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Battling recidivism of parolees: Challenges and coping strategies of social workers at community corrections offices

Mmatsatsi Ramokolo-Kutu[1.1] and Petro Botha[1.2]

[1.1] *University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, Pretoria, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5274-4742 *mmatsatsir@gmail.com*

[1.2] *University of South Africa, Department of Social Work, Pretoria, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7958-4824 *Bothap@unisa.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT

Effective parolee rehabilitation and reintegration into society are essential to reducing recidivism. This article presents the challenges and coping strategies of social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees within the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). The study was qualitative in nature and the researcher employed a phenomenological design with elements of exploratory, descriptive and contextual research designs to understand social workers' challenges and coping strategies when working with parolees within the DCS. Nineteen (19) participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through face-to-face and telephonic interviews as the study was conducted during COVID-19. The ecological framework was used to analyse the challenges experienced by social workers. The findings revealed that parolees do not comply with parole conditions and are not motivated to attend social work programmes in the community and that social workers do not have adequate resources. Social workers cope in different ways to deal with the challenges, for example, by working weekends to reach more parolees. Recommendations include that services should be accessible to parolees, their needs be addressed, and stakeholders work as a team to win this battle.

Keywords: challenges; parolees; rehabilitation; reintegration; strategies

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges faced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees with the DCS. The rehabilitation and reintegration of parolees play a crucial role in the fight against recidivism in most African countries and offender rehabilitation programmes have become the cornerstone of the criminal justice system (Chikadzi et al., 2022; Ngozwana, 2017). Approximately 57 million parolees are detained again after serving their terms, which is a global concern (Yukhnenko et al., 2020). This issue is not confined to a single country, as Yukhnenko et al. (2023) demonstrate by highlighting the global recidivism rates among previously incarcerated individuals across 33 countries. In South Africa, recidivism statistics have not been scientifically researched. South Africa's recidivism rate is not known with certainty; however, many estimates have been offered, including 47% (Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, 2012), 80–94% (Padayachee, 2008), and 55–97% (Pelser, 2008; Schoeman, 2010). The DCS is committed to rehabilitating inmates and parolees and facilitating their social reintegration into the community (Du Plessis & Lombard, 2018). Rehabilitation entails planned interventions by different professionals inside and outside of correctional centres to change the behaviour of the offender that is thought to contribute to their criminality (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2017). It implies the reformation of the behaviour of inmates and parolees through general education and programmes to ensure that offenders return to society as completely self-supporting and accepted members (Hadi & Mohamed, 2017). Reintegration, according to Bahr (2015), is defined as "the process of transitioning from incarceration to maintaining a crime-free lifestyle". It entails a process of transition from imprisonment into mainstream society and, in this process, offenders begin to adjust to the outside world in the aftermath of their release (Chikadzi, 2017).

Social work services in the DCS are mandated by Section 41(3) of the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 to provide psychosocial services to enhance the mental wellbeing of offenders (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1998). The core function of social work services in the DCS is to assess offenders and provide needs-based programmes and services to enhance the adjustment, social functioning and reintegration of offenders into the community (RSA, n.d.). Rehabilitation begins in correctional centres and offenders continue with rehabilitation programmes upon their release on parole (Singh, 2016). Their responsibility for rehabilitating and reintegrating parolees back into society poses many challenges for social workers at community corrections offices (Murhula & Singh, 2019).

Most of the international and South African studies consulted (Berghuis, 2018; Du Plessis & Lombard, 2018; Ngozwana, 2017; Murhula & Singh, 2019) focus on the challenges of offenders and not on the experiences of social workers at community corrections offices. There thus seems to be a lack of research on the challenges experienced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees within the DCS. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the challenges experienced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees, and their coping strategies.

The article presents a background on rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, the theoretical framework adopted, as well as the methodology followed during the research. It

will discuss the three themes identified, namely social workers' descriptions of the challenges they experience when rendering social work services to parolees; social work supervisors' and heads of community corrections offices' descriptions of the challenges experienced in providing social work services to parolees; and social workers' explanations of how they cope with the challenges they experience when rendering social work services to parolees. Having a better understanding of the challenges of social workers will enable all stakeholders, including DCS, to work together as a team to enhance service delivery.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Social workers stationed at community corrections offices of the DCS provide appropriate and needs-based social work services to offenders and parolees in order to promote positive changes in their lives (RSA, 2019). They are expected to work with individuals who have committed serious offences, which calls for being alert at all times for security risks attendant on the provision of these services. Social work services to parolees include assessment, counselling, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes as well as awareness campaigns; these services are provided to parolees, their families and the community.

Rehabilitation continues when offenders are outside the correctional centres, and social workers are responsible for continuing with rehabilitation or re-entry programmes to ensure successful reintegration into the community (Bahr, 2015). From the literature review, it is evident that social workers experience challenges when rehabilitating offenders. Numerous studies have been undertaken on the rehabilitation of offenders, but there is nothing on the challenges facing social workers working with parolees (Ganapathy, 2018; Taneva, 2019; Yin, 2020). In other words, attention has been focused on offenders and not social workers working at community corrections offices, especially concerning the challenges they experience and how they can be supported. There is a lack of knowledge and information about the challenges experienced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees. As a result, the challenges of social workers at community corrections are at serious risk of being ignored, which compromises service delivery.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Rehabilitation of offenders is critical for their successful reintegration into the community (Ganapathy, 2018), and social workers are placed at the community corrections offices of the DCS as members of the team that ensure rehabilitation and the successful social reintegration of parolees. There is a dearth of research and documentation on the challenges facing social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees, which is a hindrance to the development of policies and services delivery. Even though there is not extensive data on these challenges and coping strategies, social workers at community corrections offices continue to render services to parolees and the community. This study attempts to fill the research gap on the challenges faced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees within the DCS.

Although there is significant research on the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders (Berghuis, 2018; Cheah et al., 2020; Ngozwana, 2017; Singh, 2016), there is not much knowledge about the challenges and coping strategies of the social workers responsible for the

rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees. The researcher's motivation stems from the lack of information in the literature on the challenges encountered by social workers who work with parolees during their rehabilitation and reintegration process. The researcher had an informal discussion with three social workers and one supervisor at community corrections offices in Gauteng and Limpopo provinces. From these discussions, it was clear that there was a need for this study. This lack of knowledge means social workers at community corrections offices are at a disadvantage, which impacts negatively on service delivery. Furthermore, understanding the challenges experienced by social workers at community corrections offices will influence the development of policies and enhance service delivery for parolees. The research questions of the study was: *What are the challenges faced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and reintegration of parolees within the Department of Correctional Services?*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Recidivism in South Africa, which is the context of this study, seems to be a norm, with offenders often being reincarcerated after completing their sentences (Bello, 2017). The researcher incorporated ecological systems theory into this study, which helps in understanding human development and behaviour, and has been applied in many fields, including social work (Eriksson et al., 2018). Holloway and Wiener (2020) highlight that an individual should be viewed as a part of an ecological system and not as a separate part. The ecological systems perspective requires interventions on the levels of the micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system to sustain and develop the individual from a human development perspective (Pack, 2015). The microsystem refers to the settings in which an individual has direct involvement and first-hand social interactions with the people around them.

The micro-systems refer to the settings in which an individual has direct involvement. They include environments where the person has first-hand social interaction with the people around them (Piel et al., 2017). "The meso-system, within which micro-systems are nested, includes social interactions between two or more of the focal individual's settings" (Neal & Neal, 2013). The meso-systems are nested within an exo-system, which is an environment that affects the individual but of which the individual is not necessarily a part nor involved in, e.g. legislative mandates (Neal & Neal, 2013). Finally, the macro-system is regarded as the outermost layer in the individual's environment within which exo-systems are nested and includes broad cultural influences (Piel et al., 2017). The ecological systems theory facilitates insights into the origin of the difficulties individuals such as social workers working with parolees encounter in their work environment (Crawford, 2020). In this study the challenges faced by social workers were investigated from a holistic ecological perspective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

This article is based on a study conducted in the Department of Correctional Services, Gauteng Region community corrections offices. The study adopted a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach aims to explore, explain and describe people's experiences, perceptions and behaviour in their social environment (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The approach was appropriate

for this study because, as Basias and Pollalis (2018) state, it elicits answers to questions such as what, why, how, when and where, and is also described as a word-based approach which uses rich, descriptive language rather than numbers to understand people's experiences, perspectives, and meanings. The objective of this article is to explore the challenges faced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees, as well as to understand their coping strategies by collecting and analysing their words to make sense of their professional experience.

Based on the need to investigate and explore the challenges faced by social workers responsible for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees, the researcher adopted a phenomenological research design with elements of exploratory, descriptive and contextual research designs. The phenomenological design, like the qualitative approach, can be described as word-based, as it is instrumental in exploring and describing the participants' experiences and perceptions of their social environment by analysing their utterances (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The approach and design allowed participants to share challenges and suggestions from their own perspectives.

Population and sampling

The study population was selected in accordance with the focus or topic of the study. As such, the population targeted for this study was social workers at community corrections offices, social work supervisors and heads of community corrections who render rehabilitation and social reintegration services to parolees. The study used the following criteria to select participants:

- Male and female social workers with more than one year's experience in community corrections and willing to participate;
- Male and female social work supervisors with more than one year's experience in community corrections and willing to participate;
- Male and female heads of community corrections with more than one year's experience in community corrections and willing to participate.

These participants worked within the context of community corrections and were rich sources of information because they had first-hand information of working with parolees. The reason for including social work supervisors and the heads of community corrections offices was to obtain a wider perspective through the triangulation of data sources. This meant collecting data from different sources by examining the evidence they provided (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a member of DCS, the researcher visited different community corrections offices in Gauteng to make the first contact with the participants in their offices. The aim of the visit was to introduce herself and establish rapport with the participants as well as to recruit them to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from the three population groups, namely, social workers, social work supervisors and heads of community corrections offices. A pilot test was undertaken with one participant from each population group to enable the researcher to understand how participants respond to questions in the pilot test (Neuman, 2014) and to ensure that the interview schedule elicit sufficient information.

Data collection and analysis

Participants were provided with informed consent forms and interviews were arranged upon receipt of the signed informed consent forms. A total of 19 interviews were conducted with all the participants. The process of data collection commenced with seven social workers, three social work supervisors and two heads of community corrections, who were all interviewed face to face. The interviews were conducted in their offices, which were easily accessible to the researcher and the participants. Three social workers, two social work supervisors and two heads of community corrections were working from home because of the COVID-19 restrictions and these interviews were conducted telephonically. The data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews supported by an interview guide, which was developed on the basis of the literature review. The interview guide was used to gain in-depth information (Williams, 2019). Data were collected over a period of 30 days. The interviews lasted 40 to 45 minutes, and with the participants' permission, the researcher audio-recorded each interview. The collected data were transcribed and the data analysis was conducted immediately after data saturation in accordance with Tech's (in Creswell, 2014) eight steps of data analysis. The researchers, with the help of an independent coder, analysed the data as follows: transcribing the data, data reduction, breaking down data into segments, and then creating codes, code themes, subthemes and categories to make sense of the data and arrive at a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2016).

Trustworthiness

To guarantee the validity and reliability of the study, the researcher ensured its credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Schurink et al., 2021). for credibility, member checking was one of the methods used. As a member of DCS who is familiar with the environment where data were gathered, the researcher was able to go back to three of the supervisors who participated in the study to verify the information provided during data collection. The utilisation of an independent researcher, who is both a skilled social worker and research coder to evaluate the researcher's data analysis and conclusions, helped to enhance the study's dependability. Transferability was facilitated by providing a detailed description of the research methodology and research process, enabling the findings to be applied in different contexts (Liamputtong, 2020). The study's transferability was also enhanced by a clear formulation of how purposive sampling was used and when data saturation was attained. Confirmability was ensured by detailed data recording; every interview was audio-recorded and interpretations of the research findings were obtained from the data collected from participants. Data collected during the study, including audio-recordings, were kept securely for the purposes of confirmability.

Ethics

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) of the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Ref # number 32277792_CREC_CHS_2021). Permission to conduct the study was granted by DCS's research ethics committee. The researcher abided by the ethical principles of informed consent, no harm to participants, anonymity and confidentiality, management of information and

debriefing of participants. Prior to deciding to participate in the study, each participant received written information pertinent to the research and to confirm that participation was voluntary; each participant signed the informed consent form before the interviews. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts were taken to ensure that the researcher and the participants were not harmed and were safe from contracting COVID-19. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld throughout the study and the information obtained from the participants was kept confidential and securely stored. This was done by keeping the names of the participants confidential and using pseudonyms. The recorded information was transcribed by the researcher and all personal information on the identity of the participants was removed. The researcher planned to refer the participants for a debriefing by an Employee Assistance Practitioner at the DCS, who is a social worker registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), as the researcher was aware that some questions would touch on sensitive topics, which could affect the participants negatively. Since there was nothing that required a referral for a debriefing, none were made.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the research findings and is divided into two parts. The first part provides the relevant biographical information on the participants, and the second presents the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews conducted with the participants and supported with storylines taken from the transcripts of the interviews. The confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants have been protected.

Demographic data of the research participants

Table 1 reflects the demographic particulars of the participants as categorised in terms of the code allocated to the participants, qualifications, years in community corrections and professional position. Seventeen females and two males participated in the study. Fifteen participants were social workers (10 social workers and 5 social work supervisors) and 4 were heads of community corrections with Grade 12.

Table 1: Biographical information of the participants

Code	Qualifications	Years in community corrections	Position
G	BSW	05	Social worker
J/C	BSW	05	Social worker
M	BSW	07	Social worker
N/F	BSW	08	Social worker
N/A	BSW	04	Social worker
N/S	BSW	06	Social worker
P	BSW	05	Social worker
P/E	BSW	05	Social worker
R	BSW	05	Social worker

R/K	BSW	06	Social worker
J	BSW	07	Social work supervisor
D	BSW	05	Social work supervisor
M/L	BSW	08	Social work supervisor
T	BSW	06	Social work supervisor
V	BSW	04	Social work supervisor
XL	Grade 12	05	Head of community corrections
B	Grade 12	06	Head of community corrections
N	Grade 12	11	Head of community corrections
Z	Grade 12	07	Head of community corrections

The above table focuses on the demographic particulars of the participants, and the information provided formed part of the selection criteria.

Overview of the themes and subthemes

Both the researcher and the independent coder generated several themes in the process of data analysis. This article will focus on the following three themes: (1) social workers' descriptions of the challenges they experience when rendering social work services to parolees; (2) social work supervisors' and heads of community corrections offices' descriptions of the challenges experienced in providing social work services to parolees; and (3) social workers' explanations of how they cope with the challenges they experience when rendering social work services to parolees.

Theme 1: Social workers' descriptions of the challenges they experience when rendering social work services to parolees

Social workers were asked to describe the challenges they experience when rendering services to parolees and their responses were grouped into ten subthemes as presented below:

Subtheme 1.1 Inadequate and unsuitable resources

Participants identified inadequate and unsuitable resources as some of the challenges they experience on an exo level, which is the environment that affects the individual but in which the individual is not necessarily a part of nor involved in. (Neal & Neal, 2013).

> *From my side, I don't even have a computer, so I don't make a habit of going to the system and violating people. It means I must go and knock on other people's doors so that I can have access to the computer.* (Participant G)

One participant identified the difficulty in maintaining confidentiality when rendering services, which was linked to a lack of resources:

> *... we are working in a hall with parole officers and we are unable to provide counselling services to parolees as expected. There is no confidentiality. But we try to keep*

> *confidentiality by trying to be away from the parole officers in this big hall, but it's not a private space where parolees can be able to feel relaxed to express their emotions.* (Participant N/S)

It was evident from the responses of the participants that they work under stressful conditions as they do not have enough resources. According to Tepayakul and Rinthaisong (2018), the best way in which an organisation can achieve its goals is by having workplace resources in place. Additionally, Kimber and Gardner (2016) state that supervisors play a critical role in ensuring that employees have the resources to perform their jobs effectively and efficiently.

Subtheme 1.2: Non-attendance of programmes and missing appointments

Participants reported that parolees do not attend programmes and most of them do not keep appointments made with the social worker. The social workers could thus not build a relationship with parolees at a micro-level. The reasons for parolees not attending programmes include the fact that the programmes are the same as in the correctional centres; parolees are working or do not have money for transport; and parolees have breached parole conditions.

Participant N/S stipulated that parolees are not honouring their scheduled appointments, which negatively affects the performance of social workers as it hinders them from achieving their established performance targets.

> *They are not honouring the appointments for programmes and this is affecting my work as a social worker. Remember I have to report at month end and my report should include the number of programmes conducted for the month. So, if they are not coming, it means I have to report zero for that particular month.* (Participant N/S)

In describing the reasons for not attending programmes, Participant P/E mentioned that some of the parolees attended similar programmes in the correctional centres:

> *…. programmes are the same. That is why it is difficult for the parolees to attend the programmes because they will be saying 'but I attended the programmes inside'. It's boring because it's like you are repeating the same thing.* (Participant P/E)

Attending programmes is a challenge as some of the parolees are working and are not available during the week. They experience financial problems because they struggle to find employment as they tend to be less educated and have a criminal record (English, 2018). The researcher concluded that is it evident that parolee non-attendance of programmes is affecting service delivery at community corrections as social workers are unable to perform as expected. The researcher believes that there should be different programmes for parolees who are serving their sentences in the community, which will motivate them to attend. The thought of attending the same programmes they attended while incarcerated is demotivating.

Subtheme 1.3: Parole violations or non-compliance

There are certain conditions that parolees must comply with while under parole supervision such as curfew, office consultations, attending rehabilitation programmes and avoiding substance abuse (LaForest, 2021). Participants stipulated that parolees do not comply with parole conditions, set on an exo level, as indicated below:

> *We have a challenge of parolees who are non-compliant with parole conditions. When the parole officers do supervision at their places some of them are not always at home. They will either be on the street drinking – not at home – without notifying the parole officers.* (Participant N/A)

In addition, Participant M further indicated that sometimes parolees violate the conditions because of confusion about supervision roles and parolees getting conflicting information from different parole officers:

> *Another issue is the confusion of supervision roles, because they have many supervisors who sometimes give them different information about their conditions and they end up being confused and they will bring it to my attention. They are confused and at the end of the day they violate the parole conditions.* (Participant M)

Participants reported that some of the parolees are not always at home, which is linked to non-compliance with parole conditions. Others change their addresses without informing the supervisor. According to Raboloko and Maripe (2019), a large number of parolees are returned to correctional centres because they had violated their parole conditions. Research has found that the rate of parolees who do not comply with the parole conditions has increased in the past decade (Ricciardelli & McKendy, 2021). Based on the above, it is concluded that parolees are running away from their responsibilities by violating their parole conditions.

Subtheme 1.4: Social workers fear going alone into the community

When responding to the question on the challenges they experience, social workers mentioned that they are afraid of going into the community alone. Fear refers to the experiences of social workers at a micro-level. Their job description includes community awareness and community projects, they said they felt unsafe in the community on their own:

> *… it's not safe for a social worker to be alone in the community. Mostly social workers are female officials and we know how parolees operate; once they get an opportunity, they use it.* (Participant N/S)

Participant P expressed a need for an escort when conducting home visits.

> *We need to request from the head of community corrections that I need an escort to do home visits, because it's not safe.* (Participant P)

Grossi (2017), confirms that social workers at community corrections offices are expected to deal with the challenges of dealing with parolees in the community. Social workers should intervene with parolees by helping them to comply with their parole conditions and contribute to the good of society (Botha & Warria, 2021).

Subtheme 1.5: Denial of problems and families reporting issues too late

According to Murhula and Singh (2019), social work services empower individuals with social functioning skills and help them to solve their own problems. However, it becomes a challenge to provide the necessary assistance to a person who is in denial. Denial influences the relationship between the social worker and parolee on a micro-level. From the comments of

the participants, it was evident that parolees are in denial that they have problems as they wait for their family members to refer them for assistance.

> *When a person is in denial that he has a problem, as a social worker I can identify what a person is going through, but when the person is so resistant, it becomes a challenge for me to provide the necessary assistance.* (Participant N/S)

Participant P/E further indicated that their family members utilise social work services as a last resort and this makes it difficult to render the necessary service.

> *Again, the families come to the office to report about the problems they are having with the offender as a last resort and in that case, they are tired with the parolee and they want him to go back to prison.* (Participant P/E)

Parents and caregivers are aware that the parolee is having problems or is abusing substances, but they hesitate to report this to the social worker; they only report the problem when they are tired of the parolee and want him/her to be taken back to the correctional centre. Gunnison and Helfgott (2013) confirm that if the relationship between the offender and family members was poor prior to the incarceration of the offender, then upon their release the family members may not be willing to resolve this conflict.

Subtheme 1.6: Inability of social workers to report parole violations on the system

Violation occurs when parolees do not comply with the parole conditions and they should be reported on the community corrections system (Rydberg, Grommon, Huebner & Pleggenkuhle, 2017). Social workers are expected to report that their parolee had breached or violated the parole condition on the system. Participating social workers mentioned that it is difficult for them to report parolee violations on the community corrections system because they have not been trained. They always get assistance from the parole officers.

> *I am not familiar with the system because I was not trained. When I want to [report] a parolee violation of conditions on the system, I go to the parole officers who are familiar with the system to assist with that.* (Participant J/C)

Participant R maintained that they are unable to schedule appointments, because they are not familiar with the community corrections system:

> *...we are unable to report parolee violations on the system and we can't schedule appointments because we don't know how the system works and it would be easier if we knew the system, because the next date of the appointment would reflect on the system.*

Mchete and Shayo (2020) confirm that training plays a crucial role in the workplace, enabling employees to become more productive. On the same note, Abdel-Gadir (2020) states that training is essential to enhance productivity in any organisation. It thus seems that social workers do not get the support they need on a meso level.

Subtheme 1.7: Lack of support from caregivers

Caregiver support is crucial for parolees as they return to the community after incarceration (Grier, 2015). Most of the caregivers of parolees are immediate family members such as

parents, siblings, uncles and aunts. This influences the relationship between the social worker and the parolee on a micro level. Parolees do not get support from caregivers and family members as stated below:

> *... the problem is getting support from the caregivers ... let's say for practical example a parolee who needs assistance with maybe ID application ... you find that some of these things need the involvement of either the parent or the caregiver. It becomes a challenge to work hand-in-hand with family members, because some of them are either unemployed or they would be complaining about money to come to the office.* (Participant R)

Research studies confirm the importance of family and caregivers in playing an active role in providing support to parolees (Bragstad et al., 2014; Wolff et al., 2016). Grier (2015) is of the view that caregiver support is crucial for parolees when they return to the community after a period of incarceration.

Reference was also made to the lack of understanding of the parole system by the community and caregivers. One of the social workers pointed out:

> *... the community is of the view that if someone is sentenced for ten years, it means that person would spend the whole ten years in prison. They are not aware that there is a half sentence and this person can be considered for parole.* (Participant P)

Because of this lack of understanding of the parole system, the community and the family members do not support parolees, which affects their successful reintegration, and this becomes a challenge for social workers. Parolees who are not supported upon re-entering the community are at risk of violating parole conditions such as not attending social work programmes. The study conducted by Cherney (2021) confirms that the transition of offenders from correctional centres into the community requires family members to play a key role. It is evident from the narratives of the participants that the community is not aware that there is a half sentence and that inmates come into consideration for parole after a stipulated period.

Subtheme 1.8: Lack of teamwork

The participants highlighted the lack of teamwork at community corrections offices and mentioned that individuals work alone to achieve organisational goals. Although there are teams with the same objectives at community corrections offices, the spirit of team cooperation is lacking.

> *We have a community liaison officer who deals with that community awareness campaign, and we don't usually work with him and if we can work as a team, that idea will work for us.* (Participant P/E)

One participating social worker stipulated that there is a need to be hands-on at community corrections as effective teamwork entails good cooperation among team members as they work toward attaining the organisation's goals (Hwang, 2018). Participant R said:

> *... what I have realised with community corrections, we all need to be hands-on. There are some components here that will make you feel that you are not part of them.* (Participant R)

It is evident that although there are teams in place, these teams are not working effectively toward rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees. Researchers strongly agree that teamwork within the meso-system of the social worker is critical and will enhance service delivery at community corrections as social workers work with parolees and their family members. Mitashree (2018) states that the absence of teamwork in the work environment leads to occupational failure and can affect morale and productivity, which threatens the operation of the organisation. Previous research studies show that the key factor for achieving more and better results in an organisation is when individuals of different abilities are formed into a team (Sanyal & Hisam, 2018; Tripathy, 2018).

Subtheme 1.9: Focus on quantity rather than quality

Handayani and Khairi (2022) state that employees are expected by their organisations to pay particular attention to job quality when carrying out tasks according to given responsibilities. Participants lamented the fact that they are compelled to focus on quantity in their work rather than quality:

> *Our seniors want statistics report and we end up doing quantity not quality. Because if you don't provide a status report, it's like you are not working.* (Participant R)

Social workers depend on the availability of parolees, so that they can compile a report at the end of a month. Participant J/C said:

> *You are trying to reach the numbers that they want, but it's difficult. Remember parolees have to come to us when they have challenges or problems. If they don't come, we end up not reaching the target*.

The inability of social workers to render quality service could progress into potentially serious problems such as violation of conditions and rearrests. Comparing the findings with the literature, it is evident that the quality of work is fundamental for employees and organisations, and it is regarded as a crucial measure of organisational performance (Geisler et al., 2019). Social workers also voiced their frustrations about their seniors who focus more on services geared towards the rehabilitation of incarcerated offenders and not parolees, influencing their work on a meso level. These difficulties can convince the participants to leave their organisation or even the profession.

Subtheme 1.10: No budget for community projects

Social workers should be provided with relevant resources, such as an adequate budget to effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate parolees (Makhurane, 2020). They need funds to run community awareness campaigns and community work projects. The participants indicated that it is a challenge for them to run community work projects and awareness campaigns because of the lack of resources, something over which they have no control, placing it on an exo level.

> *Another challenge is that we don't have a budget for community awareness campaigns.* (Participant P/E)

Participant P confirmed that they are unable to perform effectively because of a lack of resources.

> *It's so challenging because at the end of the day your report will be saying you are not performing, and sometimes it's lack of resources, like when you want to organise community projects, you need funds and you find that funds are exhausted.* (Participant P)

These findings speak of a feeling of job dissatisfaction which characterises social workers not performing as expected as a result of a lack of resources. As described in the literature, social workers often face challenges of engaging with community structures in which parolees reside to address their concerns and improve their quality of life (Pradeep & Karibeeran, 2017). The researcher concludes that the challenges that social workers experience affect service delivery, which in turn leads to parole violations and recidivism.

In the next theme, social work supervisors and heads of community corrections describe the challenges they observed in providing social work services to parolees.

Theme 2: Social work supervisors' and heads of community corrections offices' descriptions of the challenges experienced in providing social work services to parolees

The social work supervisors and heads of community corrections offices were asked to describe the challenges experienced in providing social work services to parolees from their perspectives. Their responses to this question were categorised into nine subthemes as presented below.

Subtheme 2.1: Parolees not being easily accessible and not keeping appointments

Social work supervisors and heads of community corrections offices agreed that parolees are not readily available to take advantage of social work services. They do not avail themselves of social work services. Participant T explained:

> *We are struggling because we must manhunt the clients. Sometimes … when you want to see them, they don't avail themselves; they will tell you they are working, they don't have money for transport, their employer does not know that they are parolees.*

Parolees are serving their sentences outside the correctional centres and social workers find it difficult to get them to attend programmes. Participant D spoke about the difficulty of getting parolees at the same time for programmes:

> *… parolees are now outside in the communities and it is quite difficult to even get five of them at the same time to come for programmes.* (Participant D)

It is evident from the above extracts that parolees have several reasons for not attending social work services, which include transport challenges and the fact that they are working and not available during the week.

Participant D explained:

> *When someone is released from prison and has already attended all the programmes while inside, they often don't see the need to attend further programmes once they are outside. They may not see the relevance or importance of continuing with these programmes in the community.* (Participant D)

According to Quinn-Hogan (2021), it is very important for parolees to attend rehabilitation programmes as they assist in combating crime. A South African study on ex-offenders' appraisal of offender reintegration programmes in South Africa conducted by Chikadzi et al. (2022) states that rehabilitation programmes presented by social workers in the correctional centers are embraced as a proactive way to reduce crime and recidivism.

Subtheme 2.2: High caseloads and focus on quantity

Although social workers also shared their frustration with the focus on quantity, the view of social work supervisors was broader, referring to the allocation of caseloads of the organisation. High caseloads and the focus on quantity and meeting set targets were seen by the social work supervisors as a challenge in social work service delivery and, more broadly, as a challenge posed by the exo system.

> *Another challenge is the workload for social workers. Social workers are unable to reach out to all parolees due to workload, which sometimes leads to other parolees reoffending because they are stressed and we are unable to address every case.* (Participant J)

Participant M/L confirmed the above assertion:

> *… the issue of high caseload is a very big problem for us. Our caseload is high, the number is big and it becomes difficult for only four social workers. And as a supervisor, I also have my own caseload.*

The ideal caseload is stated by Barck-Holst et al. (2021) as 15 to 30 cases per social worker. High caseloads have also been noted as a common factor in stress, job burnout and job dissatisfaction. With social workers being integral to supporting people in the community who are most in need, they must be provided with appropriate support to reduce workplace stress and promote optimal health and wellbeing (Ravalier et al., 2021).

Subtheme 2.3: Community challenges and stigmatisation of parolees

The social work supervisors cited various challenges within communities that hinder service delivery to parolees, including the stigma attached to parolees, failure to deliver services because of community unrest and lack of funds for community work projects.

> *There is still stigma attached to the parolees by members of the community. There is a lot of work that needs to be done to address the issue of the stigma that the community has against the parolees.* (Participant D)

Participant M/L spoke of the challenges they experience when there are community protests:

> *When there is community unrest, you cannot access your clients because there is a service delivery problem in the community. You cannot see them and they also cannot come to the office for safety reasons.* (Participant M/L)

It is generally known that parolees are stigmatised by the community upon re-entry because of the crimes they have committed. This challenge is situated in the macro system of social workers. Holloway and Wiener (2020) state that the stigma attached to parolees upon re-entering the community hinders them from participating in activities that are designed to help them and increase their social skills. For this reason, families and caregivers must support parolees for successful reintegration.

Subtheme 2.4: Lack of teamwork

The responses of social work supervisors and heads of community corrections offices concurred with those of social workers regarding the lack of teamwork at community corrections offices. Participant T noted the challenges of being unable to work as a team:

> *… there is no teamwork between social workers and parole officers; it's like we are working with different people and we have different mandates; it's like everyone is pushing his/her own agenda.* (Participant T)

Participant D reported the same challenges regarding the lack of team work:

> *… we find that services at community corrections are fragmented. Reintegration officers will do their job and finish, and a social worker would come and do their job and finish. So, there is no link in what they are doing … when they are having committee sittings, they don't invite a social worker and then social workers are not informed when the offender is violating conditions.*

The participants' comments revolved around the lack of teamwork. It was evident that there are teams at community corrections offices where team spirit is absent. Even though they have shared goals, social workers and monitoring officials work in isolation. Studies have reported that teamwork has a powerful impact on employee performance and can assist in facilitating the developmental process in the organisation (Polega et al., 2019). Sanyal and Hisam (2018, p. 15) state that recently the focus of individuals is no longer on the concept of teamwork, but on achieving organisational goals individually. A lack of teamwork within community corrections offices can lead to social workers feeling isolated, unsupported, and overwhelmed. As a result, some may choose to leave community corrections offices and return to correctional centres where team dynamics are more established. Given the above, it is evident that teamwork is very important and has a positive impact on any organisation.

Subtheme 2.5: Social workers not trained on the community corrections system

Social work supervisors mentioned that social workers are not trained on the community corrections system and this is a challenge in rendering services to parolees:

> *… because we are not trained on the community corrections system, there is a form that the social worker should complete and send to the parole officers because they are able to report parolee violations on the community corrections system. Social workers are unable to do that.* (Participant D)

The heads of community corrections offices shared the same sentiments regarding social workers not being trained in community corrections:

> *... [social workers] must report to the parole officers in case a parolee did not honour the appointment, so that the parole officers can [stipulate] a violation on the system. Social workers were not trained in the community corrections system.* (Participant Z)

The findings suggest that social workers experience low job satisfaction, particularly because they must rely on monitoring officials to enforce compliance with parole conditions among offenders who violate them. Training is viewed by Narayanan and Nandi (2017) as a platform used by the organisation as a macro-system to communicate its vision to employees and to integrate them into the organisation.

Subtheme 2.6: Lack of resources including suitable offices

The lack of resources was mentioned by social work supervisors as a hindrance to the provision of social work services to parolees and the community on an exo level. This is depicted in the following comment:

> *We don't have resources to render social work services to our clients, resources such as telephones. Even now, since I came to this office, the phones are not working.* (Participant V)

According to Nielsen et al. (2017), the availability of resources in the workplace assists employees in completing their tasks, apart from being a way of enhancing their wellbeing. Communication with clients in the community is also not possible, because social workers do not have telephones.

The heads of community corrections offices mentioned that social workers do not have suitable venues to render confidential social work services. The comment below attest to the difficulties of working without resources.

> *And another challenge that we experience with social workers is the satellite offices, they are not offices where the social worker can render confidential services.* (Participant N)

It is generally accepted that social work services should be rendered in an office where the client and the helper will be comfortable talking and maintaining confidentiality (Honawar, 2019). Social workers are unable to render such services because of a lack of well-resourced offices.

Subtheme 2.7: Parolees not thinking they need social work services or have unrealistic expectations

The heads of community corrections offices described one of the challenges as being that parolees do not think they need social work services, or that they have unrealistic expectations of what the social workers can do for them. Social workers are sometimes expected to intervene in situations that are beyond the scope of their professional knowledge, which has an effect on their relationships with parolees on a micro-level.

> *They think that there is no need to consult with the social worker or make use of their services …* [The parolee] *would say: 'I'm out on parole and I don't need a social worker's*

services. They only approach social workers when their parole comes under threat. (Participant B)

Sometimes I think the challenge is that the social workers are expected to intervene in things that are impossible for them to do. For example, when there are family disputes concerning property rights and so on, the challenge is the expectation of others rather than what the social workers are doing. (Participant XL)

It is clear from the above comments that upon release from the correctional centres, most of the parolees believe that they are free and are not willing to attend community corrections services, which include social work services. Honawar (2019) states that the social work profession is dedicated to assisting vulnerable populations, including parolees, to address life challenges and enhance their wellbeing.

Subtheme 2.8: Caregivers not understanding their role

The most important unit of society that plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of parolees is the family (Makhurane, 2020). Caregivers not understanding their role in respect of the parolee was another challenge mentioned by the heads of community corrections offices as stated below:

... caregivers don't understand their roles as the caregivers of the parolees. When they experience challenges with the parolees at home, they would call us and say 'please come and take this person of yours'. I think the reunification services should be started before the offender is released from the correctional centre. (Participant Z)

The families are experiencing challenges with the parolees, but they are afraid to report, especially if the parolee is a breadwinner, and this is making it difficult for the social worker to render the service. (Participant N)

Caregivers and family, play a critical role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of parolees. This finding is supported by Walker and Bishop (2016), who state that serving a sentence close to family members who understand their role reduces the chances of recidivism.

Subtheme 2.9: Social workers not going into the community or doing projects

Community work is one of the social work methods and social workers at community corrections are expected to go to the community to render services. Community work has been regarded as a significant aspect of the field of social work for decades (Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018); however, in this study, the heads of community corrections offices mentioned that social workers do not go into the community as is indicated in their job description. Participant Z noted that social workers are not going into the community.

Because they are not going out, they are unable to engage the family members on the parole conditions; they don't know what they need to do in order to understand the parolee.

Unlike the social workers and social work supervisors, the heads of community corrections offices highlighted the challenge of the social workers not wanting to do projects or to be involved in other community corrections' activities, which influences the relationship between

the social worker and the community on a meso level. The following comment indicates the challenge of social workers not doing projects

> *Social workers themselves can become more involved in actual activities of community corrections because everything is sort of interlinked. … They should* accompany *us when we do the monitoring just to see the offenders'/parolees' families and see where the offenders are staying and which communities they are coming from.* (Participant B)

The researcher concludes that a lack of team spirit and the unavailability of resources can hinder social workers from rendering services to parolees and their family members. Social workers form part of the team at community corrections with shared objectives. However, they are reluctant to go into the community as part of the monitoring team, but this is no longer about personal safety but a clear indication that there is no team spirit.

In the next theme, social workers provide explanations of how they cope with the challenges they experience when rendering services to parolees.

Theme 3: Social workers' perspectives on how they cope with the challenges they experience when rendering social work services to parolees

The social workers gave explanations on how they cope with the challenges they experience when rendering services to parolees. Their responses are categorised under four subthemes which are presented below.

Subtheme 3.1: Consulting supervisor or debriefing with colleagues

A number of the social workers responded that they cope with their challenges by consulting with their supervisor or debriefing with colleagues, which lies on the micro level of the social worker.

> *It's very difficult, because we just try to work hard, but with some of the cases we consult with our supervisor because we don't have debriefing sessions. I have never attended one.* (Participant R/K)

> *Sometimes we sit together as social workers and talk about our frustrations; in a way we are debriefing one another.* (Participant J/C)

The above comments show that what social workers are currently doing relates to the principle of consultation as stated in the Policy guidelines for conduct, code of ethics and the rules for social workers in South Africa (SACSSP, 2007), which state that social workers should seek advice and the counsel of colleagues whenever such consultations are in the best interests of the clients. Vassos, Harms and Rose (2018) state that much of the literature on social work emphasises the importance of one-on-one supervision of social workers as this is regarded as an activity for continuous professional development.

Subtheme 3.2: Continuing to provide services by making adjustments

The social workers also explained that they continue to provide services and make adjustments, for example, working weekends, so that they are able to reach more parolees who are not

available during the week as a result of work commitments. The following comment attests to this:

> *I was coping by coming during the weekends even though I was not paid for that. I was doing this so that I can be able to get more parolees for the programmes so that I can report at month end.* (Participant N/A)

Because of a lack of resources, social workers are not provided with phones to contact parolees and some of them use their own cell phones in order to render services.

> *We end up using our own phones and our own money and no one is going to pay you for that.* (Participant N/F)

There are no offices for social workers in the community; therefore, social workers meet with parolees in their cars and sometimes relying on the resources of sister departments such as the South African Police Service (SAPS), which are not always available.

Participant J/C explained:

> *I sit in the car with the offender; it is not safe. You sit in the front seat and the offender would be at the back then you have that conversation and in that case it's confidential because it's only the two of us.*

Some social workers work weekends to accommodate parolees who are working during the week. Participant J/C made the following comment:

> *I was coping by coming during the weekends even though I was not paid for that. I have parolees who start working at 9:00 in the morning and they indicate that they are available at 6:00; I would make appointments with them to start the programmes at 6:30 and finish by 8:00 so that they can be able to go to work.*

Social workers in this study have their own way of coping with the challenges; one of them is very risky such as working during the weekends where approval has not been granted. Should they be injured in the community during this time, DCS cannot be held accountable. This is done in order to reach a number of parolees who are not available during the week.

Subtheme 3.3: Reporting parolees' violations of parole conditions

The inability to report parolees' violations of their parole conditions was described as a challenge by the social workers, but some explained how they overcome this. They refer the parole violations to the monitoring officials, who can report them on the community corrections system.

> *We report to the parole officers, and they capture parolee violations on the system; we don't know the system.* (Participant G)

> *Yes, we do report their violations but it's the responsibility of the parole officers, as they are the ones who are familiar with the community corrections system ... we were not trained on that.* (Participant N/S)

Subtheme 3.4: Referring to other service providers

Social workers at community corrections offices work hand-in-hand with external stakeholders to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate offenders into the community (Makhurane, 2020). The social workers confirmed that they refer parolees to other service providers for assistance, particularly to meet basic needs or for substance abuse treatment.

> *We always refer them to the Department of Social Development (DSD) for food parcels, and sometimes in our office we donate money from our own pockets and identify parolees who are in need. Sometimes the religious people in the community assist us with donations and we identify those in need.* (Participant N/F)

> *Usually with the drug issue, we refer them to the rehabilitation centres. Some of our parolees, when they come back from rehab, they will tell you it was just a holiday* [Participant J/C].

The above comments are consistent with the Policy guidelines for codes of conduct, code of ethics and the rules for social workers in South Africa (SACSSP, 2007), which allow social workers to refer clients to other service providers when specialised knowledge is needed to fully serve the client. The findings above are supported by Makhurane (2020), who states that different stakeholders should be involved in dealing with specific needs and challenges of parolees with the aim of reducing reoffending. The researchers strongly agree that social workers should network with other stakeholders and that parolees should be referred for further intervention which will contribute to their successful reintegration.

DISCUSSION

To understand the challenges of social workers when working with parolees, the researcher interviewed social workers, their supervisors and heads of correctional offices. The findings from the separate sources of information mostly corresponded, although social workers, as expected, provided more detail on challenges in practical service delivery, while supervisors and heads of correctional offices had a more managerial perspective.

The ecological systems theory assisted the researchers in understanding the challenges of social workers rendering services to parolees on different levels or in different systems. One of the aims of the ecological systems theory is to clarify the relationships and interactions between individuals (Narang & Meenai, 2016). On a micro level, the relationship between the social workers and parolees was affected by parolees not being accessible and not attending social work programmes. They also tended to deny that they have problems, thus not seeing the need for input from DCS. Caregivers did not understand their role and did not support the parolees. Social workers shared their fear of going into the community on their own to visit parolees. But they nevertheless tried to cope on a micro level by going alone into the community, despite their fears for their safety, or working over weekends.

At a meso level, including social interactions between two or more of the focal individuals' settings (Neal & Neal, 2013), it was revealed that there is insufficient teamwork or meaningful interactions between the micro systems of the social workers and parole officers, which in turn affects service delivery to parolees. The findings indicated that the programmes provided to

parolees are similar to the ones presented to inmates in correctional centres, with the result that there was some resistance among parolees to attend them. Social workers are not trained on how to report parolees not attending their programmes on the system. It thus seems as if different stakeholders render services in silos and that a holistic approach to parolees' needs is absent. Social workers reported that they requested supervision and asked monitoring officials to report parolee non-compliance on the system on their behalf in an effort to cope. They also referred parolees to other service providers such as rehabilitation centres.

Meso systems are nested within an exo system, which is an environment that affects the individual, but in which the individual is neither a part of nor involved with. (Neal & Neal, 2013). Findings revealed that social workers are unable to make contact with parolees and their family members because of a lack of resourced offices in the community. Social workers have high caseloads and are expected to report in terms of quantity and not quality of work rendered. They also do not receive a budget to do community work projects.

The macro system is regarded as the outermost layer in the individual's environment within which exo systems are nested (Piel et al., 2017). In this case the macro system refers to the stigmatisation of parolees and the crimes they committed within the community and a lack of knowledge on issues around half sentence and conditions of parole. Not having a budget and safe offices within the community makes is difficult for social workers to address these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parolees in the community do not always make themselves available for social work services. The DCS should ensure that social workers have well-resourced offices in the community to render confidential services and present rehabilitation programmes to parolees. The resources needed include office computers and telephones. Most of the parolees do not work and are unable to reach the community corrections offices. Availability of resources would address some of the challenges of parolee non-compliance with the conditions.

Social workers find it difficult to render services to parolees as there is no budget allocated for their services. The DCS and the Treasury should consider allocating a budget for social workers at community corrections offices. It is anticipated that adequate budget allocation will assist in ensuring that resources such as telephones are available. It is further recommended that this budget should make provision for community work projects to facilitate social workers' efforts to reach out to parolees' families and communities.

The DCS should consider training social workers on the community corrections system. They work with parolees and are unable to report their non-compliance on the system. It is anticipated that training of social workers would assist them to be more productive.

The DCS should also consider the appointment of more social workers to deal with the existing caseload. Social workers are overloaded and in terms of the reporting requirements, they focus more on quantity rather than quality.

The DCS should also consider developing a strategy that will assist in ensuring that parolees attend programmes presented by social workers and are available for their appointments. They need to be reminded that they are no longer in correctional centres and should continue with

their sentences in the community. It is thus also important that social workers develop programmes focused on the needs of parolees and not only repeat programmes parolees had attended as inmates.

There is a need for teamwork at community corrections offices and this will, among other things, address the fear of social workers going out into the community on their own. Teamwork would enable social workers and monitoring officials to conduct marketing of services in the community, where caregivers and families of parolees would be orientated on the services rendered at community corrections. Participation in these services would assist them in understanding their responsibilities as caregivers, as well as the significance of providing support for parolees. It is further anticipated that teamwork and community awareness campaigns would encourage parolees to comply with the parole conditions, as well as enhance the effectiveness of service delivery to parolees.

CONCLUSION

This article provided an overview of the challenges that social workers face in the correctional offices of the DCS rendering services to parolees and how they try to cope. Challenges were identified on a micro, macro, exo and macro level, and recommendations were made on how these challenges should be addressed. The invaluable role social workers play as part of community corrections should be recognised and social workers should be empowered in their efforts to address recidivism of parolees as part of a holistic team effort. The provision of resources for social workers at community corrections office will enhance service delivery to parolees and to the entire community.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mmatsatsi Elizabeth Ramokolo-Kutu was a PhD student, currently employed by the Department of Correctional Services as a manager of the Employee Assistance Programme. The article resulted from her PhD study, which was conducted from February 2020 to February 2024, and she wrote the initial draft of the article. Her field of specialisation is Employee Assistance Programmes, family services and rehabilitation of offenders.

Petro Botha is a Professor at the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa. She supervised the study from February 2020 to February 2024, as well as assisting with the writing of the draft article. Her field of specialisation is foster care, mentoring, coaching and social work education.