

A critical review of South Africa's current parole system

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Abstract

This article provides a critical review of South Africa's current parole system, focusing on persistent issues such as inconsistent decision-making, minimal victim participation and high recidivism rates among parolees. It reviews government reform efforts from 2008 to 2024, highlighting delays in legislative changes, leadership gaps within parole boards and declining public confidence. Drawing on official reports, media coverage and government briefings, it is argued that without urgent reforms, the parole system will remain ineffective in reintegrating offenders into society while maintaining public safety. Recommendations include a multi-disciplinary parole board, evidence-based decision-making, meaningful victim involvement and improved transparency through public parole hearings.

Keywords

parole system, public safety, recidivism, South Africa, victim participation

Introduction

This paper provides a critical analysis of the current South African parole system, examining its effectiveness, challenges and overall impact on the criminal justice system. The primary objective is to address the pressing question: Does the current South African parole system require a comprehensive review?

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This question has been a focal point of numerous governmental discussions, including debates in parliament, as policymakers, legal experts and society at large continue to ponder whether the parole system effectively fulfils its intended mandate. Concerns about potential shortcomings in its implementation, administrative processes and overall application have been raised, prompting calls for review and reform. These concerns were deliberated in a workshop on 20 November 2024 organised by the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) and Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, entitled 'Evaluation of South African parole system' (Ncama, 2024, personal communication). This workshop reflected the urgent call for review and evaluation of the parole system. Against this backdrop, this paper contributes to the debate by proposing a framework of guiding principles for a reformed parole system in South Africa.

Several studies have examined this topic in the South African context, including research by Letlape (2023), Lidovho (2003), Louw (2008) and Mujuzi (2011). Although highlighting various challenges in the existing parole system and recommending a policy review along with improvements to processes, these studies did not propose a comprehensive or ideal model for a reformed parole system. While they identified key areas of concern, such as inefficiencies in administration, inconsistencies in parole decisions and potential gaps in rehabilitation efforts, they fell short of offering a clear vision of an improved parole system. They did not explicitly articulate a framework or guiding principles to underpin a restructured parole system, leaving an important gap in the discourse on parole reform in South Africa. This paper aims to build upon those studies by critically evaluating the existing parole system and exploring potential pathways for reform. It seeks to bridge the gap in the literature by proposing a well-defined and practical approach to a more effective and just parole system.

Community corrections in South Africa

South Africa's correctional system is characterised by high levels of overcrowding, which places considerable strain on prisons and the broader criminal justice system. By March 2024, correctional centres held 156,600 inmates against an approved capacity of 105,474, reflecting an overcrowding rate of 48% (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a: 71). The prison population rate is estimated at 260 per 100,000 of the national population, based on a projected population of 63.85 million as of July 2025 (World Prison Brief, 2025). This high incarceration rate positions South Africa among the countries with the highest imprisonment levels globally, underscoring the magnitude of the challenge facing its correctional system. Community corrections therefore play a critical role in alleviating this pressure by offering a structured, cost-effective alternative to incarceration. Nationally, 218 community corrections offices supervise parolees, probationers and awaiting-trial persons (ATPs),¹ ensuring compliance with release conditions while facilitating reintegration (Department of Correctional Services, 2023). In the 2023/2024 financial year,² these offices managed an average caseload of 46,686 parolees, 6325 probationers and 793 ATPs (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a: 83). However, despite their importance, community corrections offices face heavy workloads. In 2022, the average official-to-offender ratio was 1:32, with some offices facing ratios as high as 1:59

(Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2022). These figures underscore not only the scale of community-based supervision but also the importance of parole in reducing prison overcrowding and promoting offender rehabilitation.

Understanding parole in South Africa

Parole is an essential component of South Africa's correctional system, providing for the conditional release of offenders before the completion of their full sentences and ensuring their supervised reintegration into society. It offers a structured pathway that supports rehabilitation and reintegration as law-abiding citizens while maintaining public safety by reducing the risk of reoffending (Louw, 2008; Portfolio Committee on Justice and Constitutional Development, 2015).

South Africa's parole system operates under the framework of Chapter 28 of the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 (CPA), in conjunction with the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 (CSA). Chapter VII of the CSA, which came into effect on 1 October 2004, regulates the release of offenders from correctional centres and their placement under correctional supervision,³ parole and day parole. This chapter specifies the minimum detention periods offenders must serve before being considered for community corrections, establishes the functions of the Correctional Supervision and Parole Board⁴ (hereafter referred to as the parole board) and the Correctional Supervision and Parole Review Board, and sets out provisions for medical parole. The discussion that follows focuses on parole considerations and decision-making for offenders sentenced after 1 October 2004, particularly those serving determinate sentences⁵ under the CSA.

Eligibility for parole

Offenders become eligible for parole consideration after serving the minimum detention period prescribed by law (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a: 107; Louw, 2013: 35). South African legislation provides that all sentenced offenders may be considered for parole after serving a portion of their sentence. In terms of section 73(6)(a) of the CSA, offenders sentenced after 1 October 2004 to a determinate sentence exceeding 24 months may be considered for parole after completing the non-parole period, or, if none was stipulated, half of their sentence (Republic of South Africa, 1998: 55). However, exceptions exist for certain categories of offenders. Habitual criminals may be considered for parole after serving 7 years, while those sentenced to life imprisonment become eligible after 25 years. The final decision regarding parole for offenders serving life sentences rests with the Minister of Correctional Services, following recommendations from the parole board (Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2015; Republic of South Africa, 1998: 58).

The parole process

The parole process begins with the case management committee⁶ within each correctional centre, which compiles a profile report for the parole board. This report provides critical

insights into the offender's rehabilitation progress, the potential risk to the community and the interests of victims. If parole is granted, the offender is released under supervision by the community corrections office, subject to compliance with the conditions set by the parole board (Louw, 2008: 90; Louw and Luyt, 2009: 3–4). Parole decision-making authority depends on the length of the offender's sentence. The head of the correctional centre has the power to grant parole to offenders serving sentences of 24 months or less, while the parole board is responsible for cases involving sentences longer than 24 months (Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2015).

Parole is not an automatic entitlement upon serving the minimum detention period. Instead, each case is assessed individually based on factors such as the severity of the offence, risk of reoffending, participation in rehabilitation programmes, engagement with restorative justice processes, available community support structures and the potential risk to victims and society (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a: 107; Hargovan, 2015; Louw, 2008). Rehabilitation programmes offered to incarcerated offenders include: (1) correctional programmes targeting offending behaviour (e.g. anger management, substance abuse, restorative justice orientation and pre-release programmes); (2) production workshops (e.g. carpentry, plumbing, welding) and agriculture; (3) skills development (e.g. baking, upholstery, computer literacy) and educational programmes; and (4) psychological, social work and spiritual care services (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a; Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2025a; Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2014).

The parole board, which evaluates parole applications, comprises four community members – including a chairperson and vice-chairperson – appointed on fixed 5-year contracts, with two additional part-time community representatives. A DCS official serves as the board's secretary, and a representative from the South African Police Service (SAPS) may be co-opted for specific cases (Department of Correctional Services, 2024b; Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2024a; Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2020).

Despite its intended purpose, the parole system has faced significant criticism in recent years due to high-profile cases involving parolees who have reoffended. Such cases have fuelled public debates about the effectiveness of the system in balancing offender rehabilitation with public safety concerns.

Parole failures and public outcry: Cases highlighting the urgent need for parole reform

In England and Wales, the conviction rate for serious further offences (SFOs) remains consistently low, at or below 0.5% (Parole Board for England and Wales, 2025a: 17). SFOs refer to specific violent and sexual crimes committed by individuals who were, or had only recently been, under community supervision at the time of the offence (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024: 5). By contrast, South Africa's parole system has faced significant criticism due to the high incidence of SFOs among parolees. While the DCS maintains that parole boards carefully assess risks and ensure

participation in rehabilitation programmes designed to address offending behaviour (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a: 27), the frequency and severity of crimes committed by parolees suggest profound shortcomings in this process. In 2024/2025 alone, 5682 parolees committed new offences out of a supervised population of 52,556, equating to a reoffending rate of 10.8%. During the same reporting period, parolees and probationers were linked to 303 rape cases (5.3%) and 209 murder cases (3.7%) (Minister of Correctional Services, 2025). Such figures reveal a troubling picture of a parole system that appears to be failing in its fundamental objective of balancing offender reintegration with public safety.

Over the past five years, media reports have consistently highlighted cases of SFOs committed by parolees, which have fuelled public outrage and undermined confidence in South Africa's parole system. The weaknesses of the system are most evident in cases where parolees commit violent crimes soon after release, with women and children particularly at risk of sexual violence and murder by individuals deemed rehabilitated and suitable for reintegration (Hlati, 2022). Patterns emerging from reported cases reveal that many parolees had extensive histories of violent and sexual offending, including rape, child abuse and murder (Adonis, 2022; Evans, 2022; Masson, 2022, 2023; Zaal, 2024). In some cases, individuals had been released despite prior reoffending while on parole, raising questions about the effectiveness of risk assessments (Khumalo, 2022; Mitchley, 2022; Schrieber, 2022). Others committed new offences within days of release, suggesting significant shortcomings in monitoring and community supervision (Mabuza, 2024; Manna, 2024). At the most extreme, parolees were implicated in multiple rapes and murders, including the widely reported Lusikisiki massacre, which left 18 people dead (Ellis, 2024; Ellis and Mazwi, 2024). Collectively, these cases expose fundamental failings in parole decision-making and emphasise the urgent need for reform to restore trust and credibility in the system.

Parole reform in South Africa: A system in perpetual transition

The parole system in South Africa has undergone significant scrutiny over the years, with repeated calls for reform to address its limitations. The current system, introduced in 2004, has been widely criticised as outdated and ineffective in balancing the rehabilitation of offenders with public safety and victim participation (Department of Correctional Services, 2017: 27; De Villiers, 2017). Despite multiple attempts to refine and improve the system, many of the challenges remain unresolved.

Early calls for reform and the abandoned 2008 incarceration framework

Concerns about the parole system were raised as early as 2007 when the Correctional Services Portfolio Committee⁷ emphasised the need for a review. The main critique was that the system employed a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, failing to distinguish between offenders who had committed petty crimes and those convicted of more serious offences (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2007). The committee called for a more nuanced approach that would tailor parole policies to the severity of the crime and the individual risk posed by the offender.

In 2008, an attempt was made to introduce a new incarceration framework through the Correctional Services Amendment Act 25 of 2008. This framework sought to establish a third parole system that would revise the criteria for determining the minimum period offenders must serve before qualifying for parole (Department of National Treasury, 2012: 2; Republic of South Africa, 2008). However, after extensive deliberations and consultations, the proposal was scrapped in 2010 due to its legal and logistical complexities (Department of Correctional Services, 2017: 30). The decision to abandon the framework was largely based on concerns that introducing a third parole system could create confusion and inconsistency in sentencing and release procedures (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2010).

Academic research has echoed these concerns. Louw and Luyt (2009) recommended further studies to determine whether South Africa's parole policy required reform and to highlight the significance of the parole decision-making process. They argued that an effective parole system should be a key component of broader correctional reforms. Despite these recommendations, little progress was made in addressing systemic flaws, and by 2015 concerns over the independence and professionalism of parole boards and victim participation continued to dominate discussions.

The 2015 review and ministerial intervention

A major push for parole reform came in 2015 when former Justice and Correctional Services Minister, Advocate Michael Masutha, initiated a review of the parole system. During his address to parole boards and case management committees on 24 November 2014, Masutha expressed concern over inconsistencies in parole decision-making and the lack of victim participation (South African Government, 2014). He pointed out that parole boards often did not ask uniform questions when assessing offenders, leading to discrepancies in release decisions for individuals with similar offence profiles. To address these issues, a task team was established to evaluate the parole system and develop a new framework for its management. The team was tasked with the following:

- Strengthening the recruitment and retention of skilled professionals, such as criminologists and psychologists, to improve parole board decision-making.
- Increasing victim and community participation in parole hearings.
- Partnering with institutions of higher learning to develop an offence-specific risk assessment tool.
- Implementing capacity-building programmes for parole boards, focusing on interviewing techniques, restorative justice and victim support services (South African Government, 2015).

The 2017 position paper and systemic reform proposals

In 2017, following the conclusion of the task team's investigation and the 2015 review, the DCS drafted a position paper outlining proposed reforms to South Africa's parole

system. This document was circulated to relevant stakeholders for input and served as a foundation for discussions and consultations aimed at finalising an improved parole framework. Key stakeholders involved in the consultation process included the National Council for Correctional Services (NCCS),⁸ the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services,⁹ the Medical Parole Advisory Board and the parole boards (Hlati, 2022; Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, 2022b).

A key proposal was the establishment of a new Parole Administration Act, which would govern parole decision-making, placement, monitoring and reintegration within the community corrections system. Some of the most significant proposed amendments were the following:

- The establishment of parole boards at management, provincial and national levels with clearly defined powers and responsibilities.
- Revised procedures for reviewing parole board decisions.
- Enhanced victim participation mechanisms.
- Improved transparency in parole decision-making.
- The inclusion of provisions regulating halfway houses and parole revocation procedures (Department of Correctional Services, 2017).

The position paper also outlined several reforms aimed at enhancing the parole consideration process by ensuring comprehensive decision-making, better risk assessment and increased transparency. These proposals included the following: (1) including victim and SAPS representations earlier in the process to provide a more complete parole profile report; (2) introducing a reoffending risk assessment tool to identify potential risk factors; (3) implementing a decision-making matrix to standardise the factors considered by parole boards, reducing bias and improving consistency; (4) using a parole revocation tool to ensure that all relevant factors, including prior interventions, are considered before revoking parole and (5) publishing parole consideration dates and offender names in advance to allow victims and other stakeholders the opportunity to provide input and participate in restorative justice processes (Department of Correctional Services, 2017).

While the 2017 position paper presented a much-needed blueprint for reforming South Africa's parole system, it was criticised for its lack of quantitative data to assess the feasibility of its proposals (Muntingh, 2018: 2). Without empirical evidence, the practicality and financial sustainability of the suggested reforms remain unclear. Even more concerning is the apparent inaction regarding its approval by either the former or the current Minister of Correctional Services. This delay raises serious questions about the government's commitment to parole reform. Without concrete steps towards implementation, the position paper risks becoming another unfulfilled policy initiative, leaving critical issues in the parole system unresolved.

The 2020 parole reform efforts

In 2020, former Justice and Correctional Services Minister Ronald Lamola acknowledged the persistent flaws in South Africa's parole system, particularly following reports of crimes

committed by parolees against children (Mabuza, 2020). In response, yet another task team was formed – this time in collaboration with the NCCS – to review parole laws and policies (Meyer, 2020). Under the leadership of Judge Desai, the team was tasked with making the parole process more victim centred, revising minimum detention periods for violent sexual offences (Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2020), enhancing public safety (Meyer, 2020) and addressing non-compliance with the Correctional Services Act (Evans, 2020). However, this initiative echoed previous reform efforts, raising concerns about the government’s ability to implement meaningful and lasting change.

It was only in 2022 that Minister Lamola presented a three-pronged strategy to address these persistent issues. He emphasised strengthening parole procedures by formalising victim–offender dialogues, restructuring parole boards to improve decision-making and commissioning an independent review of rehabilitation programmes to assess their socio-economic impact (Moya, 2022). While these measures reflected an ongoing commitment to reform, they also exposed a recurring pattern of reactive policy-making rather than proactive intervention.

Ongoing debates and delays in South Africa’s parole system reform (2024)

Years later, discussions around parole reform and the effectiveness of South Africa’s parole system remain unresolved. Despite repeated assurances that a review is underway, tangible progress has yet to be seen. In July 2024, Correctional Services Minister Dr Pieter Groenewald reiterated the government’s commitment to reviewing the parole system during his department’s budget vote. He emphasised the urgency of finalising reforms, framing this as both a policy necessity and a moral obligation. Groenewald acknowledged public concerns regarding fairness and transparency, questioning the extent to which victims’ voices influence parole decisions. He called for a reassessment of the system’s review and oversight mechanisms (South African Government, 2024).

The prolonged delay in finalising the parole system review has not only undermined confidence in the DCS but also contributed to reputational damage, particularly as reports continue to surface of parolees engaging in violent crimes. While the DCS confirmed that research on the review had been completed, it remained unclear why legislative amendments had not yet been implemented. The DCS aimed to finalise these amendments within the first 24 months of the new government term, but given the history of delays, scepticism remained about whether meaningful reforms would materialise (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2024a).

Discussion

The most pressing tension within the parole process lies in reconciling rehabilitation with public safety. In principle, parole reflects a correctional philosophy that emphasises rehabilitation and structured reintegration as central to reducing recidivism (Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2015). However, parole decisions are often met with public scepticism, as communities perceive them as compromising safety, highlighting the need for a system that protects society, recognises victims’ rights and

promotes genuine rehabilitation (Paoli, 2025). Conversely, delaying or denying parole exacerbates overcrowding and undermines rehabilitation, thereby weakening prospects for successful reintegration.

Another persistent tension involves balancing the rights of offenders with those of victims (Njilo, 2025). While offenders are legally entitled to parole consideration once statutory requirements are met, many victims feel excluded when offenders are released without their knowledge (Venter, 2020). Although section 75(4) of the CSA and section 299A of the CPA provide for victim participation in parole hearings (Portfolio Committee on Justice and Correctional Services, 2020), in practice such participation is inconsistent and often minimal (Commission for Gender Equality, 2012: 63; Louw, 2021). The Service Charter for Victims of Crime in South Africa (commonly referred to as the Victims' Charter) affirms victims' rights to be informed of parole proceedings, to attend hearings and to make verbal or written representations to the parole board (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2014). Such representations may include the emotional, physical and financial impact of the offence, as well as any concerns about safety, restitution and rehabilitation (Department of Correctional Services, 2006). Victims ultimately seek a parole process that integrates punishment, rehabilitation and reparation while addressing their needs for information, respect, recognition and voice.

Victims' attitudes are shaped by a widespread perception that the criminal justice system does not treat them fairly (Hargovan, 2015). This perception is supported by evidence showing that victims are often not informed of parole hearings and that few counselling or support structures exist to facilitate their participation (Geldenhuys, 2022; Hargovan, 2015). In some instances, victims are not notified at all, despite having provided their contact details (Blanche, 2020). During the 2021/2022 financial year, 1882 victims or their families were not consulted prior to the granting of parole (Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, 2022a). High-profile cases have further exposed these systemic shortcomings. In the case of Bob Hewitt, a former tennis champion convicted of raping and sexually assaulting girls he coached, parole was granted in 2019 without notifying the victims, even though their contact details were available to the parole board. Following ministerial intervention, the decision was overturned and reconsidered after the victims' submissions were received (Blanche, 2020; Meyer, 2020). Similarly, in 2024, the parole of Frans du Toit and Theuns Kruger – convicted of the 1994 rape and attempted murder of Alison Botha – was revoked by the Minister of Correctional Services after it emerged that Botha and her family were not adequately informed of the parole process (Venter, 2025). These cases illustrate ongoing failures to uphold victims' rights to notification and participation in parole proceedings. Meaningful victim involvement, however, has both procedural and therapeutic value. As McLachlan (2018) argues, allowing victims to be heard enhances perceptions of fairness, promotes emotional healing and provides valuable contextual insights for parole boards. Most victims want offenders to be held accountable for their actions and for the harm they have caused, while also seeking closure. The central challenge for parole boards, therefore, is to balance offender rehabilitation with the restorative justice ideals of healing and restoration (Louw, 2021: 11). Achieving this balance not only recognises victims' rights in law but also ensures their consistent and practical implementation.

These tensions are further exacerbated by systemic and operational shortcomings. Persistent overcrowding, shortages of professional staff, budgetary constraints and low offender participation in rehabilitation programmes – particularly skills development programmes – contribute to a situation in which many offenders appear before parole boards without having completed interventions intended to demonstrate rehabilitation (Department of Correctional Services, 2025b: 19; Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2025a).

The current caseload ratio of social workers to sentenced offenders stands at 1:240, while only 73 psychologists are employed to serve an inmate population of 166,008 – equating to approximately 2270 inmates per psychologist. These figures clearly demonstrate the severe shortage of professional staff within the DCS. Parole boards depend heavily on professional reports to make informed decisions regarding offender placement on parole. During the 2024/2025 financial year, 1350 psychological reports for lifers and 3507 social work reports were submitted to parole boards to assess offender suitability for release (Department of Correctional Services, 2025a: 84; Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2025a). Given these constraints, it is plausible that professional reports may become formulaic, thereby diminishing their evaluative value (Louw and Luyt, 2009: 12).

The DCS reported a steady increase in offender participation in rehabilitation programmes between April 2020 and March 2024. However, participation in development programmes declined due to a shortage of qualified officials to facilitate these initiatives (Department of Correctional Services, 2024a: 107–108). Effective rehabilitation depends on equipping offenders with life and vocational skills that enhance their reintegration prospects after release (Department of Correctional Services, 2025b: 10). Offenders who acquire practical skills through activities such as carpentry, agriculture and manufacturing are more likely to reintegrate successfully and less likely to reoffend. Yet, fewer than 7% of sentenced inmates in South Africa's correctional centres have regular access to work and skills training opportunities (Schütz, 2025). A 2025 DCS parliamentary report indicated that 81,575 offenders completed correctional programmes and an average of 1700 offenders per day participated in production workshops out of 104,117 sentenced offenders (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2025a). While these figures reflect completion, they provide limited insight into the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in reducing recidivism.

The parole board represents another layer of systemic dysfunction within South Africa's parole system, characterised by structural and operational weaknesses, as well as ongoing concerns regarding its composition, functionality and overall effectiveness. In September 2024, the DCS reported persistently high vacancy rates, with 14 chairperson (27%) and 16 vice-chairperson (31%) positions unfilled across the 52 established parole boards. These leadership shortages have raised serious doubts about the boards' capacity to conduct thorough offender assessments and make informed parole decisions. As a result, case backlogs have grown, and hearings are often expedited to address delays. The absence of stable leadership thus undermines the efficiency, fairness and credibility of the parole process (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2024a). The government's failure to address these vacancies reflects broader administrative and

resource-related challenges within the DCS, including difficulties in recruitment, retention and budget management (Teixeira, 2025). Recent austerity measures by the Minister of Finance, which further reduced the DCS budget, have exacerbated these challenges – limiting the parole boards' capacity to function effectively, make sound decisions and accurately assess whether offenders are genuinely rehabilitated and ready for reintegration into society (South Africa Government, 2025).

Despite multiple reform efforts of task teams, ongoing parliamentary debates and repeated public outcry, South Africa's parole system remains deeply dysfunctional and largely unchanged. Public mistrust is further fuelled by broader scepticism about the fairness of the criminal justice system, shaped by historical inequality, corruption and perceived political interference (Kotzé, 2003). Together, these dynamics reinforce the urgent need for comprehensive reform of South Africa's parole process to restore credibility, strengthen accountability and reconcile the competing imperatives of justice, rehabilitation and public safety.

Conclusion

The persistent calls for reform over the past two decades signify the deep-seated issues within South Africa's parole system. While multiple policy reviews have identified key areas for improvement – including risk assessment consistency, victim participation and parole board professionalism – implementation remains slow. To move forward, a proactive and transparent approach is needed to ensure that parole policies balance rehabilitation with public safety and victims' rights. Until these systemic flaws are addressed, South Africa's parole system will continue to face scrutiny and public distrust. In response, the following principles are proposed as a framework for strengthening and improving South Africa's parole system.

Expansion and diversification of parole board membership

Internationally, correctional systems recognise the value of including professionals such as educationalists, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and faith-based practitioners in parole decision-making. In South Africa, however, the contribution of criminologists to correctional practice has largely been overlooked (Hesselink and Booyens, 2014; Hesselink-Louw, 2004). Cornwell (2003) argues that this oversight reflects a fundamental lack of understanding of criminology's practical relevance. Criminologists offer extensive theoretical and empirical insights into the causes, motives and patterns of criminal behaviour, as well as the socio-psychological and environmental factors that contribute to offending. Their expertise in criminogenic needs, risk assessment and victimology can significantly enhance offender rehabilitation and reintegration efforts (Herbig and Hesselink, 2012).

South African parole boards currently lack adequate representation from professionals with specialised expertise in offender behaviour and mental health. Expanding board membership to include criminologists and psychologists would strengthen interdisciplinary decision-making, improve the quality of assessments and ensure that parole outcomes

are more closely aligned with the rehabilitative goals of the correctional system. Criminologists can assess criminogenic risks and contextualise offending patterns, while psychologists can evaluate emotional stability, mental health concerns and an offender's readiness for reintegration.

Implementing these changes in the South African context would require a phased and context-sensitive strategy. As an initial step, criminologists and psychologists could be incorporated as core members or appointed as specialist consultants to existing parole boards. This should be supported by targeted training and professional development for current board members to build an integrated and effective decision-making framework.

Immediate filling of parole board vacancies

High vacancy rates in critical positions, such as chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, undermine the efficiency and consistency of parole hearings. These staffing gaps often lead to postponed hearings and inconsistent decision-making, compromising the stability and professionalism of the parole system. The DCS must therefore prioritise timely appointments and fair remuneration to ensure operational continuity.

To strengthen professionalisation, South Africa could adopt aspects of the tenure model used by the Parole Board for England and Wales. Under this system, members are appointed for an initial 5-year term, with reappointment based on performance appraisals and active involvement in casework, including chairing responsibilities. Accredited chairs may serve for up to 15 years, subject to ministerial approval (Parole Board for England and Wales, 2020, 2025a).

Evidence-based and consistent decision-making in parole

In correctional practice, 'evidence' refers to findings derived from empirically sound social science research, while evidence-based practice involves interventions that have been rigorously evaluated and shown to produce positive, measurable outcomes (Klinge, 2016: 556). A shift towards evidence-based, research-driven practices is essential for strengthening South Africa's parole system. Validated risk-assessment tools and structured decision-making frameworks can help reduce subjective bias, improve consistency and enhance the legitimacy of parole decisions.

The Canadian parole system provides a valuable example through its utilisation of the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model and structured decision-making framework (SDMF). The RNR model ensures that decisions address offenders' risk levels and criminogenic needs, while considering responsivity factors critical to reducing recidivism (Siraj et al., 2025: 254). The model offers the theoretical foundation, while validated risk-assessment instruments serve as the practical tools used to implement its principles. The SDMF further strengthens decision-making by offering an empirically informed, structured professional judgement framework that guides parole board members in assessing an individual's likelihood of reoffending while still recognising their discretionary authority (Parole Board of Canada, 2025). According to Serin (2018), the SDMF achieves three key objectives: (1) promoting equitable decisions for vulnerable

populations; (2) enhancing the transparency and accountability of parole decision-making and (3) distinguishing between the quality of parole decisions and post-release outcomes.

Integrating similar approaches in South Africa could help address persistent inconsistencies in decision-making across regions and cases (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2025b). Embedding empirically grounded frameworks into practice would further promote fairness, reduce discrepancies and strengthen public confidence in the integrity of the parole system.

Meaningful involvement of victims in all processes

Victim participation is central to building a parole system that upholds justice and promotes transparency. While South African legislation provides for victim involvement, in practice their input often has minimal influence on parole decisions (Louw, 2021). Strengthening victim participation would not only support restorative justice but also improve public confidence in the system.

The victim contact scheme (VCS) in England and Wales offers a model of effective victim engagement. Under the VCS, eligible victims are assigned a Victim Liaison Officer who provides regular updates on the offender's sentence progress, parole eligibility and potential release. Victims may also submit personal statements to parole boards, allowing them to express concerns about release conditions or the potential impact of the offender's return to the community (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2022). This structured approach ensures that victims remain informed, supported and heard throughout the parole process.

Drawing from this model, South Africa should establish a dedicated and centralised victim support unit within the DCS. The unit should be adequately staffed and resourced to facilitate victim–offender dialogues and victim–offender mediations, manage victim registration and tracing and ensure meaningful victim participation at all stages of the parole process (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2025b).


Improve transparency and public trust through public parole hearings


In South Africa, parole board hearings are currently closed to the public, although victims of crime have the right to attend (Louw, 2021). By contrast, international best practices demonstrate the value of greater openness. For example, the Parole Board of Canada allows victims, support persons, media and members of the public to observe hearings, provided they submit a formal request (Parole Board of Canada, 2024). Similarly, since 2022, England and Wales have introduced the option for some parole hearings to be held in public, accessible to both the media and the public (Parole Board for England and Wales, 2025b). Introducing a comparable mechanism in South Africa would not only enhance accountability but also build greater public confidence in parole decisions.

A well-functioning parole system should extend beyond the conditional release of offenders to ensure that reintegration promotes public safety, accountability and rehabilitation. South Africa does not need to abandon its current parole system but should

strengthen it so that it reflects fairness, transparency and international best practice. By doing so, the parole process can better address its present challenges and become a credible system that reduces recidivism and restores public trust.

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Notes

1. In 2000, a provision was introduced under section 62(f) of the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977, allowing ATPs (remand detainees) to be placed under community corrections supervision as a condition of bail while awaiting the outcome of their trial (Republic of South Africa, 1977).
2. The financial year for the DCS in South Africa runs from 1 April of each year to 31 March of the following year.
3. In South Africa correctional supervision is a community-based sentencing option imposed by a court of law, or a sentencing option where imprisonment is converted to correctional supervision after a portion has been served in a correctional centre. Individuals serving a correctional supervision sentence are referred to as probationers within the community corrections system (Department of Correctional Services, 2018).
4. Correctional Supervision and Parole Boards refer to statutory bodies appointed by the Minister of Correctional Services under section 74 of the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 to take independent decisions on the conditional placement of offenders (Republic of South Africa, 1998).
5. A determinate sentence refers to a 'definite period of imprisonment imposed by a court with or without the option of a fine' (Curlewis, 2016).
6. The case management committee at each correctional centre is defined as a multi-disciplinary committee responsible for drafting profile reports, making recommendations regarding conditional placement of sentenced offenders and submitting profile reports to the parole boards (Louw, 2008).
7. The Correctional Services Portfolio Committee oversees the DCS and its entities. Its mandate includes reviewing and amending legislation, assessing strategic plans and budgets, monitoring financial and operational performance, overseeing policy implementation, evaluating international agreements and facilitating public participation in correctional matters (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2025).
8. The National Council for Correctional Services is a statutory body that advises the Minister of Correctional Services on policies for the correctional system and sentencing processes, appointed by the Minister in terms of section 83(1) of the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2024c).

9. The Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services is an independent South African government body responsible for monitoring and overseeing the DCS, ensuring the protection of inmates' rights and upholding human dignity within correctional facilities (Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services, 2024b).

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