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Recidivism in Cameroon

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Abstract: Recidivism rates in Cameroon present a significant challenge for the criminal justice system, with approximately 60% of released prisoners reoffending within three years, particularly among youth and minor offenders. This article explores the causes of recidivism, including socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment, systemic issues like prison overcrowding and inadequate rehabilitation programs, and psychological challenges involving substance abuse and mental health. Community factors, including stigma and the availability of illicit substances, further exacerbate the problem. Effective solutions require a comprehensive approach that integrates school-based initiatives, peer counseling, community engagement, holistic rehabilitation, and the establishment of coalitions. These strategies aim not only to address the immediate needs of ex-offenders but also to foster long-term community support and resilience. Through this analysis, the article emphasizes the urgency of addressing recidivism in Cameroon to promote safer and more rehabilitative environments for ex-offenders.

Keywords: Recidivism, Cameroon, criminal justice, rehabilitation, reintegration, prison

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INTRODUCTION

Recidivism rates remain alarmingly high globally, undermining the effectiveness of criminal justice systems. This persistent issue notably burdens taxpayers and compromises community safety while hindering the reintegration of ex-offenders. Cameroon mirrors this challenge, facing a troubling cycle of incarceration and reoffending that exacerbates the strain on its justice system. The rate of recidivism in Cameroon is particularly concerning, with reports indicating that approximately 60% of released prisoners reoffend within three years, especially among youth and those convicted of minor offenses.

According to Joan Petersilia, a Professor of Criminology at the University of California, recidivism is defined as "*the tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend, leading to repeat arrests or incarceration*"[1]. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) adds that recidivism involves "*re-arrest, reconviction, or*

[1] J. Petersilia, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry,* New York: Oxford University Press. 2003, p. 4.

reincarceration […] after a previous conviction"[2]. These definitions highlight the importance of examining the underlying factors contributing to reoffending, including lack of social support, unemployment, and mental health issues.

In Cameroon, these factors are exacerbated by prison overcrowding and limited resources. The socio-economic barriers facing ex-offenders include poverty, lack of education, and substance abuse, all of which further entrench the cycle of recidivism.

The rehabilitation of offenders is crucial to preparing them for a crime-free life upon release; however, the effectiveness of these efforts is often compromised. This article aims to provide an overview of the problem of recidivism in Cameroon, exploring its root causes and potential solutions. By highlighting successful programmes and discussing evidence-based strategies tailored to the Cameroonian context such as job training, mental health support, and community engagement we aim to raise awareness and encourage further research and action. To address this cause of recidivism in Cameroon is essential for developing effective interventions that can promote safer, more resilient communities. In subsequent chapters, we will explore the contributing factors in detail and present strategies for breaking the cycle of reoffending.

A. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO RECIDIVISM IN CAMEROON

Understanding the multiple dimensions of recidivism requires examining the socio-economic, legal, psychological, community, and systemic factors that perpetuate this cycle in Cameroon. There are several reasons why people may reoffend after being released from prison. In Cameroon, poverty, lack of education and job skills and substance abuse are among the main factors that contribute to recidivism.

1. Socio-Economic Factors

Recidivism in Cameroon is heavily influenced by socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education and vocational training. These factors create a cycle where crime becomes a means of survival, and former inmates struggle to reintegrate into society.

Poverty

Poverty exacerbates recidivism, as released prisoners often lack financial stability, housing, and access to basic needs. Studies show that about 70% of ex-prisoners experience homelessness, increasing their vulnerability to reoffending. Poverty also restricts access to healthcare and education, further limiting opportunities for rehabilitation. Weak social support networks compound these issues, making community-based interventions essential.

Unemployment and Lack of Education

These are interconnected factors driving recidivism in Cameroon. Without access to education or vocational training in prisons such as New Bell Prison and Yaoundé Central Prison inmates lack the skills needed for employment upon release. Research shows that unemployed ex-offenders are far more likely to reoffend than those with stable jobs. As stated by Ndikumana, "*many prisoners in Cameroon lack access to basic education and job training programs, which severely limits their chances of successful reintegration into society upon release*"[3]. Compounded by societal stigma and economic hardship, many turn back to crime as a means of survival, perpetuating the cycle of recidivism.

[2] National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Recidivism, U.S. Department of Justice, 2021. https://nij.ojp.gov/
[3] J. Ndikumana, Barriers to Reintegration: The Case of Prison Education in Cameroon, 2016, p.45.

2. Prison System Factors

Beyond socio-economic influences, the prison system itself significantly contributes to recidivism due to challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate treatment programs, and a lack of rehabilitation opportunities. These factors hinder successful reintegration, perpetuating the cycle of reoffending.

Overcrowding

One major factor that contributes to recidivism in Cameroon is overcrowding in prisons. Many prisons in Cameroon are severely overcrowded, with some prisons holding up to five times their intended capacity. With occupancy rates often exceeding 200%, the prison system is overwhelmed, leading to inhumane conditions that hinder rehabilitation efforts. Overcrowding in Cameroon's prisons is a longstanding issue that has severe consequences for prisoners, prison staff, and the broader community. According to a report by the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) the prison population in Cameroon has consistently exceeded the designed capacity of its facilities, leading to severe overcrowding. The report highlights that "*overcrowding in Cameroonian prisons often reaches levels where inmates are forced to share limited space, exacerbating the conditions regarding hygiene and access to medical care*"[4]. Similarly, a report by the Cameroon Ministry of Justice, "*the prison population in Cameroon has been increasing steadily over the years, leading to overcrowding in many prisons*"[5]. These highlights the root causes of the problem, emphasizing that the prison system in Cameroon is unable to accommodate the growing number of prisoners. One of the most notable examples of overcrowded facilities in Cameroon is the Yaoundé Central Prison. This facility, originally designed to accommodate around 800 inmates, has, at times, housed over 4,000 prisoners.

Inadequate Treatment Programs

Insufficient treatment programs for substance abuse and mental health issues are a significant concern in Cameroon's prison system, contributing to high recidivism rates. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), "*prisons in Cameroon often lack adequate facilities and trained staff to provide treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues*"[6]. This finding highlights the systemic challenges faced by Cameroon's prisons in providing adequate treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues. For instance, a study on the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaoundé found that "*only 10% of prisoners with mental health issues received treatment, while 70% of prisoners with substance abuse issues did not receive any form of treatment*"[7]. These alarming statistics highlight the vast disparity between the need for treatment and the actual provision of treatment services within Cameroon's prisons.

3. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors play a significant role in contributing to recidivism in Cameroon. The prevalence of substance abuse, mental health issues, and unaddressed trauma among inmates are major concerns that often go unaddressed due to limited or non-existent programs. As a result, inmates are released back into society without receiving adequate treatment or support, leaving them vulnerable to relapse into criminal behaviour. The lack of trained personnel or staff specialized in addressing psychological problems are a significant challenge facing Cameroon's correctional facilities. With only one training school, the National School of Penitentiary Administration (ENAP), located in Buea, the country faces a significant shortage of skilled professionals equipped to handle the complex psychological needs of inmates.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is a major driver of recidivism in Cameroon, with many ex-inmates falling back into crime to support their addiction. Studies show that 75% of prisoners in maximum-security facilities have

[4] International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS), World Prison Brief, 2020, p. 10. (https://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief)
[5] Cameroon Ministry of Justice, Cameroon Prison Reform Report, 2019, p. 12
[6] World Health Organization, Prison Health in Cameroon, 2018, p. 15.
[7] Mental Health and Substance Abuse in Cameroon's Prisons, Journal of Prison Health, 2020, p. 8.

a history of drug abuse, while 60% of inmates in central prisons used drugs before incarceration. Sadly, according to international journal "*only 10% of prisoners receiving adequate treatment*"[8] in Cameroon prisons worsening addiction and increasing reoffending rates. The government acknowledges this crisis. Dr. Manaouda Malachie, Cameroon's Minister of Public Health (MINSANTE), revealed that;

*In 2021, 946 new patients sought treatment at Addiction Care, Support, and Prevention Centers (CSAPAs), highlighting a growing demand for rehabilitation services. Notably, conflict-affected regions such as the Far North, Northwest, and Southwest saw a sharp rise in substance abuse cases, with treatment requests increasing from *22% in 2019 to 43% in 2021*[9]

The most abused substances are Cannabis (43.19%), tobacco (19.84%), and alcohol (15.17%), mostly affecting young people (average age 23) and urban residents (72.10%).

Mental Health Issues and Trauma

The prevalence of mental health issues and trauma among inmates in Cameroon's correctional facilities is a pressing concern that significantly contributes to the country's high recidivism rate. Many inmates in Cameroonian prisons suffer from depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders, which are often worsened by the harsh conditions of incarceration. As noted by Fazel and Seewald in their large-scale study of prisoner mental health, "*Prison environments frequently worsen pre-existing psychiatric conditions due to overcrowding, violence, isolation, and lack of treatment, creating a cycle of deterioration that persists after release*".[10]Also, According to WHO, "*prisoners have a higher prevalence of mental health disorders than the general population, and prison conditions often exacerbate these issues due to overcrowding, violence, and lack of access to mental health care*"[11] . This statement highlights how the prison environment does not only fail to support individuals with existing mental health conditions but also worsens their psychological state by subjecting them to severe stressors.

4. Community Factors

Community factors play a pivotal role in shaping the lives of ex-convicts, influencing their likelihood of successful reintegration and, ultimately, their risk of recidivism. In the following section, we will expatiate on the specific community factors that contribute to recidivism in Cameroon, including stigma and lack of community support, availability of illicit substances, and limited access to resources and services.

Stigma and Lack of Community Support

Ex-convicts in Cameroon face harsh stigma and rejection, making reintegration nearly impossible. Many are labeled as criminals for life, denied jobs, housing, and even basic social acceptance. Without community support, they struggle to survive, often pushed back into crime just to get by. Cultural attitudes worsen the problem some families see ex-inmates as a disgrace, cutting them off completely. With no support systems, many feel hopeless, trapped in a cycle of poverty and reoffending. Until Cameroon addresses this stigma and builds stronger reintegration programmes, recidivism rates will remain high.

Availability of Illicit Substances

Freshly released inmates in Cameroon often return to neighborhoods flooded with illegal drugs. With little support and high stress, many relapse quickly, using substances to cope with rejection and hardship. Worse, some turn back to crime just to afford drugs, restarting the prison cycle. When communities

[8] International Journal of Prisoner Health, 2019, p. 23

[9] Minister of Public Health Cameroon (MINSANTE), Fight against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking: Everyone is Concerned, 2022. [https://www.minsante.cm/site/?q=en/node/4345)

[10] S.Fazel, K. Seewald, Severe Mental Illness in 33,588 Prisoners Worldwide: Systematic Review and Meta-Regression Analysis. The British Journal of Psychiatry, 2012 [https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.111.096370)

[11]World Health Organization, Mental health and prisons. Geneva: 2021, p. 12. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/mental-health-and-prisons

normalize drug use whether through peer pressure or family influence, breaking free becomes nearly impossible. Without stronger drug control policies and real rehabilitation support, Cameroon's ex-inmates will keep struggling. Cutting off drug access and expanding recovery programs are crucial to stopping this destructive cycle.

5. Legal Factors

Ineffective laws and policies, harsh sentencing laws, inadequate correctional supervision, and corruption within the justice system can perpetuate a cycle of crime and incarceration, making it challenging for offenders to reintegrate into society. This section, we will expatiate on the legal factors contributing to recidivism, with a particular focus on harsh sentencing laws, inadequate correctional supervision, and corruption within the justice system.

Delayed Criminal Proceedings

The criminal justice system is meant to ensure fairness, protect innocent people, and maintain order in society. However, in Cameroon, slow court processes create a serious problem. Instead of helping individuals and promoting justice, the system often makes things worse. Currently, various prisons across the country are housing a large number of individuals awaiting trial. The CHRC's report on prison conditions reveals concerning statistics regarding individuals awaiting trial in some prisons across the country;

"*in Bamenda Central Prison, there are a total of 654 prisoners, of which 373 are still awaiting their court dates, Ebolowa Central Prison houses 670 individuals, with 389 of them awaiting trial, in Buea Central Prison, the situation escalates, as out of 1,462 prisoners, 1,031 are awaiting trial. Garoua Central Prison exhibits the most severe circumstances, as it holds 1,777 prisoners, of whom a staggering 1,645 are still awaiting trial.*"[12]

This signifies that, the prolonged detention of individuals awaiting trial in Cameroon's prisons has severe implications, including disruption of lives, increased risk of recidivism, overcrowding and poor prison conditions, and erosion of trust in the justice system. As these individuals remain in a prison environment for extended periods, often without proper support or resources, they may become hardened by their experiences, further entrenching them in criminal behaviour.

Corruption

Corruption fuels recidivism in Cameroon. This remains as a persistent challenge within the Cameroonian criminal justice system, with alarming rates of reoffending undermining efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate former inmates into society. Research has consistently highlighted corruption as a significant contributor to this issue, perpetuating cycles of crime and undermining the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. Corruption can take many forms, such as bribery, extortion, and nepotism. Corruption can lead to inadequate resources being allocated to rehabilitation and reintegration programs, and can also create opportunities for former inmates to engage in criminal behavior in order to gain financial benefits. According to Michel Foucault "*power is not held by individuals, but is exercised through networks and institutions*"[13] that perpetuate cycles of crime. In the context of Cameroon's prisons, corruption perpetuates a cycle of power and exploitation, undermining rehabilitation efforts. This perspective highlights the systemic nature of corruption. Kofele-Kale further argues that "*the politics of corruption in Cameroon undermines the legitimacy of the criminal justice system*"[14]. This erosion of trust perpetuates recidivism, as former inmates view the system as ineffective.

B. SOLUTION TO RECIDIVISM IN CAMEROON

Addressing the high rates of recidivism in Cameroon requires a multi-faceted approach involving

[12] Cameroon Human Rights Commission, *Summary Information on Visits to Detention Facilities Conducted*, 2022 pp. 2-4.
[13] M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, p. 26
[14] N. Kofele-Kale, The Politics of Corruption in Cameroon, African Studies Review, 2007, p. 50.

government, community engagement, and rehabilitative strategies.

1. School-Based Initiatives

Research has shown that early intervention is crucial in shaping attitudes and behaviours that influence a young person's trajectory. In Cameroon, a substantial number of youth face various adversities, including exposure to illicit substance abuse, gambling, and an array of violent or illegal activities such as assault, burglary, and pickpocketing. These challenges are not mere acts of rebellion; they stem from deeper socio-economic issues, peer influences, and often a lack of access to constructive opportunities that drive many young individuals toward crime. Consequently, the educational system has a crucial role to play in steering these vulnerable populations away from paths that may lead to future incarceration.

Integrated Curriculum Development

Integrated curriculum development is an innovative approach to education that emphasizes the interconnectedness of different subjects and learning methodologies. This holistic strategy seeks to create a learning environment that is not only engaging but also responsive to the diverse needs of students.

Peer Counseling Programs

Peer counseling programs involve training older students to provide guidance and support to their peers, fostering a culture of empathy and understanding within schools. This approach has been recognized as an effective strategy in deterring habitual crime and preventing future recidivism among young people.

Role-Playing Exercises

Role-playing exercises offer a valuable approach to addressing substance abuse issues among youth populations in Cameroon, with the potential to significantly contribute to the prevention of future recidivism. By actively engaging participants in realistic scenarios, role-playing exercises enable youth to better comprehend the consequences of substance abuse, not only for themselves but also for their communities as a whole. As noted by Lazarus et al., "*role-playing is a powerful tool for helping individuals understand the consequences of their actions and develop empathy for others*"[15]. This increased understanding and empathy can help youth make more informed decisions about substance use, reducing the likelihood of future recidivism.

Empathy Development

One of the foremost advantages of role-playing is its capacity to foster empathy among participants. By stepping into the shoes of various stakeholders such as substance users, family members, law enforcement, and healthcare professionals, participants gain a deeper understanding of the multidimensional consequences of substance abuse. This experiential learning technique not only helps individuals recognize the emotional pain and societal challenges associated with addiction but also encourages compassionate responses in real-life situations. According to Paul Bloom, "*Empathy is a crucial ingredient in mitigating the harsh treatment of those who struggle with addiction, allowing individuals to see the humanity in others*"[16]. This quotation emphasizes the transformative potential of empathy-building exercises; when participants engage in role-playing, they confront their biases and misconceptions, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the struggles faced by those affected by substance misuse.

2. Sensitization and Community Engagement

Effective prevention of substance abuse and recidivism is complex challenging that necessitates a comprehensive approach, extending far beyond individual interventions to encompass the entire community. At the heart of this strategy are sensitization and community engagement, both of which play

[15] A. A. Lazarus, L. E. Beutler, & J. C. Norcross, *Handbook of psychotherapy case formulation.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 123.
[16] P. Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, Ecco Books, 2016, p. 3.

key roles in fostering a supportive environment that encourages positive behaviour, actively discourages substance use and criminal activity, and promotes collective action against recidivism.

Targeted Campaigns

Targeted campaigns are increasingly recognized as a powerful method for achieving sensitization and community engagement. These campaigns are designed to develop and implement tailored messages, materials, and strategies aimed at specific demographics within a community. By concentrating efforts on distinct groups such as youth, parents, and vulnerable populations, targeted campaigns can maximize their impact, ensuring that critical information resonates deeply with each audience.

3. Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Rehabilitation and reintegration are critical components of a comprehensive approach to addressing substance abuse and recidivism in Cameroon. As individuals complete treatment programs, it is essential to provide them with the necessary support and resources to ensure a successful transition back into their communities.

Holistic Rehabilitation Programs

Holistic rehabilitation programs represent a comprehensive approach to healing that considers the interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of an individual. These programs aim to address the whole person rather than just the symptoms of a condition or disorder. This paradigm shift in rehabilitation is rooted in the understanding that recovery is influenced by a multitude of factors, necessitating an integrative and personalized approach. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH), "*holistic health emphasizes the connection of the mind, body, and spirit, and that all aspects of health should be taken into account for a comprehensive approach to treatment*"[17]. This perspective is crucial in rehabilitation settings as it allows practitioners to tailor interventions according to the unique needs of each individual, facilitating a more sustainable recovery process.

4. Collaboration and Capacity Building

Establishing community coalitions is a crucial step in creating a unified and sustainable approach to addressing substance abuse and recidivism in Cameroon. By bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders including local government authorities, non-governmental organizations, faith-based groups, healthcare providers, educators, law enforcement agencies, and active community members these coalitions can harness collective knowledge, resources, and influence to develop comprehensive and culturally appropriate solutions. The strength of such coalitions lies in their ability to foster collaboration among groups that might otherwise work in isolation, ensuring that efforts to combat substance abuse and reduce recidivism are coordinated, efficient, and impactful.

One of the primary advantages of community coalitions is their capacity to streamline efforts, preventing the duplication of services and maximizing the use of limited resources. When stakeholders work in unison, they can identify gaps in existing programs, allocate resources more effectively, and implement strategies that address the root causes of substance abuse and criminal behaviour. Additionally, the inclusion of multiple perspectives allows for the sharing of expertise, best practices, and innovative approaches that may not emerge in a more fragmented system. For instance, NGOs with experience in rehabilitation can collaborate with faith-based organizations that provide moral and spiritual support, while local government agencies can contribute policy expertise and funding opportunities. Another critical benefit of community coalitions is their ability to engage and empower local populations. When community members are actively involved in decision-making processes, the resulting initiatives are more likely to resonate with the people they are designed to help. This participatory approach ensures that interventions are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and more readily accepted by those affected

[17] National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, Holistic Health, 2022, p. 10.

by substance abuse and recidivism. Moreover, when communities take ownership of these efforts, the likelihood of long-term success increases, as local buy-in fosters sustainability beyond the lifespan of external funding or short-term projects.

To establish effective coalitions in Cameroon, a structured and inclusive approach is essential. The first step involves identifying and engaging key stakeholders who have a vested interest in addressing substance abuse and recidivism. This includes not only formal institutions but also grassroots organizations, traditional leaders, and individuals with lived experience who can provide invaluable insights. Once stakeholders are assembled, the coalition must define a shared vision and clear objectives, ensuring that all members are aligned in their mission. A well-defined governance structure is also necessary to outline roles, responsibilities, and decision-making protocols, preventing conflicts and ensuring accountability. Open communication and continuous collaboration are the backbone of any successful coalition. Regular meetings, transparent information-sharing, and opportunities for feedback help maintain trust and momentum among members. Furthermore, establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation allows the coalition to assess progress, measure impact, and adapt strategies as needed. By maintaining flexibility and a willingness to learn from both successes and setbacks, community coalitions can refine their approaches and remain effective in the face of evolving challenges.

Ultimately, the establishment of strong community coalitions in Cameroon presents a promising pathway toward reducing substance abuse and recidivism. By uniting diverse stakeholders under a common purpose, these partnerships can drive meaningful change, promote social cohesion, and build safer, healthier communities. Through sustained collaboration, shared responsibility, and a commitment to evidence-based solutions, Cameroon can create a more resilient society where individuals are supported in overcoming addiction and reintegrating successfully into their communities.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation (ME) is a foundational pillar of any programme or initiative aimed at addressing the complex issues of substance abuse and recidivism in Cameroon. The landscape of substance misuse in the country is complex, often intertwined with socio-economic factors, cultural beliefs, and limited access to healthcare services. Given this complexity, effective ME practices are essential for not only tracking progress but also for understanding the dynamic factors that contribute to both individual and community outcomes. A well-defined ME framework enables stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs, community leaders, and health professionals to systematically assess the impact and effectiveness of their interventions. By employing quantitative and qualitative methods, these stakeholders can gather comprehensive data that sheds light on user experiences, identifies trends, and ultimately informs program design. This approach can be vital in a country in Cameroon, where the needs and contexts of communities differ significantly.

CONCLUSION

Cameroon’s high recidivism rates stem from interconnected socio-economic, institutional, and psychological factors that hinder successful reintegration. Sustainable solutions require a comprehensive approach combining prevention programs, rehabilitation initiatives, and systemic reforms. Effective implementation demands collaborative efforts between government, civil society, and communities. By prioritizing rehabilitation and evidence-based strategies, Cameroon can break the cycle of reoffending and build safer, more inclusive communities. Urgent action and sustained commitment remain crucial for lasting change.

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