

Pathways from violence

The impact of community-based intervention on offender reintegration in Gugulethu

Sean Lerner*

seanlerner17@gmail.com

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Crime has gripped public discourse in democratic South Africa.¹ Cities such as Cape Town, Durban and Nelson Mandela Bay have some of the highest homicide rates in the world.² Most South Africans do not feel safe at night³ nor do they believe government is capable of maintaining law and order.⁴ Nationally the picture is bleak. But at the local level, innovative responses to crime are underway, illustrating the constraints and advantages of community-based interventions. Established in 2004, the Rebuilding and Life Skills Training Centre (Realistic) is a community-based response to youth crime in the township of Gugulethu in Cape Town. Using in-depth interviews, this article presents a case study examining the obstacles faced by young ex-offenders in Gugulethu, and the impact of Realistic's aftercare programme on their life path.

This article aims to identify obstacles to integration faced by young ex-offenders in Gugulethu; assess how the resulting needs were addressed by Realistic's aftercare programme; and highlight the constraints and advantages of community-based intervention as a model of crime reduction.

Study aims and methods

In total, 48 participants were interviewed. Forty were male and eight female. All were formerly incarcerated, living in Gugulethu, and between 18 and 35 years old. Half were recruited from the local parole office, Mitchells

Plain Community Corrections, and the other half from the aftercare programme at Realistic. Participants were drawn from these two groups to provide a point of comparison, since parolees were not enrolled in any community-based intervention. The executive director and most experienced social worker were also interviewed about their perspectives on Realistic's work.

The goal of participant interviews was two-fold: identify obstacles to integration and then determine if services rendered by Realistic's aftercare programme aligned with the resulting needs. Participants were interviewed about experiences in prison and after, life and criminal histories, and their plans for the future. Ex-Realists were asked about their experience at Realistic; parolees were asked about their

* Sean Lerner is a JD candidate at Columbia Law School and holds a BA in Cognitive Science from Vassar College, where he wrote his thesis on resilience processes in offender reintegration.

experience of parole. Interviews were semi-structured, leaving room for participants to talk about subjects of interest to them.

A research assistant, formerly incarcerated and from Gugulethu, sat in on all interviews to translate when necessary and to help participants feel comfortable with an outsider (i.e., the interviewer: a white, English-speaking middle-class American male).⁵ Interviews lasted on average an hour. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Western Cape.

Normative and moral assumptions

This study is based on the assumption that successfully integrating ex-prisoners into their communities will reduce pressure on courts and prisons, shrink the pool of repeat offenders, and bolster public safety. It is assumed that incarceration alone has little corrective effect. Like a patient who acquires an infection from bacteria she was exposed to during corrective surgery, juveniles exposed to the brutalisation of prison can develop behavioural problems that reinforce criminality.⁶ Last, there is a moral imperative to treat prisoners and ex-prisoners with dignity and as people capable of contributing to society.

State of prisons and prisoners in South Africa

South Africa is host to the largest prison population on the continent.⁷ Evidence suggests quick turnover among remand detainees. Nearly 300 000 remand detainees were released from prison in one year, according to a 2014 report by the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services.⁸ But since only 43 000 were held at any one time, a staggering 86% of remand detainees were incarcerated for less than a year.

This practice does provide temporary relief from imprisoned persons. And prisons could serve only to contain criminals. But there is compelling evidence that correctional programmes, from

classes to counselling, are worth the money. One recent RAND Corporation meta-analysis of the literature on correctional education programmes found that not only did they reduce the risk of recidivism and increase the likelihood of obtaining employment post-release, but they also returned substantial savings to the taxpayer. One US dollar (US\$) invested in educational programmes returned US\$4 in savings from reduced prison-related costs.⁹

And yet Section 38(1)(a) of South Africa's Correctional Services Act (CSA) renders remand detainees as well as prisoners sentenced to under two years' incarceration ineligible for educational, psychological and drug counselling services. The strategy is, effectively, contain and release – an approach seemingly at odds with sections 2(c) and 36 of the CSA, which calls for the promotion of 'human development [for] all prisoners', and describes the goal of imprisonment as 'enabling the sentenced prisoner to lead a socially responsible and crime-free life in the future'.

Moreover, containment is a one-dimensional strategy. Investing in programmes that support the journeys of people receptive to positive change would generate taxpayer savings through reduced prison-related expenditures (which a 2014 NICRO report found to be around R10 000 per month per prisoner).¹⁰ If anything, it makes less sense to deprive remand detainees, rather than long-term prisoners, of key programmes and services, because they are the ones about to re-enter society.

To manage psycho-social and material challenges outside prison walls, young ex-offenders may turn to support services. Interventions delivered in unfamiliar environs, such as residential facilities, prisons and probation offices, fail to fully consider the real-world contexts that offenders return to. Research indicates that interventions set in localised contexts – neighbourhoods, homes,

schools – are more effective than unfamiliar contexts.¹¹ Experimental evidence also suggests that community-based interventions are cost-effective relative to imprisonment. For example, Robertson et al. found that community-based cognitive-behavioural therapy resulted in average savings of US\$1 435 in prison-related expenditures per youth offender.¹²

These studies were, however, conducted in the US – a context so fundamentally different from South Africa's that its translational value is debatable.¹³ This article wishes to address the lack of research on community-based interventions and offender reintegration specific to South Africa.

Governmental response: the White Paper on Corrections

Well over a decade ago, the White Paper on Corrections (2005) proposed policies that would reconstruct the prison system with 'rehabilitation' or social integration as the primary objective, declaring that prisons should 'provide an environment that fosters moral [and] spiritual regeneration'.¹⁴ The agency responsible for leading implementation, the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), has responded to this clarion call with indifference. A 2014 NICRO report found one educator for every 227 sentenced prisoners and one psychologist for every 1 565. Moreover, just 20% of sentenced prisoners availed themselves of educational or psychological services.¹⁵ If only sentenced prisoners can access counselling, drug and educational services, automatically denying these to 30% of the prison population, and if 80% of sentenced prisoners do not even use such services, the vast majority of ex-offenders are released without acquiring new educational or psychological tools.

Of course, fulfilling this legislative mandate is a complicated project. To that end the CSA established the sentence plan, a tool used

to track the individual needs of over 100 000 sentenced prisoners.¹⁶ By tracking these, the sentence plan can guide the appropriate delivery of educational and psychological services. But since services are only available to sentenced prisoners serving more than two years, hundreds of thousands of prisoners are necessarily excluded.

The white paper was clear that social integration, i.e., attainment of psychological well-being and financial independence, should be the primary objective of corrections. Yet in its 2016/17 budget summary, the DCS allocated less than 10% of its budget to these operations.¹⁷ Funding educational, psychological and employment services is a social investment. Diverting a young offender at risk of a so-called criminal career could return lucrative dividends. One US study found that reforming a single young offender could save the state well over US\$5 million.¹⁸ Further, the prison and court systems are unable to handle their respective caseloads. South Africa's prisons are severely overcrowded, with occupancy at 133%, while cases routinely stall as detainees await trial, unable to pay bail.¹⁹ Addressing social integration is thus in the government's interest: if ex-prisoners do not reoffend, it will ease the burden on the courts and prisons and enhance public safety.

Local dynamics in Gugulethu

In 1957 the area known today as 'Gugulethu' simply consisted of sand dunes, uninhabited beyond the occasional farm.²⁰ But after razing District Six in 1958, the apartheid government established an emergency camp in these dunes and forcibly relocated black residents.²¹ Almost 60 years later it is home to nearly 100 000 people and is quite developed, with a mall and public sports centre.²² In spite of Gugulethu's sudden and violent inception, it has produced a rich legacy, including prominent politicians and musicians, athletes

and entrepreneurs, and scores of unsung anti-apartheid heroes.²³

Still, the violence out of which Gugulethu was born is a demon it has been unable to exorcise. Someone is murdered, on average, every other day.²⁴ Young people from poor households are exposed to gangsters on the street, marketing their glamorous lifestyle. Drugs, most prominently methamphetamine, are widely used in the Western Cape province.²⁵ The proliferation of drugs and glorification of gangsterism reinforce each other.²⁶

Meanwhile, a weak national and local economy, and apartheid's regulation of movement in and out of Gugulethu, have contributed to a self-imposed quarantine among residents. Those who do not work, especially school-age children, rarely visit the world outside of their township. If children rarely leave, seeing only the poverty, overpopulation and decay featured in many neighbourhoods in Gugulethu, they may take that reality for granted. This limited and inward-looking perspective can have unquantifiable effects on a person's sense of possibility. Together, these factors contribute to a situation where Gugulethu regularly reports some of the highest numbers of murders and carjackings in the country.²⁷

There is a limited supply of peer-reviewed research on offender reintegration in Gugulethu specifically.²⁸ This study hopes to address that gap.

Realistic

Realistic is a community-based organisation operating out of a storefront in Gugulethu's commercial district. It provides a range of social services to local youth, both ex-offenders and those at risk of imprisonment. Importantly, it is one of few places in Gugulethu where any young person can walk off the street and speak with a social worker. Other community members

may also stop by for a free meal. Realistic is a bona fide community institution.

Aside from its informal services, born of immediate need more than strategic planning, Realistic offers two formal programmes: an on-site aftercare programme for at-risk youth and ex-offenders, and a separate crime prevention programme taught at local high schools. This study interviewed former participants in the aftercare programme (referred to as 'ex-Realists'). The aftercare programme runs Monday through Friday from 9 am to 4 pm. Programme participants are exposed to a variety of therapeutic activities, from group and individual counselling to a 21-day nature survival camp and restorative justice conferencing.

All sessions are facilitated by a social worker. In these sessions, participants learn to express their feelings and explore their relationships with friends and family, consider why they think they use or have used drugs, relate to their peers about shared struggles, and after the weekend reflect on whether or not they had accomplished their goals. The aftercare programme is six months long.

Hypothesis and overview of findings

It was hypothesised that 75% of ex-Realists would stop offending behaviour (i.e., drug abuse and criminal activity) after exposure to the programme. But the evidence indicated otherwise: 50% were rearrested and approximately 66% reported continued use of drugs or alcohol after participation in the programme. Participants reported that Realistic's programme was effective at stopping their offending behaviour while enrolled, but failed to follow up afterward or address material obstacles.

Still, when it came to catalysing the development of ex-Realists, Realistic performed exceptionally well. Virtually all ex-Realists reported having learned valuable lessons about

acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, their self-worth and the possibility of change, all of which are critical to navigating life's demands.

These findings suggest that Realistic has limited effectiveness at reducing offending behaviour in the long term. The stumbling block to success is that services rendered only partially conformed to the needs of ex-offenders. Participants reported a range of urgent financial, educational, psychological and relational needs left unaddressed by the aftercare programme. To address risk factors that underpin chronic reoffending, community advocates and government officials must engage with both material and psycho-social obstacles to community integration.

Findings: obstacles to integration

Interviews revealed two types of obstacles on the path to integration: material and psycho-social. First, descriptive statistical analysis revealed widespread unemployment and drug use, diminished family structure, and a high rate of reoffending. Thematic analysis of transcripts, informed by the work of Braun and Clarke, revealed five psychological and social trends in participants' lives that appeared to reinforce criminal tendencies.²⁹

Descriptive statistical analysis of material obstacles

Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that participants came from homes that suffered from diminished family structure and low levels of social cohesion (Table 1). Only eight of the 48 participants grew up in households with both

parents. Some of these participants reported that while both parents may have been in the home, they were often embroiled in protracted conflicts that gave rise to a toxic environment. As one participant reported, his parents were both in the house, but slept in separate rooms and used him as a pawn in their ongoing arguments. Most participants lived with a single parent (n=29, 60%), while a sizable number lived with relatives (n=10, 21%), and one lived in a foster home. Since virtually all participants relied on family support, the diminished family structure made their journey to social integration more difficult. While family support alone is not enough to help the ex-offender surmount obstacles to integration, it is a key source of emotional and financial stability. Assistance from governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is particularly important for ex-offenders who do not have robust family support.

Most participants lacked a formal education. Only 17% (n=8) possessed a matric certificate. Insufficient formal education compounds the difficulty of finding full-time employment, since a basic formal education or English fluency are preferred in the service industry, leaving construction as the only viable option for unskilled ex-offenders. The only participant who had full-time employment, as an instructor at a nearby gym, possessed a matric certificate and was fluent in English. The 98% (n=47) unemployment rate among participants should be viewed in light of the already high 40.3% unemployment rate among black South African youth (ages 15–34).³⁰

Table 1: Snapshot of sample

	Avg. age	Gender ratio (M:F)	Avg. number of arrests	Matric graduation rate	Desistance from drugs	Unemployment	Repeat offenders	Rate of two-parent household
Total	27.29	10:02	4.17	8	13	47	41	8
Percentage	N/A	N/A	N/A	17%	30%	98%	85%	17%

Table 2: Source of income

	Family	Crime	Self-employment	Casual job	Formal job	Welfare	Romantic partner
Ex-Realist	14	1	1	3	0	2	3
Parolee	15	6	1	0	1	0	0
Total	29	7	2	3	1	2	3
Percentage	60.41%	14.58%	4.17%	6.25%	2.08%	4.17%	6.25%

Although without formal employment, some participants received income from odd jobs, while others relied on government support (Table 2). Their income rarely exceeded R1 500 per month and none was financially independent. Among the seven participants who reverted to crime, only one was financially independent. He told the interviewer and possibly himself that because of his long-term unemployment, he had to continue to sell drugs to finance his family's needs. The other six relied on their families for housing.

There is an economic vacuum after prison and struggling families are left to fill the financial void. Ex-offenders' unemployment placed pressure on their families. In their report on the socioeconomic impact of pre-trial detention in Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia, Muntingh and Redpath noted, 'it is the poor who are subsidising imprisonment'.³¹ The same was true for ex-Realist participants, whose families, many of whom lived in poverty, subsidised their cost of living.³² Ex-offenders relied on impoverished family members for housing (n=42, 88%) and supplemental income (n=29, 60%).

Beyond current unemployment, a number of participants reported that they had no prior

work experience. An even larger number reported a scattershot history of unskilled labour positions, typically performing an isolated short-term construction job or two. The two participants who were self-employed had technical skills and resources they leveraged to generate income. One participant was trained by a local NGO to bake goods, which he sold to schoolchildren (the NGO let him use its kitchen after graduating from its programme).³³ The other participant had a driver's licence and rented a minibus taxi to drive children to and from school. However, he was only allowed a taxi route because his late grandfather had been a taxi boss. Routes are fiercely contested and have resulted in so-called taxi wars.³⁴

Substance use was reported by the majority of participants (89.6%). The most popular drug was dagga (cannabis), followed by methamphetamine and mandrax (methaqualone, often crushed and smoked with cannabis) (Table 3). The rates of reported drug abuse in the sample, most notably dagga, meth and mandrax, outstripped that of the general youth population by a magnitude of tens.³⁵

Table 3: Illicit substances used

	Dagga	Mandrax	Meth	Ecstasy	Cocaine/crack	Heroin	Polydrug user	None
Ex-Realist	23	19	20	0	3	0	18	1
Parolee	15	9	12	3	4	1	16	5
Total	38	28	32	3	7	1	34	6
Percentage	79.17%	58.33%	66.67%	6.25%	14.58%	2.08%	70.83%	12.50%

Lastly, descriptive statistical analysis revealed the vast majority of participants (85.4%) to be repeat offenders. Indeed, many were chronic repeat offenders with over four arrests on average.³⁶

Qualitative analysis of psycho-social obstacles

To construct a rich thematic description of the complete data set, dominant themes were explored and analysed, rendering five major themes central to the life experience of participants:

- Inability to articulate frustration
- Perceived invisibility due to low social status
- Glorification of gangsterism
- Normalisation of violence
- Criminogenic effect of drug addiction

First, the inability to articulate frustration in a healthy manner was an engine of violent behaviour for some participants. One participant raised in a single-parent household reported that he was unable to feel grief after his mother and only reliable guardian died: 'I don't feel anything, man. I feel like I don't have a heart, you know what I mean.'³⁷ This emotional numbness impacted his relationship with his long-time girlfriend: '[I]t's a problem even in my relationship. Because I once raised my hand to my girlfriend. Yeah, that broke my heart ... We were arguing and arguing and arguing for a long – I don't know where that come from, and then I raised my hand.'³⁸ This pattern was reiterated by others, such as a participant raised in a foster home who reported that he was unable to share his feelings of abandonment as a teenager. Often, he would engage in capricious violence against his peers, reporting, 'I would always take a chair and, like, hit someone with it.'³⁹

When a female participant, who had a fraught relationship with her child's father, discovered he was spreading lies about her to friends and family, she did not use only words. Instead,

'I stabbed him,' she reported. 'Three holes. In the chest, in the arms, and on top of his heart.'⁴⁰ Her feelings afterward were tinged with regret, but mostly cathartic: 'After I stabbed him, I regretted it. But at another point, I didn't regret it. It was like a relief coming out.'⁴¹ Rather than use socially appropriate means of conflict resolution, she stabbed him multiple times and nearly killed him – reporting that it felt good. Given a history of loss and maltreatment, frustration and anger are understandable. But among participants the consequence of this anger, and the inability to articulate it, manifested in impulsive violent behaviour.

Second, participants reported that they had low social status as children and felt socially invisible. One participant said that because he grew up without money for fashionable clothes, he would stay inside every weekend: 'I must stay inside. I won't be able to go with my friends, because they all dressed to kill, you know.'⁴² To cope, he said, 'I would just get myself high every day. Yeah, so that I can be able to sleep at night.'⁴³ But using drugs as a means of inoculating himself against his own emotions had consequences. He said that if he could not afford drugs at the time, 'then I have to look for it the whole night until I get it. Somebody must get hurt for it.'⁴⁴ Another participant provided a detailed account of social dislocation after moving to Gugulethu from more affluent suburbs, which ultimately led him to join a street gang:

I wasn't used to coming here in Gugulethu; I was shocked. I'm used to staying in places like Wynberg and Newlands. I can see I couldn't fit with the, with the style of Gugulethu. And they were teasing me. I was wearing things like this [gestures at clothes] ... So, that's how everything started – I began to join a gang in Gugulethu.⁴⁵

It seems that feelings of social invisibility and alienation led to low self-esteem. In turn, many

coped with these powerful emotions through the numbing effects of drugs or gang induction.

Third, some especially perceptive participants reported that gangsterism is glorified in Gugulethu, that it is viewed heroically, as an almost noble pursuit, by young people. One participant said of gangsterism in his neighbourhood: 'We used to think that's the good stuff. We used to practice it in Cape Town and at school and stuff. We started doing the things our big brothers were doing.'⁴⁶ Gangsters market their lifestyles to impoverished youth through conspicuous consumption, broadcasting their social status with peacockish displays of material (if relative) wealth. Further, older gangsters would act as pseudo-paternal figures. It appears that for some impressionable teenagers, the social currency of gangsterism dulls its morally reprehensible qualities. Indeed, it is seen by these individuals as a shortcut to the top of the social hierarchy.

The fourth dominant theme was the normalisation of violence. Many participants were surprisingly blasé about lethal violence. For example, one participant, the victim of a shooting at age 17, said that being shot multiple times was not a big deal for him: 'It's used to happening in the township. Since we are boys, things like that happen. We stab another boy there in the street or you hit him with a stick or with a slingshot [catapult]. Then, you know, we don't go to that area. Ever.'⁴⁷ Another participant said of his role model growing up, who was a well-known gangster: '[H]e had everything. He had nice girls, everything. So I used to like him. Eventually he died; they shot him dead.'⁴⁸ It is not surprising that a violent death is par for the course among gangsters, who live violent lives. It is, however, worth noting that young adults submitted to these conditions view gun violence as such a regular feature of their lives that it does not merit a strong response. Perhaps for survival, many participants have numbed

themselves emotionally to the lethal violence occurring around them.

The fifth and final theme of participants' life experience was the criminogenic effect of drug use. One participant reported that his gang never actually planned their crimes, it 'would just happen' when they were craving drugs.⁴⁹ Another provided an in-depth description of a robbery he committed while living in Paarl, reporting that he smoked marijuana with his partner because 'it's to make us not fear what we are going to do'.⁵⁰ However, he said he complained to his partner because he preferred to smoke meth, suggesting by virtue of his preference that he smokes with some frequency before crime, ideally hard drugs. A third participant echoed that feeling of drug-induced invincibility, reporting, 'We smoke to have the power to go and do that thing [robbery]. As I said to you, when I smoke, I feel like ... on top of the world – like nobody can beat me.'⁵¹ There are a number of reasons participants used to explain their use of hard drugs, ranging from its being a coping mechanism to sheer boredom. In the above cases, drug use became a behaviour intimately linked to criminal activity.

Findings: successes and shortcomings of community-based intervention

Successes: Social support and outdoor activities

The most outstanding feature of Realistic's aftercare programme is the positive social support rendered by both professional social workers and peers in the support group. Social workers appeared to have a substantial impact on their clients, helping them to open up and share their emotional baggage. One participant remarked, 'Here you get your own social worker when you feel like talking and something is troubling you. You just take the weight out of your shoulders.'⁵² For a number of clients, it was the first opportunity in which they could be open

about their issues and receive unconditional support. Referring to a social worker, another participant reported, '[H]e was the first person. I felt relieved that I can be opened.'⁵³ It is hard to overstate the power of this acceptance on the self-esteem of a young person accustomed to the dismissal of their fears and frustrations. That said, for support to be effective, the client must want help in the first place. Borrowing an old adage, the social worker interviewed for this project remarked, 'You can bring the horse to the water, but you can't make it drink.'⁵⁴

The peer support group was also viewed favourably by most participants. Group reflection with peers helped them learn how to express themselves appropriately. Some participants described their peers at Realistic in familial terms, indicating how close-knit the group can become over time. Below are several excerpts:

- 'The peers and colleagues were helpful because I would start to share with them what drugs were doing to me. They were start[ing] to feel like family. Give me some advices. Stay away from bad company outside. Hey, Realistic showed me the light, man.'⁵⁵
- 'When I sat in that group, in that circle there, I felt this was my family ... whatever you say, it stays here.'⁵⁶
- Through reflection in the peer support group one participant learned: 'To do things, to see things, that thing is wrong, that thing is right ... Realistic changed my mind. I'm different now.'⁵⁷
- 'Here, we were told to speak out. So that's the thing that I didn't do. So when it came to me, I speak out everything. And then I was told to do this; not do that. You see, those things help me.'⁵⁸
- 'Realistic is a support group whereby you share, you see. You share your instincts. You share everything that is in you.'⁵⁹

It appears that, through social support, participants learned important life skills – including the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, the important skill of self-expression and the value of respect – and, in the process, found a place of belonging.

Aside from positive social support, the second major success is Realistic's outdoor activities. Realists are taken to beaches, the bush for a 21-day survival camp, and Table Mountain for an overnight camping trip led by park rangers. The executive director noted that many of the Realists had grown up with Table Mountain in view their whole lives, but had never actually been on the mountain.⁶⁰ For certain participants, it seems that the effect of getting out of the township into natural beauty is nothing short of transformative. In light of the idle lifestyle imposed on them in prison and the self-imposed quarantine among township youth, the change of scenery enables them to break the stagnation, reflect and see new possibilities. One ex-Realist reported that after the outdoor activities,

I would feel free. Because I know there is no boyfriend who is going to be taunting my head. My mom will be like – sometimes when you are at home just be asking you this, this, this, and that. You just, free and happy. Being a family ... When you out there, you get something. You introspect yourself, and then you get answers. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes you still asking yourself. But at least something is happening ... Experiencing new things in the camp makes you think. Ask yourself. Be happy – be you, be you.⁶¹

Another participant felt similarly. But instead of escaping from toxic social relationships, he felt reconnected with his childhood, a visceral reminder of life before drug dependency:

Part of these thing I was used to because I'm coming from that side [the Eastern Cape]. So it was like, to me, life can go on without drugs. I used to grow up this way. This can still happen in my life if I just stay focused ... There are activities you can do for fun besides drugs.⁶²

If Realists wanted to reflect and introspect, trips out of the township presented a special occasion to do just that. For those who rarely leave, the opportunity for self-reflection, afforded by an escape to tranquil nature, could reawaken a dormant sense of possibility for change. It is not a cure-all, but judging from participant statements, the respite from Gugulethu did seem to promote personal growth.

Shortcomings: no follow-up and full unemployment

Despite the progress Realistic achieved with participants, it also had stark limitations. Realistic clearly is useful. The question is how useful, and whether the resources invested in it could be put to better use elsewhere.

Participant interviews revealed one major shortcoming: there is no formal follow-up after the six-month programme ends. Meta-analyses of the drug treatment literature have found that continuing care after in- and out-patient treatment is an effective way to reduce relapse among recovering addicts.⁶³ Innovations in continuing care have also minimised the cost of a continuing care programme. For example, one study found that a text messaging-based aftercare programme, in which young addicts received daily self-monitoring and feedback texts, had a significant positive correlation with negative drug tests, indicating its promise as a viable continuing care programme for recovering youth.⁶⁴ Even if an ex-offender does not have access to a mobile device, this finding still suggests that low-cost but regular reminders can be an effective tool in battling drug dependency.

The lack of formal follow-up could feasibly be addressed by modifying Realistic's theory of change. Currently, the theory of change used by Realistic assumes that development naturally continues after programme termination, even without formalised follow-up. This is not the case. Half of the ex-Realists interviewed were re-arrested following their enrolment in the aftercare programme – and one-third of the ex-Realists reported that they were still using hard drugs. As one participant remarked, after graduation, 'You will sit around; do nothing. You will get temptation ... When I was back in the community, I went back to old friends and started doing bad habits again.'⁶⁵ Another participant described how Realistic is an island of positivity unto itself, useful like a man standing in the way of a wave:

You found out you've got 20 people that are supporting you in a positive way. But when you are going out there are 400 peoples on the negative side ... most especially now that I'm from prison, and I see that my other friends who are also from prison are driving nice cars – and you figure that, no man, I'm not used to go to school and don't have any money. So I want money. So another thing is just that if I'm with them, while they are busy bringing their money after the robbery ... At least when I go home, I will have some R300 or R400.⁶⁶

It seems that without regular reinforcement of Realistic's teachings, the reality of township life will wash away progress over time. However, research suggests that mentoring programmes can be effective in establishing and building on new positive behaviours.⁶⁷ Potential low-cost solutions might include creating a programme where sponsors mentor new graduating Realists à la Alcoholics Anonymous, or alternatively, a peer reflection group where ex-Realists come back to talk with current Realists about the

struggles they have faced after graduating from the programme.

Descriptive statistical analysis also revealed a significant shortcoming: no ex-Realists were employed. To be fair, scarcity of economic opportunity is by no means specific to Realistic. Only one parolee had full-time employment and two were self-employed; and all three accomplished this entirely on their own initiative. That said, Realistic can do more to advocate for programme graduates. Solutions include canvassing local businesses for part-time work, leveraging its credibility in Gugulethu to establish apprenticeships with local skilled labourers for selected graduates, or mandating enrolment in the Expanded Public Works Programme, a database of short- to medium-term jobs available with government contractors, designed to alleviate extreme poverty in South Africa.⁶⁸

The difficult question is, however, whether the skills deficit faced by young ex-offenders is already too great to overcome. This enquiry could guide the optimisation of resource allocation – i.e., which ex-offenders are worth investing in. Of course, this approach has a steep downside: it relegates a presumably large number of able-bodied adults to a life of financial dependence and social alienation.

Realistic versus parole

The support offered by Realistic represented a critical first step for participants, but was insufficient to stop offending behaviour altogether. It was, however, considerably better than the alternative. Only a few parolees reported getting any service referrals from their case officer. For example, only two of the 24 parolees interviewed were offered employment services by their case officer, even though 23 lacked full-time employment. Moreover, these jobs exposed them to exploitation. One of the two reported that he quit after he was assaulted

by his supervisor for asking why he did not receive his agreed-upon salary.

Direct comparison of ex-Realists and parolees proved more difficult than anticipated. Because ex-Realists had left the programme, it was possible to see if they had recidivated afterwards and to draw a conclusion about the impact of Realistic's programming. In contrast, parolees were still on parole. Since it was not possible to compare the recidivism rates of these two groups after Realistic and parole respectively, their experiences in obtaining support services were compared instead.

Discussion

Department of Correctional Services Strategic Plan 2015–2016

These findings suggest a chasm between policy and reality. Responsibility for this implementation gap largely lies with the DCS, but it does not seem like it is on the right path. Strategic objectives for community integration outlined in its *Annual report 2015/16* do not correspond with the obstacles to integration found in this article.⁶⁹ In fact, they hardly make sense at all. While the sub-programme on community integration correctly described its purpose as providing support systems for the integration of ex-offenders back into society, it rather inexplicably listed the corresponding objective as improving the participation of victims in the restorative justice process. Victim–offender mediation is not a support system. It is not clear why the CS would focus on a single issue when there are many other factors at play. Furthermore, Realistic's shortcomings point to the stark limitations of support programmes that are short-term and strictly psycho-social in nature.

The other performance indicator for community integration examines the proportion of parolees integrated through halfway house partnerships. As opposed to the first performance indicator, it is germane to community integration, but – again,

inexplicably – the enrolment target is 80 parolees (in 2015 there were around 52 000 parolees).⁷⁰ It strains credulity to say that these two indicators alone measure the performance of released prisoners. This method was either ill-conceived or the DCS created asinine performance indicators to remain wilfully ignorant of how its wards are faring in the community.

Government–civil society partnerships

The above findings suggest serious obstacles to integration and a lack of direction on the part of government. In spite of the task's intimidating size, community members like the social workers at Realistic are busy working to address endemic problems of crime, violence and drug proliferation. It would be in government's best interest to capitalise on and invest in civil society organisations that empower people at community level.

Considering the resource constraints faced by government, the most rational way to address prisoner integration nationally is through large-scale coordination with civil society. Government has to outsource services, but it must also be the first to reach out. More than a decade ago, the white paper directed the DCS to create an environment conducive to partnerships with civil society organisations.⁷¹ However, in the course of this research there was no indication that the DCS helped orchestrate an effort to organise allied NGOs, such as Realistic.

Terminating criminal behaviour in an individual is a complex process, requiring the support of multiple stakeholders. The long-term impact of Realistic's work is ultimately stifled by its lack of coordination with vocational schools, local businesses, allied NGOs and government agencies (specifically the DCS) that could assist ex-Realists in their journey after graduation. Limited opportunity after Realistic resulted in difficulty for programme graduates – many of whom abstained from drugs and crime while in the programme, but fell back into old social

circles and behaviours afterwards. The situation was worse for parolees who received little formalised support, relying instead on their families for assistance. Family reliance is not an appropriate substitute for professional support.

Limitations

This study is not an exposition of social integration generally, but rather a bottom-up engagement with the perceptions of ex-offenders in Gugulethu specifically. It should be noted that due to the modest sample size, this study's findings cannot be generalised beyond Gugulethu. Furthermore, the self-report nature of interviews is subjective, reflecting only the perceptions of ex-offenders. Interviews allow for detail of individual cases, but there was noticeable variance across participants' willingness to talk. Some shared above and beyond the questions; others said the bare minimum. Thus, for pragmatic reasons, detailed excerpts were selected as telling examples of common perspectives. Despite interviewing 48 ex-offenders, there is only so much this data alone can tell us.

Bearing this in mind, future research is needed to test the present findings across multiple samples and other community-based organisations, to see if they are reproducible. Longitudinal research would also help to assess the impact of government–civil society partnerships on recidivism rates for ex-offenders. A high-quality study on the national recidivism rate would be helpful for such research, as it would provide a benchmark to compare the recidivism rates among participants of specific programmes or initiatives.

Conclusion

Thematic and statistical analysis of 48 participant interviews revealed two major findings:

- After their release from prison ex-offenders reported facing both material and psycho-social obstacles to integration.

- While providing valuable short-term social support, Realistic is insufficient for many programme participants, because it fails to address their material needs and follow up after graduation.

Realistic is both a beacon of hope and an oasis of positivity. With minimal resources, the aftercare programme can transform participants' inner lives. As one participant noted: 'I don't kill people anymore. My mother doesn't cry anymore. There's no one coming to complain. Those things – I feel relieved.'⁷² Participants performed remarkably well while in the programme, but many fell off track after they left the oasis. Realistic's impact will ultimately be reflected in the applicability of its teachings to new domains, such as the home or the workplace. Individual risk factors need to be considered in a post-graduation plan, with formalised follow-up and service referrals where appropriate.

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Notes

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