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We are like devils in their eyes: Perceptions and experiences of stigmatization and discrimination against recidivists in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions and experiences of stigmatization and discrimination against recidivists in Ghana. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 20 adults and analyzed to identify emerging themes that addressed the objectives of the study. The findings indicated that the community members had negative perceptions about recidivists. Additionally, evidence showed that recidivists included in this study had experiences of stigma and discrimination in areas, such as employment, housing, and romantic relationships. The findings suggest the need for a collaborative effort that aims at removing barriers that hinder formerly incarcerated persons' reintegration into society.

KEYWORDS

Offender reentry; qualitative research; recidivism; reentry; reintegration; support systems

Introduction

In recent times, there have been public concerns about increasing rates of recidivism in many countries, including Ghana. Recidivism reflects the extent to which correctional programs have failed to rehabilitate and reintegrate released prisoners into society (McKean & Ransford, 2004). It is estimated that on average, about two thirds of formerly incarcerated persons will be rearrested for new offenses within 3 years after their release from prison (Langan & Levin, 2002; McKean & Ransford, 2004). Additionally, the growth in the rates of recidivism has brought with it concerns about public safety, as well as economic and social costs, given the heightened questions about whether the investment in arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating persons reduces recidivism (Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012; Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009; Pratt, 2009; Visher & Travis, 2003). Besides, high rates of recidivism lead to costs to offenders themselves, their families, and their communities (McKean & Ransford, 2004).

Recidivism is the relapse into criminal activity and normally measured by released offenders' return to prison for new offenses (McKean & Ransford, 2004). It is a complex problem given that a myriad of reasons compel released

prisoners to reoffend. Previously incarcerated persons encounter numerous barriers in their journey to a successful transition back into society (Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman, 2007; Lattimore, Steffey, & Visher, 2010). Most often, offenders exit prisons with little or no financial and social support that would enable them adjust successfully into their communities (Angell, Matthews, Barringer, Watson, & Draine, 2014) and that could facilitate recidivism. Persons released from prison may encounter difficulties finding housing, employment and other support services (Petersilia, 2000) as they usually return to poor communities that have inadequate resources (Clear, 2007). Employers are less likely to hire formerly incarcerated persons due to anticipated risks to them and their organizations, concerns about responsibility, and issues regarding trustworthiness of previously incarcerated persons (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Bushway et al., 2007; Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2007; Western, 2006).

In some African countries, like Ghana, not everyone in prison is a convict, and as a result detainees tend to form the larger part of prison population. A huge proportion of this population comprises individuals awaiting trial, and some of them have not seen a judge in as many as 7 years (Sarkin, 2008; Wines, 2005). Prosecutors, judges, and even prison wardens opine that confinements are unbearably long and justice dreadfully uneven (Wines, 2005). Many of the detainees spend longer periods in prison than convicts, without access to any reentry program. It is important to emphasize that pretrial detention does not constitute a violation of human rights, provided it takes place under the appropriate conditions, for a short period of time, and is utilized as a last resort (Sarkin, 2008).

Pretrial delays contribute to the consolidation of prison and detention populations, as well as result in the phenomenon of overcrowding (Sarkin, 2008). Many prisoners in Africa are not lawbreakers but victims of incompetence, corruption, or justice systems that are basically understaffed, underfinanced, and overwhelmed (Wines, 2005). Additionally, in view of the fact that detainees are not convicts and may exit the prison at any time, they do not qualify to access the few rehabilitation and reintegration programs; as such, they may be the biggest victims of the system and most vulnerable to recidivism. Also, many of them are innocent of the suspected offenses, but they turn into offenders when they leave prison due to prolonged stay in the same cells with convicts.

Unable to find work in their communities, many formerly incarcerated persons who are convicted offenders are likely to resort to their past ways of living, which could lead to their rearrest. However, some former detainees and prisoners are compelled to reoffend due to lack of rehabilitation programs in addition to lack of community social services and family support (Chui & Cheng, 2014; Seiter & Kadela, 2003). While formerly incarcerated persons experience numerous challenges on their release, being stigmatized and

discriminated against serve as major barriers to successful community reintegration (Celinska, 2000; Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2013) and provide avenues for a possible reoffense.

Generally, formerly incarcerated persons reenter society with a label that is highly stigmatized and this status has staid consequences for successful reintegration (Tietjen & Park, 2010). More often than not, they are discriminated against in terms of relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, living situations, educational prospects, and gainful employment opportunities (Tietjen & Park, 2010). Another form of discrimination is evident in the lack of government programs for rehabilitation, leaving it to the prison authorities to grapple with. Even as rehabilitation remains the goal of many penal policymakers in Africa, lack of political will encumbers its ultimate realization (Sarkin, 2008). In Ghana, for instance, none of the major government ministries (education; environment, science, technology and innovation; or health) has a mandate for prisoner rehabilitation. This is unfortunate, given the research evidence that recidivism rates in Africa plummet with the existence of effective and supported rehabilitation programs (Mackenzie, 2000). Nevertheless, due to the negative effects of stigma and discrimination, efforts by formerly incarcerated persons to rebuild their lives may fail and they could end up returning to prison after release.

Undoubtedly, the ability of formerly incarcerated persons to reintegrate into society after their release from prison is critical in reducing recidivism rates (Celinska, 2000). Nonetheless, some aspects of stigma and discrimination are formalized because, for many previously incarcerated persons, the path to reentry is permanently blocked—on release they are barred from the best employment opportunities, as well as public housing, based on nothing more than their criminal history (Greenhouse, 2002; Peters, 2014). Normally, persons who are labeled as felons do, consequently, engage in more crimes than those without that label (Chiricos, Barrick, Bales, & Bontrager, 2007). As Scanlon (2001) argued, a lifetime label for having committed a crime in the past is a harmful discrimination that encourages recidivism. The stigma of stereotyping, labeling, discrimination, status loss, and separation felt by formerly incarcerated persons is likely to obstruct their successful reentry into society (Chui & Cheng, 2013; Henderson, 2005; Link & Phelan, 2001), and this could result in lapses into recidivism.

Despite the fact that offenders are among the most stigmatized groups in society, few studies on stigma consider offenders (Moore et al., 2013). Further complicating the issue is the dearth of studies on offenders in Ghana. This current study, which is part of a larger body of research, therefore sought to explore (a) societal perceptions about recidivists and (b) the experiences of stigmatization and discrimination among recidivists. Given that crime-reduction approaches of governments, particularly increased imprisonment, have turned formerly incarcerated persons into stigmatized persons who are

often discriminated against in society (Pager, 2009), there is the need for studies that offer insights into how imprisonment adversely affects formerly incarcerated persons' reintegration and consequently recidivism (Clear, 2008; MacKenzie, 2006; Mears, 2012). Such studies could advance efforts aimed at reducing and informing theoretical understanding of recidivism (Mears, 2012). Against this backdrop, an in-depth understanding of the contextual factors that influence formerly incarcerated persons' decision to reoffend is fundamental in developing effective and efficient interventions that could help reduce recidivism in society.

Theoretical underpinnings

Many studies on stigma and vulnerable groups apply Goffman's (1963) seminal work on management of spoiled identity. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is a feature that is deeply discrediting and makes the person experiencing it different from others and of a less pleasant kind. The despicable experience is often accompanied by stereotyping, rejection, dishonor, status loss, separation from others, and discrimination (Byrne, 2000; Link & Phelan, 2001). Discrimination is one of the mechanisms through which stigma is manifested and refers to discriminatory behaviors perpetuated by nonstigmatized persons toward persons who are stigmatized (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009). It is a type of enacted stigma that may be experienced by persons who are stigmatized and could be in the form of job loss, social rejection, or physical violence (Dako-Gyeke, Dako-Gyeke, & Asampong, 2015; Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009). Stigma therefore plays a role in sustaining social inequality between persons who are stigmatized and nonstigmatized persons (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009).

When a quality or mark is regarded and responded to as stigma, two processes occur: (a) the possessor of the stigma is identified as different based on the possession of this mark or quality and (b) the possessor is devalued based on the possession of this mark or quality (Callais, 2009; Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Stigmatization is an active process that involves actors consisting of people who confer the stigma and those that are stigmatized (Callais, 2009). These two groups are referred to as those who are normal and those who are stigmatized (Goffman, 1963). People who belong to marginalized groups possess a relative position of subordination in society based on the knowledge that their status is socially devalued and therefore may be subject to negative treatment by people (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009). This knowledge is experienced through at least three stigma mechanisms: enacted, anticipated, and internalized (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009).

Enacted stigma is the extent to which stigmatized persons believe they have actually experienced prejudice and discrimination from others (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2015; Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009; Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Anticipated stigma is the extent to which individuals expect that others will sully them if they

become aware of their stigmatized identity (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009; Markowitz, 1998; Quinn & Caudoir, 2009). Internalized stigma refers to the degree at which persons who are stigmatized approve of the negative beliefs and feelings associated with their status (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2015; Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009; Link, 1987). In addition, social context play an important role in the construction of stigma given that stigma functions at the intersection of culture, power, and difference (Parker & Aggleton, 2003) and exists at the structural, social, and self levels in society (Link & Phelan, 2001). At the structural level, stigma impacts individual behavior through interactions between institutional barriers that marginalize groups (Link & Phelan, 2001; Moore et al., 2013).

The social level relates to stereotypes and discrimination from community members and the self-level considers individual responses to stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001; Moore et al., 2013). Three types of stigma (abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigmas) were highlighted by Goffman (1963). Although it is possible for people to be targets of multiple stigmas simultaneously, the stigma against formerly incarcerated persons is a blemish of individual character (Callais, 2009; Goffman, 1963; Maruna, 2001; Uggem, Manza, & Behrens, 2003), and could serve as a device that rationalizes already existing forms of social and institutional discrimination (Callais, 2009). These theoretical considerations are useful for this study because they draw attention to why and how formerly incarcerated persons' stigma and discrimination are maintained in society.

Methodology

Study design

A qualitative research design was employed for this study. The research design enabled us to tackle sensitive issues and also appreciate the wider social contexts of the study participants' experiences (Griffin, 2004). In addition, the research approach provided an opportunity for us to study a small number of participants through extensive engagement, to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2003). Moreover, the research method made it possible for us to gather information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of recidivists, as well as other people who interact with formerly incarcerated persons and may stigmatize and discriminate against them.

Study area and participants

The study was conducted at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison and the Nsawam Township located in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Until the establishment of the Ankaful Maximum Security Prison in 2011, the Nsawam Medium Security Prison was the largest prison in Ghana. It has the largest number of prison inmates in Ghana and is about 36 kilometers from Accra,

the capital city of Ghana. The prison is located at the outskirts of the Nsawam Township. A total of 20 adults (14 males and 6 females) were recruited as participants for the study. The sample consisted of 10 recidivists (males), 3 rehabilitation prison officers (2 females and 1 male), 2 prosecutors (1 male and 1 female—police officers responsible for execution processes in court), and 5 members of the Nsawam community (3 females and 2 males). Recidivists were recruited because they were likely to have experiences of stigma and discrimination. The prison officers and prosecutors were included in the study in view of the likelihood of their engagement in stigmatizing and discriminating behaviors against recidivists in the course of discharging their respective responsibilities of offender rehabilitation and prosecution. Additionally, some members of the Nsawam Township were included in the study because the medium security prison is situated at Nsawam, and therefore as members of the community they may have interacted with some of the released prisoners before they were reincarcerated.

All recidivists included in this study were males for the reason that, while we planned to interview female recidivists, we were unable to do so as the prison authority refused to give permission to access the female inmates for security reasons. All inmates included in this study had been incarcerated more than once, and the rehabilitation prison officers had worked with the prison service for over 5 years. With regard to the prosecutors, each had worked in their professional field for 5 or more years and had prosecuted at least three recidivists. As for the community members, all had lived in Nsawam (where the prison is located) for 5 years or more.

Data collection and analysis procedures

The study was approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences Board of the University of Ghana and data were collected from April–June 2014. Before the commencement of the data collection, permission was sought from the Ghana Prisons Service, the institution that oversees all prisons in Ghana. The Ghana Prisons Service issued an authority letter indicating approval for the study to be conducted with the inmates and prison officers at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison. The letter was subsequently delivered to the Nsawam Prison authority and a meeting was held to explain the purpose of the study to the officers. Thereafter, the officers introduced the researcher to potential participants. After the purpose of the study had been explained to them, the willing recidivists provided their contact details. An appointment was then scheduled for the data collection, after the inmates and prison officers had decided on a suitable time.

With regard to the prosecutors (police officers responsible for execution processes in court), we visited the Nsawam police station and discussed the purpose of the study with them. Those who were willing to be part of the study were recruited, and appointments were scheduled for data collection

at times convenient for them. Additionally, we visited the township several times to identify potential participants. Members of the community, who were willing to participate in the study after the purpose had been explained to them, provided their contact details. Appointments were scheduled for data collection at times convenient for them. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to commencement of each in-depth interview. Every interview started with an explanation of the purpose of the study and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point in time of the data collection. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were assured of confidentiality regarding the information they provided.

A total of 20 interviews were conducted according to a set of open-ended guiding questions based on the objectives of the study. The open-ended questions allowed participants to express themselves freely and permitted the researcher to probe participants' responses for elaboration and to explore key issues raised by participants (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2015). Key questions that featured in recidivists' interviews related to the number of times convicted, expectations, beliefs, and experiences of stigmatization and discrimination. For nonoffenders (prison officers, prosecutors, and community members), the majority of questions related to their perceptions of offenders and formerly incarcerated persons, as well as their experiences regarding stigmatizing offenders. The interviews were conducted in Twi (the dominant local Ghanaian language) and each interview lasted between 40 min and 1 hour. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the interviews provided opportunities for participants to speak privately with us.

With participants' (except the recidivists) permission, the interviews were audiotaped. During interviews with recidivists, notes were taken for the reason that the prison service authority prohibited the use of a tape recorder or phone in the prison yard. Interviews with the recidivists and prison officers were held at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison. With regard to the prosecutors and community members, interviews took place either in their homes or workplaces based on their respective preference. Following the data collection, the audiotape was replayed several times for the purpose of transcribing the data. We individually extracted and coded major themes from the text. The themes took into consideration statements of meaning that were present in most of the data. In order to ensure credibility of the findings, sets of codes and themes independently developed were discussed and consensus reached. Emerging themes and categories were used to address the objectives of the study.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of participants

This study consisted of 20 participants made up of 10 recidivists, 5 members of the Nsawam Community, 3 prison officers, and 2 prosecutors (police

officers). Of the participants, 14 were males and the remaining 6 were females. It is important to emphasize that at the time of data collection, the actual number of recidivists at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison could not be confirmed. According to the prison officers, although some of the current inmates had served jail terms in other prisons, they only had records on those who were former inmates of Nsawam Medium Security Prison.

The ages of recidivists ranged between 22 and 64 years, and many of them had been imprisoned between two and four times with the exception of one who had been imprisoned seven times. In terms of educational background, the highest level attained by the recidivists was senior high school with many of them having dropped out of junior high school. For the recidivists who had jobs prior to their first incarceration, their employment statuses were predominantly commercial bus drivers, commercial bus conductors, scrap dealers, and carpenters. However, before their recent incarceration, one recidivist worked as a taxi driver. The age range of the prison officers was between 28 and 45 years and that of the prosecutors was between 32 and 47 years. The prison officers and prosecutors had been at post for 5 years or more. The ages of the community participants ranged between 19 and 49 years and each of them had lived in the Nsawam community for 5 years or more.

Societal perceptions about recidivists

After serving their sentences, offenders usually return to their respective communities. Most often, exconvicts experience some difficulties as they struggle to adjust to conditions within their environment. Societal perceptions about offenders, especially those who reoffend, play an important role in the reintegration process. It was found that nonoffenders included in this study had negative perceptions about recidivists because they doubted (a) offenders' readiness to change and (b) the prison system's ability to reform offenders, and these, according to the participants, could lead to recidivism.

Negative perceptions about recidivists

In many communities, relatives, friends, and the general society find it difficult accepting and reintegrating exconvicts into the community due to negative perceptions about them. This could contribute significantly to reoffense and recidivism. Community members included in this study believed that persons who had been imprisoned in the past, especially those who had been incarcerated more than once, were bad people irrespective of the nature of their offense. According to them, formerly incarcerated persons should not be given the opportunity to live amongst nonoffenders, as a female community member explained:

I know prisoners, I know what they can do ... they are bad people who are heartless and do not care what will happen to the people they rob ... they can even murder

people for their money. I am afraid of them and do not want to have anything to do with them.

Similarly, a male community member revealed:

Every prisoner is a bad person, including those who go there by mistake, you cannot trust them ... they can do anything at any time. I am afraid of every prisoner, especially those who have been jailed several times ... when I see them around, I attempt to protect myself, my family and my property.

The rehabilitation officers and prosecutors mentioned that prior to taking up their current jobs and the training they received, which led to their close contact with offenders and the prisons system, they had negative ideas about exconvicts. Accordingly, a female rehabilitation officer disclosed:

Had it not been this job that has brought me closer to them, I got upset anytime I saw prisoners and ex-prisoners. I believe those who have not gotten the opportunity to interact with them feel the same way. The fact is, everyone is afraid of them because once a person is sentenced to prison, irrespective of the offense and the sentence given, the prisoner is seen as a bad person and everybody tries to distant him/herself from such people when they return to the community.

Offenders' unwillingness to change and the prison system's inability to reform offenders

Given that in every society people commit various levels or forms of crimes, communities have put in place institutions that aim to assist and transform offenders and facilitate their transition from prison into their respective communities. However, societal perceptions about the extent to which offenders are reformed by correctional institutions could defeat the purpose of these institutions, and this may lead to societal disapproval of formerly incarcerated persons and eventually their reincarceration. Expressing their concerns, some participants remarked:

No matter how long they are imprisoned, these are people who will never change ... even after serving their sentences in prison, they are still criminals, we cannot live with them because nothing good can come out of them ... they are always ready to commit more serious crimes after their release. (Female community member)

It is only criminals who are imprisoned ... when you commit crime and you are caught, you are sent there to be punished ... it is good to imprison offenders because they are supposed to be disciplined while there. Most of the time, this is not the case because these people are inherently bad so it is difficult to change them ... the prison officers cannot change them ... they come out even worse than before they were imprisoned. (Male community member)

A participant who believed that the prison authorities do not ensure full reformation of prisoners before their release recounted:

They do not change before they return to the community ... the prison authorities fail to ensure that offenders are disciplined and transformed prior to their release ...

they remain criminals and this is the reason why they reoffend soon after their release from prison. (Male community member)

Stigmatization and discrimination experiences of recidivists

In many societies, people who engage in criminal activities that lead to their incarceration are often stigmatized and discriminated against. It is therefore important to emphasize that society's incessant stigmatization and discrimination against exconvicts could lead them to live on the margins of society and continue to engage in criminal activities. After they serve their time in prison and reenter society they are assigned labels such as criminals, thieves, or exconvicts, and these tend to block their access to employment, accommodations, positions of trust, and sometimes romantic relationships, as found in this study. Compounding the situation is the fact that exprisoners' stigma of having a criminal record could loom over them for many years and could be experienced in various forms, as presented in the next section.

Enacted, anticipated, and internalized stigma experiences of recidivists

In terms of enacted stigma, recidivists believed they had actually experienced prejudice and discrimination as one participant noted, "When I was released from prison some time ago, members in my community always said wicked things about me ... I was called horrible names and treated badly by family, friends and community members" (Recidivist 1).

Sharing their experiences, other recidivists recounted:

I was denied marriage to a woman I was dating because I had been in prison before. Even though initially the lady's family did not tell me openly why they did not allow me to marry her, I was later informed that it was because I was an exconvict ... the woman eventually married another man and I felt very sad and hurt ... to me, this is discrimination. (Recidivist 2)

Being convicted over and over again is difficult ... I do not like being in prison all the time, but the world outside the prison is harsh ... a landlord refused to rent his house to me. ... He said he could not trust me because I was an exconvict ... thought I would not be able to pay my rent since I did not have a job at the time. (Recidivist 3)

Also, some recidivists anticipated they would be stigmatized and discriminated against should they decide to look for employment after their release from prison:

Next time, when I am released from prison, I will not disclose to any employer that I had been to because if I do, they would want to know the reason for my imprisonment and that will jeopardize my effort at getting a job ... when I leave the prison, I will need a job to survive and also help my family. (Recidivist 4)

I am sure it will be difficult for me and other exconvicts to find good jobs and even rent rooms when we return to our communities after our release ... everybody

seems to be afraid of an exprisoner and they would not like to live with us ... people may not feel secured living in the same house with exconvicts. Even if we have the skills and capability to work, no one will be willing to employ us or feel comfortable working with us. (Recidivist 5)

Besides anticipating and being stigmatized and discriminated against by nonoffenders, it was found that recidivists included in this study approved some of the negative beliefs and feelings associated with formerly incarcerated persons. Two recidivists had this to say:

How can I compare myself to my family members at home or people who have never been to prison? ... They are better off than me because they have not engaged in armed robbery or any criminal activity ... those of us here have to keep to ourselves because we have become a family and the prison has become our home ... it is not anyone's fault that I am always here, I do not think I can hold any job outside this prison or when I am released.

I have spent many years of my life here since I have been in prison more than once ... I think I belong here because the world out there is not a place for me ... I have good friends here ... why should someone allow his or her daughter to marry a recidivist.

Nonoffenders' perceptions of stigma and discrimination against recidivists

Other participants (community members, prosecutors, and the prison officers) shared their thoughts on stigmatizing and discriminatory practices that serve as barriers to recidivists' reentry into communities. More often than not, the stigma that is attached to imprisonment is reflected in stigmatizing attitudes toward offenders:

Recidivists are labeled as criminals, thieves, and most commonly, bad people ... many people believe that once a person is jailed, he or she will always be in jail ... they are associated with the prison until their death ... this is unfortunate, but that is the belief of society and it will be difficult to change this perception. (Prosecutor 1)

The notion that if you are a thief you remain a thief forever, even if you change, is a depraved way of thinking ... the National Commission for Civic Education needs to educate the public to change this mindset otherwise, we cannot prevent recidivism ... we can do our part here, but society has a bigger part to play as well. (Prison officer)

Obstacles that some formerly incarcerated persons encountered in their bid for employment and overseas travel are highlighted in the following statements:

Exprisoners are discriminated against in employment ... I am saying this because many organizations in the country ask for a police report before a job is offered ... they are denied jobs mainly because of their criminal record. Also, if a Ghanaian wants to travel abroad, especially to Western countries like the United States of America, he or she will be asked to go for clearance from the police headquarters before further actions are taken ... this will be difficult for exprisoners because of

their past criminal record...all these are discriminatory practices against ex-prisoners. (Male community member)

What I know is that people who have been convicted before are not allowed to hold any position of trust or a public office, particularly when it comes to political or government appointments...this is because people do not believe and trust ex-convicts with such positions in society. (Prosecutor 2)

In addition to the employment- and travel-related discrimination that formerly incarcerated persons' encounter, a female community member commented on how ex-convicts are discriminated against during the selection of traditional leaders. Also, a male community member revealed how ex-prisoners are discriminated against when they seek housing:

In this town and many parts of the country, ex-convicts are not selected as chiefs (traditional rulers) even if they are jailed for minor offenses...it is a taboo for a person who had been imprisoned in the past, let alone many times, to become a King/Chief or Queen...even if that person comes from the royal family, because of his or her criminal record, they are denied the opportunity...they are not respected, trusted or recognized by the community.

Because they are frequently in and out of prison, they find it difficult to reintegrate into the community...finding a place to live is even a challenge since landlords discriminate against them despite their ability to pay rent. Sometimes, their own family members and friends are not willing to live with them under the same roof.

Discussion of findings

In this study we aimed to explore societal perceptions about recidivists and the experiences of stigmatization and discrimination among recidivists. The findings point to the fact that society has negative perceptions about offenders, which support findings of other qualitative studies (MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Madriz, 1997). Related to this was the finding that community members included in the study believed the current correctional system was incapable of reforming offenders. This could lead to societal disapproval of formerly incarcerated persons and subsequent imprisonment. Research has found that people think negatively of offenders (Moore et al., 2013). Most often, when thinking about offenders, the public usually reflect on stereotypes like low socioeconomic status (Madriz, 1997). Others link negative personality traits with the word "criminal" (MacLin & Herrera, 2006), which is connected to the word "bad" (MacLin & Herrera, 2006). By and large these negative perceptions underpin the stigmatizing and discriminatory attitudes toward offenders, and could subsequently encourage recidivism.

Evidence showed that recidivists included in this study were stigmatized and discriminated against, replicating findings from other studies that investigated stigma among offenders (Lebel, 2012; Scanlon, 2001; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). Through three stigma mechanisms—enacted, anticipated,

and internalized—recidivists in this study were aware that their status was vulnerable and socially devalued, and thus fell short of society's acceptance. They had experiences of stigma and discrimination in pertinent areas such as employment, housing, and romantic relationships, and this was confirmed by the other participants (community members, prosecutors, and police officers). It is likely these experiences limited their opportunities, which made it difficult for them to succeed and, accordingly, led to their reoffending and subsequent imprisonment. Research studies that have found a relation between unemployment and recidivism conclude that exoffenders who are unable to secure jobs upon release from jail are more likely to reoffend than those who are employed (Bernstein & Houston, 2000; Simonson, 2006; Western & Pettit, 2000).

Regardless of their education and skill levels, formerly incarcerated persons continue to be the most unemployable demographic (Blessett & Pryor, 2013; Pryor & Thompkins, 2012; Simonson, 2006). Denying formerly incarcerated persons employment due to past convictions perhaps punishes them beyond the appropriate extent of the law (Chin, 2002; Simonson, 2006), and could adversely affect their children, families, and communities who depend on them for financial support (Thompson, 2004). The situation is worse in Ghana because high unemployment rates and low labor force participation characterize the country's labor market (Baah-Boateng, 2013; Dako-Gyeke, 2015). Without jobs, it would be very difficult for formerly incarcerated persons to access other facilities, like housing, and negotiate social prospects such as romantic relationships. Furthermore, concealing their past records would be very difficult for formerly incarcerated persons, given the communal living arrangements in Ghana where boundaries are generally flexible.

In many Ghanaian communities, people living in a house rarely constitute a single family; residents of a house—especially the traditional compound house, which accounts for more than 67% of all dwelling types in Ghana—will, in addition to the core family members, include fostered children of relatives, in-laws, and friends (Hanson, 2004). The plight of formerly incarcerated persons could be grim when it comes to marriage because within the Ghanaian culture, traditional marriage is usually between two families not individuals. As a result, families are likely to conduct informal background checks on the persons planning to get married. Certainly, social context plays an important role in the construction of stigma as stigma functions at the intersection of culture, power, and difference, as well as the structural, social, and self-levels in society (Moore et al., 2013; Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

Based on their past experiences of stigma and discrimination, recidivists included in this study anticipated similar experiences upon their release from jail. Theory suggests that being aware of stigma may not be as crucial for functioning as an individual's personal expectations about experiencing negative consequences from stigma (Moore et al., 2013). For this reason, it is obvious

that formerly incarcerated persons may have challenges adjusting into their communities due to the stigma that lurks around them. For many people living with a concealable stigmatized identity, at the core of anticipated stigma is the concern that people will look down on or discriminate against them (Quinn & Caudoir, 2009). Thus, recidivists may exit prison with little or no hope, which could result in a lifetime fear of failure in the world outside of prison, and this may have adverse effects on their behavior and well-being.

Research has shown that people such as formerly incarcerated persons who think others would devalue them if their identities are known experience more psychological and illness symptoms, as the worry and anxiety about possible devaluation can lead to negative outcomes (Quinn & Caudoir, 2009). Given that members of stigmatized groups, especially formerly incarcerated persons, are often devalued and disrespected in society, they tend to endorse the negative beliefs and feelings associated with their status. Stigma has an insidious discouraging effect on people even in the absence of direct discrimination (Quinn & Caudoir, 2009) because of its connection with low self-esteem, depression, and social isolation (Corrigan, Larson, Kuwabara, & Sachiko, 2010). Once formerly incarcerated persons believe that (a) life outside prison is harsh with no support systems and (b) their families, friends, and societies are not convinced of their rehabilitation, it becomes easy for them to commit crimes repeatedly and be rearrested. The lifetime corollaries of stigma, as well as other barriers in society such as social exclusion, isolation, and temptation to commit crime, could underpin formerly incarcerated persons' inability to reintegrate successfully into society.

Study limitations

The findings of this study are limited in terms of generalization since it was based on a sample of 20 participants, including 10 recidivists from one prison in Ghana, the Nsawam Medium Security Prison. Currently, there are 42 prison facilities spread over the 10 regions of Ghana (Ghana Prisons Service, 2015). Also, it is important to indicate that while the researchers audiotaped the interviews with the rehabilitation officers, prosecutors, and the community members, the interviews with the recidivists were not recorded due to restrictions from the prison authorities. The limitations notwithstanding, the findings provide evidence regarding societal perceptions about recidivists, as well as the experiences of stigmatization and discrimination among recidivists at the Nsawam Medium Security Prison.

Conclusions and implications

The findings of this study indicate that negative perceptions about formerly incarcerated persons are based on people's beliefs that offenders are not well

prepared for their return to their respective communities. Given that recidivists are impacted by the stigmatization of being formerly incarcerated persons, they are likely to face multiple problems and challenges reintegrating into their respective communities upon their release from prison. While the transition from prison to society has always been difficult, released inmates currently face more challenges and barriers than in the past (Kubrin, Squires, & Stewart, 2007). This is due mainly to limited job opportunities and reduced social services provision in many countries, including Ghana.

Recidivists who participated in this study were stigmatized and discriminated against at the individual, social, and structural levels in society. The experiences of stigma were through enacted, anticipated, and internalized stigma mechanisms. Stigma and discrimination adversely affected recidivists' ability to obtain jobs and housing, and to engage in romantic relationships. Of importance is the fact that these are areas that are crucial for formerly incarcerated persons' successful reintegration, and if not accessible could contribute to their return to criminal behaviors and, subsequently, reincarceration. By restricting access to vital life domains, discrimination could directly affect previously incarcerated persons' social status, psychological well-being, and physical health, and indirectly threaten their personal and social identity (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

In view of the fact that successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated persons is a major pathway to reducing recidivism rates and crime, it is vital to lessen individual, social, and structural factors that marginalize them in society. The incessant existence of visible and concealed barriers that prevent and threaten formerly incarcerated persons' reintegration, questions society's readiness to provide support (tangible and intangible) for this population. This calls for a multifaceted approach to reducing crimes and recidivism, given the diversity of the prison population and their needs. Additionally, in view of the fact that some facets of stigma and discrimination are formalized and that these kindle discrimination, appropriate legal provisions should be considered to address this issue.

The identification and broader understanding of the psychosocial adjustment of offenders after they are released from jail could assist professional stakeholders like social workers to develop and implement interventions that target formerly incarcerated persons, as well as their families and communities. This is essential, because social workers' ability to assist formerly incarcerated persons to become resilient, confident, and well adjusted in their communities would depend greatly on a joint effort. This collaborative effort should aim at removing barriers and restrictions that hinder formerly incarcerated persons' reintegration into society. Ultimately, this could reduce the likelihood that previously incarcerated persons would recidivate.

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