised thematic analysis because it allowed flexibility on the part of the researchers. Similar to Braun and Clarke (2013), who assert that data analysis occurs after data collection, categories were developed in this study to organise and understand the collected data. These categories were based on themes and emergent sub-themes. Analysis followed ideas of Maguire and Delahunt (2017) and Braun and Clarke (2013), who assert that the six categories that the data analysis should follow are becoming familiar with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, examining the subjects, defining, and labelling the themes, and finally, drafting the study report. Thematic data analysis and transcriptions were performed manually, and data were recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. After that, texts were retrieved from the data and documented. Then, to provide synchronised information for reporting the findings and their implications, the emergent themes in the data were described and compared with existing literature.
5. Findings of the Study

The study had interesting findings, which are described in the succeeding paragraphs. These finding are categorised into biographical information of the participants and related themes and sub-themes to group related information together for analysis purposes.

5.1. Biographical Information of the Correctional Officials

The participants provided their biographical information, which described their age, gender, place of residence, work experience, and their workstations. This information provided useful information that describes the participants “biographical picture”. Table 1 summarises the biographical information of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Work Experience in Years</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Montshioa</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Community Corrections Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rooigrond</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Correctional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kagiso</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rooigrond</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Correctional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keneilwe</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rooigrond</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Correctional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Magogoe</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Community Corrections Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rooigrond</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Correctional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masego</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Golf View</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Community Corrections Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modise</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Magogoe</td>
<td>33 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Correctional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rorisang</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rooigrond</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Correctional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshiamo</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Magogoe</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Rooigrond Community Corrections Office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Legodi and Dube (2023).

According to the biographical information, correctional officials were both males and females between the ages of 30 and 60 and lived in various parts of Mafikeng, a city in the North West Province where Rooigrond Correctional Centre is located. The participants’ residential areas have been added to show how familiar they were with the Rooigrond Area. The officials are both employees with the Rooigrond Area and members of the community, which means that the rehabilitation outcomes at Rooigrond Correctional Centre also affect them in their personal community lives. According to the findings, male participants had worked for longer stretches of time than women, meaning they have greater expertise and knowledge with overcrowding and social reintegration. This biographical information raised the expectations that male correctional officials would share more, as they had more experience in the correctional services work.

5.2. Theme 1: The Influence of Overcrowding on Social Reintegration of Offenders

One of the major tasks of the correctional officials in South Africa is to reintegrate offenders into their communities after they have completed their sentences in custody (Department of Correctional Services 2023). If reintegration of offenders into their communities is not successful, the rehabilitation of offenders during their entire sentence bears little significance. Research has established that overcrowding influences community reintegration of offenders in numerous ways (Nkosi and Mavewi 2020; Sibisi and Olofinbiyi 2021), and because of that, participants in the study were asked about how overcrowding affects the offenders and themselves as correctional officials. From all the ten participants interviewed, it emerged that overcrowding has a negative impact on offenders. If overcrowding affects the offenders negatively, it has various negative implications for the social reintegration of offenders and negative impacts on the goals of the reintegration process of the correctional facility. The participants indicated and described the different
ways in which the offenders are influenced negatively by overcrowding. The following is a discussion of how overcrowding affects community reintegration of offenders.

5.2.1. Sub-Theme: Frustration of Offenders

The findings of the study revealed that the issue of overcrowding in the correctional facility causes frustrations for both the correctional officials and the offenders. Rooigrond Correctional Centre is overcrowded, and inmates live under terrible conditions with deteriorated basic standards of living such as living without enough running water, food, or beds. Due to the described problems, being far away from their families and not having visits, offenders often ask for transfers to the centres near their homes. At Rooigrond Correctional Centre, this is what was revealed by one participant:

“Overcrowding makes social reintegration of offenders difficult because offenders tend to be frustrated when they are overcrowded and end up wanting to be transferred to other centres.” (Layla)

To indicate how correctional officials become frustrated in their work, another participant commented,

“We are frustrated by the overcrowding situation. THE BEHAVIOUR OF OFFENDERS IS ALSO FRUSTRATING!! (participant exclaimed with emphasis). We have to meet the needs of participants and on the side meet targets and deadlines, but offenders don’t understand our frustrations as officials, so they end up taking their frustrations on us”.

In the views of Crawford (2015), fury and pressure are common experiences of most people in their work environments. It happens with both the correctional officials and the offenders that when they work under crowded conditions, they become extremely infuriated, exasperated, or unfriendly towards other people (Crawford 2015).

5.2.2. Sub-Theme: Unruly Behaviour

Interestingly, another finding from the study contradicted the essence of rehabilitation processes. The authors discovered that overcrowding forced offenders to behave in an unruly manner at Rooigrond Correctional Centre, such as use of offensive language and not following instructions from correctional officials. Unruly behaviour tends to oppose the rules set by the Department of Correctional Services in terms of how offenders should conduct themselves within the correctional centre often resulting in ill discipline (Seokotsa 2019). Layla had to say,

“Offenders are disturbed psychologically because when offenders do not get what they want they become stubborn and disobedient. This also affects day-to-day running of their programmes so if overcrowding can be limited within the correctional centres things would be much easier.”

Additionally, Bridget revealed that,

“OVERCROWDING MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR US TO DO OUR WORK!!! (participant added emphasis and exclaimed). When offenders are overcrowded they tend to adopt unruly behaviours then when they exit the system it becomes difficult for them to reintegrate well into the community as they have not been rehabilitated enough and they take what they have learnt from others in correctional centres and influence the community. They end up reoffending.”

Seemingly, an overcrowded correctional centre exposes offenders to different kinds of behaviour that each of the fellow offenders possess. It is not clear, however, why offenders seem to quickly learn deviant behaviour from each other rather than good behaviour. In that regard, Manganye and Phetlho-Thekisho (2016) opined that overpopulation has its complications in the form of gangs where people by association absorb deviant behaviour, which is a breeding environment for violence.

Keneilwe had to say,
“Overcrowding in the centre influences the social reintegration of offenders in the sense that offenders leave the system before completing their sentences. The department will be saying the offender must leave because the system is pushing them out but the reality is they never get successfully reintegrated because they come from an environment that is packed and are exposed to different kinds of violent behaviours of which they end up adopting.”

In terms of social reintegration of offenders, the consequences of overcrowding have been associated with negative outcomes. Researchers have opined that when offenders are detained, they are able to meet and live with hardened criminals, who influence them and the way they will behave in future (Louw and Van Wyk 2015). For those who regard themselves as criminals and are determined to stay true to what they believe in, overcrowding has a negative influence on their reintegration because they continue to commit crimes after release. It has been found by research that what offenders exhibit as behaviour is a result of what they believe in (Louw and Van Wyk 2015).

5.2.3. Sub-Theme: Violation of Offenders’ Rights

It should be viewed as malpractice to overcrowd correctional facilities. The reason being that overcrowding in correctional centres perpetuates a violation of offenders’ rights. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2016) explains that human rights are rights that every person has by right or dignity of humans. Human rights are essential to all human beings, and they describe associations between individuals and power structures, especially the government. Being sentenced and taken to a correctional centre that is overcrowded means that an offender may lack food and water. It means the rights of an offender have been violated. Kagiso had to say,

“When we have more of capacity it is overcrowding, we cannot manage in terms of Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, in terms of human dignity if they are more they will lack certain things of which most of their rights will be violated.”

5.2.4. Sub-Theme: Gangsterism and the Security of Officials

It has also been found that gangsterism and the security of officials is a pressing issue caused by overcrowding in correctional centres. Overcrowding at Rooigrond Correctional Centre has tended to produce gangs in the correctional facility, thereby compromising to a greater extent the security of the correctional officials. Kagiso had to say,

“Overcrowding also increases the issue of gangsterism because if they are many in cells that means they will start being active in terms of gangsterism. So that also on its own means it will affect offenders on their release (akere?). One comes here not knowing what is happening within the correctional facility, then if they are many in cell because of overcrowding they end up adapting to new gang activities and it also compromises the security of the facility (akere!!!). For example, if your cell is to accommodate 40–50 offenders then you will be accommodating 70–80 offenders, that means there will be over usage of everything and the affecting of personnel in terms of security will also be compromised.”

In the views of Smith (2016), a gang refers to an organisation which operates within the correctional system as a self-perpetuating, criminally oriented entity, consisting of a select group of inmates who have established an organised chain of command and are governed by an established code of conduct (Smith 2016). Being part of a gang makes offenders feel that they belong to a particular group for support and protection (Pyrooz 2020). Gangsterism in correctional facilities, however, acts as a threat to the rehabilitation process and can delay the release of the rehabilitated offender. Masego had to say,

“Offenders become the members of gangsterism for support and survival on the inside because they are not getting it from the family. That is why at the end of the day some offenders can be fully reintegrated while others cannot and become hardeners. Hardeners feel like life outside correctional centre does not work for them, they just want to be on
the inside that is why when they are released, they influence others in the community and reoffend.”

5.2.5. Sub-Theme: Unsuccessful Running of Programmes

The mandate of the Department of Correctional Services is to run successful rehabilitation programmes so that offenders can be properly rehabilitated and reintegrated into their communities (Department of Correctional Services 2023). This study, however, found that programmes cannot be run successfully due to overcrowding. Concerning the problem of running unsuccessful programmes, one of the participants had this to say:

“Eeh- You know what? Overcrowding can influence social reintegration positively and negatively. On the negative part, when an offender is arrested there is a programme that he/she must undertake. There is a programme called Offender Rehabilitation Path (ORP) (NEH) so it is programme that an offender undertakes from day 1 of incarceration until he/she reaches the integration stage so the issue of overcrowding causes the programme not to run smooth so somewhere somehow we have to speed things up in order for the offender to be released considering the given sentence.” (Tshiamo)

The Department of Correctional Services' programmes in South Africa include theft and fraud programmes, an anger management programme, crossroads correctional programme, preparatory programme on sexual crimes, pre-release programme, substance abuse correctional programme, restorative justice orientation programme, and new beginnings orientation programme (Department of Correctional Services 2023). Fitz (2013) states that the Offender Rehabilitation Path (ORP) joins the rectification of offending behaviour, human growth, and the elevation of social accountability and standards in the Department of Correctional Services. In the processes of the Offender Rehabilitation Path (ORP), the offenders are subjected to assessment, rehabilitation, and placement or reintegration. When programmes are not run successfully, offenders are not given a chance to be properly rehabilitated and can exit the system with a criminal mentality that increases the chances of reoffending. The implications are that even their social reintegation runs a higher risk of being unsuccessful. The unsuccessful running of programmes simply means there may be an increase in the rate of recidivism. With regards to this, Tshiamo vented,

“There are programmes that offenders need to undertake in order for us to say they have been rehabilitated enough (fully) before their release so now we find ourselves in a situation where we can’t thoroughly see to the smooth running of programmes due to overcrowding. You understand? This impacts negatively on social reintegration because eeh… this offender is not fully rehabilitated, yet we tell the community that the offender is now a changed person who can be trusted again. That is what I have experienced.”

Interestingly, the study found saddening realities with regards to the rehabilitation programmes of the offenders at Rooigrond Correctional Centre. In the centre, offenders seem not to complete their programmes set for their rehabilitation needs. For offenders to be fully rehabilitated they must have completed all the programmes that were chosen according to their requirements and dangers recognised in the offender’s Correctional Sentence Plan (CSP). Concerning overcrowding and completion of rehabilitation programmes, Kevin had to say,

“Due to the fact that the department feels the pressure of overcrowding, offenders end up being pushed out of the system without completing the programmes set by the department as a prerequisite to say an offender is fully rehabilitated after completion, e.g., ORP. So, overcrowding has negative effect because an offender is not yet ready but was pushed out so reintegrating such an offender becomes a difficult process for us because in the first place this offender won’t just (ehh) comply with the conditions of parole. And not complying means the offender is in conflict with the community, obviously...this is caused by overcrowding which pressurises the centre to push offenders out of the system because absorption happens every day. The department sends the offenders who are not yet ready back into the community then they relapse or recommit again. The problem is
that we release offenders who have not yet dwelled much on the programmes and not fully understanding what they actually mean.”

5.2.6. Sub-Theme: Ineffective Parole Supervision

Overcrowding in the correctional system overspills into the parole system. In the study, it was found that Rooigrond Correctional Centre parole system was also affected by overcrowding. In the interviews, there was a revelation from one participant who commented on the effect of overcrowding on parole:

“Overcrowding causes problems because we can’t monitor offenders and visit them according to schedules.” (Billy)

In the views of Wang and Ooi (2022), parole supervision is one of the key strategies employed by the government to assist ex-inmates to reintegrate into society and help them remain lawful. Fitz (2013) emphasises that to assess the reintegation of offenders into the community, there must be the placement of offenders under parole supervision and under harsh situations for only a short duration of time. Louw and Luyt (2019) state that granting of parole and implementation of community supervision is performed in accordance with Chapter 28 of the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 (1977), read in combination with the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 (1998). Therefore, overcrowding directly affects the work of the correctional officials in that way.

5.2.7. Sub-Theme: Lack of Resources

Lack of resources has two impacts: one on the work of the correctional officials and the other on the offenders themselves. Overcrowding makes the work of correctional officials difficult as they work without adequate resources. One of the important considerations that can make any organisation achieve set goals and meet targets as well as deadlines is having adequate resources to utilise. The other thing is that offenders are forced to scramble for inadequate resources, making them frustrated in the process. This can lead to unruly behaviour and lack of proper rehabilitation. The Department of Correctional Services must have resources such as enough vehicles to conduct visits to those offenders who have been released on parole. Rorisang had to say,

“Another thing is that overcrowding within the correctional facility—the release thereof beyond those reasons overcrows the reintegration component and the reintegration component find it difficult to adapt to attempt to help those in parole due to lack of resources.”

This simply implies that the effectiveness of social reintegation of offenders is minimised due inadequate resources to use while reintegrating offenders because of the large number of offenders that the department has.

Rorisang further added the following:

“It’s a congestion of offenders particularly facing the limited resources as far as the stuff compliment is concerned subjecting them to different activities wherein, we have to give them skills. We are unable to give them enough or pay much attention to each and every individual hence we go mostly for groups and ensure we attend them in bulk so that we complete with the process to ensure that they are taken into programmes as expected. From where I am standing, it compromises the quality thereof. My subordinates work under severe pressure.”

Having fewer resources than the workload at their disposal seems to have negative implications on the work of correctional officials and is a precursor of reduced productivity. Further, it implies that they are forced to focus on doing what is expected of them without evaluating the effectiveness of their work. From an analytical perspective, we argue that reduced and ineffective quality of work may increase the rate of recidivism among offenders, as producing quality results is impossible because of the pressure officials receive from high caseloads while working with limited resources.
5.3. Theme 2: How Overcrowding Affects Correctional Officials at the Professional Level

5.3.1. Sub-Theme: Reoffending

The success of any work activity in correctional services is seen in its progressive programmes and ability to document progress without repeating what was already completed (Avdija 2017). In correctional services, job satisfaction has been known to come from what individuals document as success stories. It was concerning that this study found that offenders tend to reoffend frequently after release, thereby affecting the outcomes of the rehabilitation processes which frustrate and stress the correctional officials. Concerning reoffending at Rooigrond Correctional Centre, two participants shared their ideas and explained how it happens:

“Sometimes the family comes and complains that the ex-offender is stealing, using drugs or using the money he stole from the house to buy drugs. That is why we have a supervision committee; we sit down with the ex-offender and the family to compile all the complaints about the ex-offender and the offender, but other families cover for ex-offenders. For example, when the correctional official visits for monitoring and supervision the family would lie about why the ex-offender is not available and say they have sent him/her to the shops. The community stigmatises and associates the ex-offender with everything bad that happens within the community.” (Modise)

In the view of Chikadzi (2017), upon release from correctional centres, offenders face numberless challenges and these impediments become an obstruction to rehabilitation and increase ex-offenders’ reoffending chances. It is likely that if remorse and feeling of inferiority are dealt with and problems at the psychosocial level are not addressed, this may cause reoffending (Chikadzi 2017). It emerged in the study that one of the things that can drive ex-offenders back to a life of crime is not being accepted by their families. Accepting the offender after they have been released from the correctional centre means that the family will love and encourage them, and support them on their journey of social reintegration and becoming a better law-abiding citizen. The family may also help them financially, provide necessities including food and toiletries, and avoid judging them based on the past mistakes and crimes they previously committed.

After being released, ex-offenders also depend on their families for accommodation and financial assistance. Feeling a sense of belonging in the family after serving their sentences increase offenders’ hope and will to change. Billy has this to say:

“The challenges that we have is reoffending, so communities are often reluctant to accept the offenders.”

Being accepted by the community implies that offenders are given a chance to start afresh and relook at life with a different perspective. In contrast, not being accepted is likely going to cause negative feelings of inferiority, which may result in reoffending, which has a negative impact on the work of the correctional officials.

5.3.2. Sub-Theme: Delays from Supervisors

Overcrowding creates bottlenecks in the correctional system. With fewer resources to depend on in the rural correctional centres such as Rooigrond, it should be expected that some work will not be completed within the expected timeframe. It emerged in the study that correctional officials experience delayed work schedules due to overcrowding. In lieu of the delays, Layla said,

“I have problems with my transfers being delayed because they are approved from above. So, the more they delay, the more the transfers pile up in the office (wanthaloganya? (Tswana word meaning do you understand)-participant sighs). This frustrates me and also frustrates the offenders!!! (participant exclaimed) Because to them it seems like I am not doing my job because I cannot decide without the go ahead of my superiors.”

Kaufmann et al. (2018) state that work schedule delays may result from rules that are ineffective or by poor management, but delays may also be ascribed to alterations in
standards and behaviour that are not formal. Like any other process in the Department of Correctional Services, the transfers of offenders need to be approved by relevant authorities and require a process that consumes time. This finding implies that correctional officials often experience delays that frustrate the efforts to ensure smooth and effective transfer processes from their own supervisors. They often feel despondent and let down by the departmental processes. This is one process that the Department of Correctional Services needs to relook at and strategise on how delays may be minimised in the transfer process at the centre.

5.3.3. Sub-Theme: Increase in the Workload

The amount of work has always been a concern for the Department of Correctional Services in South Africa, more especially in overcrowded correctional facilities such as Rooigrond. This also is affected by the rural nature of the correctional facilities and limited resources. The findings reveal that the amount of work increases daily and that becomes a problem for correctional officials. Two correctional officials expressed that the following:

“Remember eeh… we have overcrowding and under crowding (neh)? So, if it is overcrowding it means the personnel you planned was for a certain number and then the moment you have more that means more will be expected from the personnel. For example, if you are to do unlock with 10 officials for 40 offenders, imagine doing unlock for 60 offenders 10 officials that means like I have indicated previously, it is affecting the security of the officials in the sense that if the offenders were to start attacking the officials, they will end up overriding the officials.” (Kagiso)

“My workload increases daily. I work with a large number of offenders, and I have to meet deadlines and make sure offenders are not angry. AKERE!!! (Participant added emphasis). Offenders become extremely angry when they don’t get what they want for example if they want to be transferred and the process takes too long- AKERE- there is too many of them, they can even strike.” (Bridget)

In the views of Manuaba and Hidayat (2018), workload is linked to the demand of a job and can be assessed by working hours, production level, or even the mental difficulties at work. When a correctional facility is overcrowded, the work of correctional officials increases drastically. The implications are that the increase in the workload causes dangers to the correctional officials as this can irritate offenders for the services they cannot not obtain timeously. It also reduces productivity on the part of the officials, which compromises the rehabilitation processes, and hence result in the ineffective reintegration services of the offenders back into the communities. Further, the shortage of correctional officials impacts undesirably on health care issues such as offenders’ inability to attend health care schedules due to inadequate escorts (MacDonald 2018). Whenever offenders want to move around the correctional centre, for example, from their cell to the social worker’s office, they must be escorted by a correctional official.

5.3.4. Sub-Theme: Complaints from Offenders

The correctional officials experience anxiety when offenders consistently complain about certain services they should be afforded. The democratic nature of the correctional services in South Africa has seen offenders who often expect things to go their way, sometimes without even understanding the processes and procedures to be followed by correctional officials. Due to overcrowding, Kagiso had this to say,

“Secondly, (ehh) the issue will bring more complaints from the offenders like I have indicated if you are to accommodate 40-45/50 then you have 70 that means now you have to even provide for issues of bedding, others end up sleeping on the floor and sleeping on the floor will result in whereby—offenders complain to the Human Rights Commission and so forth.”
The South African Human Rights Commission Annual Report (2020) states that SAHRC as a self-governing national human rights institute, is formed to provide support to constitutional democracy through endorsing, defending, and supervising the realisation of everyone’s human rights in South Africa without terror, approval, or predisposition. Like any other citizen, offenders also have their human rights, and they can complain to the SAHRC if those rights are being violated. Complaints can also be lodged with the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS) for investigations (Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services Annual Report 2017–2018). In this paper, we argue that such complaints tend to expose correctional officials as people who have little regard of the human rights of the offenders. Complaints tend to create an unsatisfactory public image of the correctional facilities and the workforce.

5.3.5. Sub-Theme: Offenders Noncompliance with Parole Conditions

Drawing from the findings of this study, offenders from an overcrowded facility often fail to comply with their parole conditions. During the interviews, Kevin alluded, “noncompliance, non-acceptance of people!” Louw and Luyt (2019) opine that a strategic outcome-oriented goal of the South African Department of Correctional Services is to ensure through the provision of rehabilitation and social reintegration programmes, that parolees (and probationers) are effectively taken back into society as law-abiding citizens. Non-compliance with the rules set by the parole board can lead to the revocation of parole. Parole revocations, even a small percentage, can have a dramatic impact on overcrowding in correctional facilities and increase the costs of incarceration (Louw and Luyt 2019). This lessens the job satisfaction of the correctional officials as they are forced to repeat what they should have accomplished.

5.4. Theme 3 How Overcrowding Affects the Correctional Officials at the Personal Level

5.4.1. Sub-Theme: Health

It is common knowledge that the health of both the correctional officials and the offenders are at risk due to overcrowding in the correctional facilities. This study, however, found that being incarcerated in a correctional centre that is overcrowded compromises the health of both offenders and the correctional officials. In the interviews, participants expressed their concerns about the health situation of both the officials and the offenders. Kagiso said,

“And also overcrowding will lead to compromising the issues of health, for example, maybe the sister is to see 10 officials as per ratio or whatever number but if they are more that means they will need more attention of the nurse so if she’s alone others will end up being compromised. Those are the challenges of overcrowding in terms of the personnel.”

The South African Department of Correctional Services has its own health care workers (nurses, doctors, social workers, psychologists), however, due to overcrowding in correctional centres, there are serious concerns regarding the transmission of communicable diseases among offenders, which also affects the officials. Working in an environment where health issues compromise the health of correctional officials, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was transmission of the disease between offenders and correctional officials.

5.4.2. Sub-Theme: Attacking of Officials

Anger issues and frustration caused by being cramped in small spaces with limited resources has been synonymous with offenders in correctional facilities (Heard 2019). It is clear from the findings that working in an overcrowded correctional facility poses much danger to the correctional officials. Expressing discontent with attacks on officials, this is what one participant had to say:
“The issue of overcrowding on personnel also, you must remember that if offenders are many they think they have more control over personnel so they will end up engaging in gang activities which may end up leading to attacking the officials as a way of proving their strength (AKERE!!!) and also to mark their territory, (AKERE!!!) if they are more than officials are less.” (Kagiso)

The Department of Correctional Services Annual Report (2021–2022) documented that in correctional centres around the country, the number of offenders is higher than the number of correctional officials who supervise them. In the views Gordon and Baker (2017), correctional officers are tasked to maintain order, and sometimes are massively outnumbered, encircled by men and women who are sentenced for various offences. Such disproportionate ratios of offenders and correctional officials increase the likelihood of violent attacks on correctional officials by offenders. Long (2019) postulates that to lessen or alleviate violent attacks, correctional-based treatment programmes must concentrate on the treatment of dually detected individuals, precisely concentrating on mental health and substance abuse.

Feelings of insecurity, defencelessness, anxiety, and danger among correctional officials need to be taken seriously by the Department of Correctional Services as such feelings may have consequences on rehabilitation of offenders. Long (2019) explains that workers in correctional centres are given the frightening task of safeguarding people who dwell behind the walls of correctional centres. Offenders tend to push for their needs and want decisions to be made in their favour. Officials end up being attacked by unhappy offenders. The security of officials is mostly compromised in correctional centres that are overcrowded. Long (2019) further states that while there are rules for offenders and contravention penalties in place, offenders do not seem to always adhere to the rules that are in place within facilities. Rorisang had to say,

“Mostly we are chasing statistics and not ensuring quality—even for their safety because if offenders are not happy about something, they become engaged in different activities which become risky to those officials. Then the comfortability of the officials as far as rendering services is also affected.”

5.4.3. Sub-Theme: Depression

Correctional officials are also prone to psychological issues (Burhanullah et al. 2022). In this study, it emerged that correctional officials are prone to depression due to various stressors they experience over time. Stressors that are work-related can cause mental, physical, and behavioural tension responses such as exhaustion, unhappiness, and inner diseases. Overwhelmed by the stresses that correctional officials undergo, one participant had this to allude:

“Overcrowding may cause depression for officials because if you work with many and you are lesser with more challenges coming from the side of offenders it may lead to an increase in the number of officials who experience depression.” (Kagiso)

Working with many offenders who sometimes become violent and demanding, as well as performing given tasks and meeting deadlines including targets set by the Department of Correctional Services, was found to be very stressful. The implications are that correctional officials found themselves overwhelmed and sank into depression.

6. Discussion of Findings

This study’s conclusions were fairly interesting, offering perceptions into important concerns that are typically disregarded in numerous discourses. While many discussions have focused on the experiences of offenders, less attention has often been paid to how correctional staff members feel about working in congested correctional facilities. The discussion centres on how overcrowding affects offenders in turn affects the correctional officials at professional and personal levels. It was possible to derive pertinent conclusions from these two debate points.
6.1. How Overcrowding Affects the Offenders

From the findings of the study, overcrowding has a huge impact on the offenders. This impact affects their rehabilitation process within the correctional system. The study established that offenders often experience frustrations when they are placed in overcrowded correctional facilities, often requesting for transfers. Such frustrations usually lead offenders to be unruly and disobeying the rules of incarceration and behavioural requirements for rehabilitation. This paper argues, therefore, that such overcrowding is a major factor in fostering more maladaptive behaviour, which has the potential of prolonging the offenders’ stay in the correctional facility (Manganye and Phetlo-Thekisho 2016).

At a more humanistic level, the offenders’ human rights are vehemently violated by overcrowding and cramping in small spaces. The violation of the human rights of the offenders tends to contradict with the demands of the South African Human Rights Commission, which oversees the rights of all human beings in South Africa within human rights frameworks of international standards (South African Human Rights Commission Annual Report 2020). This is argued to be a serious gap in the standards of the human rights of offenders that has the potential to lower the standards of rehabilitation, and consequently, affect the standards of the correctional services in South Africa.

This study found that when offenders are affected by overcrowding, the security of the correctional official is also negatively impacted. The offenders form gangs in the correctional centres in an effort to seek attention and secure their own security. This in turn leads to attacks on the correctional officials and compromises their own on-the-job security. Smith (2016) motivates that gangs operate within the correctional system as a self-perpetuating and criminally oriented entity, which can destabilise the security at a correctional facility.

The rehabilitation programmes that the offenders should undergo have been found to be negatively affected by the overcrowding. This study found that overcrowding is coupled with lack of resources such as vehicles and human resources to execute the necessary programmes and services such as anger management, leading to unsuccessful implementation of the programmes and unsatisfactory service outcomes. We argue in this paper that when rehabilitation of offenders is negatively impacted at a correctional facility, the essence and primary goal of a correctional facility of changing the offender mindset and making them law-abiding citizens is derailed and defunct.

6.2. How Overcrowding Affects Correctional Officials

From the findings of the study, correctional officials are affected in two dimensions: at professional and personal levels. At the professional level, the correctional officials become overwhelmed by the rate of reoffending of the offenders. This is precisely due to the lack of resources to implement effective programmes that rehabilitate the offenders. It was found that there were delays in transfers of offenders from one rehabilitation programme to another, which results in workload congestions in the system. This creates major drawbacks in balancing workload and the human resources resulting in public criticism of the correctional system as a whole in South Africa (Manuaba and Hidayat 2018).

Offenders also were found not to comply with rehabilitation processes such as the parole system. This study found that such lack of compliance has created a lack of trust among community members in the rehabilitation process, leading to a lack of acceptance of the parolees in their own communities under the pretext that they have not been properly rehabilitated in the correctional centres.

Most interestingly, this study found that correctional officials tend to be affected at personal levels. Due to their interaction with offenders from crowded facilities with many physical ailments resulting from the condition, correctional officials also are exposed to the risk of contracting communicable diseases such as tuberculosis (TB). The health protocols and the health practitioners find it difficult to contain communicable disease within
the correctional facilities, which then increases the chance of contracting communicable diseases (Beaudry et al. 2020).

In lieu of psychological health, correctional officials’ well-being has been found to have condemnation. In this study, the correctional officials were found to experience depression due to the workload pressure and high expectations under limited resources from the Department of Correctional Services. Despite acknowledging the existence of mental illnesses in correctional centres, other studies have only documented mental illnesses among inmates of correctional facilities while ignoring the glaring gap of the phenomenon among correctional officials (Gómez-Figueroa and Camino-Proano 2022).

7. Limitations of the Study

This study managed to solicit information from a correctional facility in a rural setting. However, it could have been more beneficial if another study was conducted in an urban setting to check if the findings would be similar. Other research can be conducted in such settings to draw comparable findings and provide comprehensive information about the work experiences of the correctional officials in the South African correctional facilities.

This study managed to gather information from the views of the correctional officials. It could, however, be beneficial also to interview the offenders themselves to find out a different perspective of what their views are on the experiences of the correctional officials and draw a different perspective.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of this study, various conclusions have been drawn and relevant recommendations made.

Evident from the findings of the study, overcrowding affects both the offenders and the correctional officials in the low-resourced rural correctional centres. The effects of overcrowding in the correctional centre have cyclical effects where what affects the offenders tend to also affect the work of the correctional officials, which then has a negative impact on the work that they do. This produces a cycle of effects on the entire rehabilitation system within the Department of Correctional Services. The authors recommend that the Department of Correctional Services needs to follow strict guidelines on the capacities of correctional centres. If not properly followed, the benefits of rehabilitation of offenders shall not be realised as effective at Rooigrond Correctional Centre.

More specifically, we conclude that overcrowding has psychological and health consequences for both the offenders and the correctional officials at the Rooigrond Correctional Centre. The authors recommend that the Department of Correctional Services collaborate with the Department of Health so that health professionals can conduct regular psychological and health checks on the well-being of the offenders and correctional officials.

This study concludes that correctional officials experience the most negative impact of overcrowding in correctional centres. It was established in this study that correctional officials experience the negative impact of working in overcrowded correctional facilities at professional and personal levels. This has the potential of paralysing the rehabilitation process if it is not effectively checked and managed. Further, working in overcrowded correctional facilities has more impact on the personal level of correctional officials, which may result into employee wellness issues. The authors recommend that employee wellness programmes be strengthened to help improve work-related issues and improve correctional officials’ work productivity.

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