

Negative Public Perception and Reoffending of Discharged Offenders in Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Crime is a menace to the society. Its impact has led to negative predisposition of the public towards its perpetrators. This has led to the formulation of laws that address criminal activities and their perpetrators. Thus, society has made provisions for facilities such as the Criminal Justice System (Police, Law court, Correctional Centers) that helps to process and reform these offenders. However, the perception of the public towards discharged offenders appears to remain the same as when the crime was committed and this negative perception has, in most cases, led to the reoffending of discharged offenders. The present study examined the effects of negative public perception of discharged offenders on their reoffending in Anambra State. The study adopted a mixed method research design using questionnaire schedule and In-Depth Interview guide as the instruments of data collection. The study drew a sample size of 400 from the total population of Anambra state. Data was analyzed electronically using descriptive statistics and expressed in frequency tables and simple percentages. The study revealed among others, numerous social consequences faced by discharged offenders as a result of the negative perception held against them which in turn make them to reoffend. It was recommended among others, that discharged offenders should be allowed to engage in community social services that will benefit their community as this will help convince community members that discharged offenders are now changed functional members of the society.

Keywords: Discharged offenders, Ex-offenders, Negative public perception, Reoffending

Introduction

Crime free society is an imperative concern for every household, state, nation and even the world, because crime is an activity that threatens human security. On the other hand security is paramount to the existence of men and his society. This can be seen in Abraham Maslow theory of needs where he points to the fact that security is a paramount need for each person and society at large (Boateng, 2017). This is because, for people in societies to engage in productive activities, earn a living, and freely engage in other socio-cultural activities, an assurance of effective and efficient security institution has to prevail to promote an ideal and congenial atmosphere for tranquillity and order (Boateng, 2017).

Across place and time, several measures have been used as corrective measures on offenders. Some of these measures were harsh and others light. The severity of the punishment depends on the society's views and perception of criminals (Osayi, 2015). For instance, in ancient Rome, severe punishments were given to study offenders according to

their crimes. These punishments ranged from stoning to death, crucifixion to throwing into the lion's den, etc. (Osayi, 2015). In Sub-Sahara Africa with specific reference to south eastern Nigeria, criminals are perceived negatively and are harshly punished. In most traditional societies, punishments for offenders ranged from public humiliation, flogging, temporal ex-communication, payment of fine, banishment, to performance of sacrifices to appease the gods (Osayi, 2015). This shows that the perception of criminals by their communities or the society goes a long way to determine how these criminals spend the rest of their lives. It is worthy to note that offenders and criminals are perceived in different ways across places and times. In some societies, criminals are seen as traitors against the government, the law and the people. Thus, the mindset about them are negative and this negative perception might not change even after serving their sentences in prisons. In this vein, prisoners and discharged offenders are vulnerable population and face many challenges and limitations after their release from prison, some of which last permanently. This is because, despite their reformation and rehabilitation in correctional facilities, the public still have negative perception and attitude towards them (Osayi, 2013). For this reason, discharged offenders are faced with multiple obstacles when it comes to reintegrating into the society after sentence. Thus, using Anambra State as the study area, this study examined the effects of negative public perception of discharged offenders on their reoffending.

Statement of the Problem

Negative perception towards discharged offenders is a global problem and needs addressing for proper integration of discharged offenders back into their society. In many societies, discharged offenders face many obstacles to a successful reentry or transition from jail or prison to life in the society. Perception of these discharged offenders by their community members is the major problem they face as this results to negative attitude towards them. An individual offender's experiences when transitioning from a correctional facility to their families and communities, is a fundamentally dynamic, social process. According to Addo (2014), the public attitudes toward discharged offenders across many places and cultures have been apathetic and negative, and this has led many discharged offenders to commit crime and go back to prison where they will be well accepted by their peers. Following this, the rate of reoffending seems to be high (Dougherty, 2011). In the same vein, Ugwuoke (2010) argues that, it is the uncooperative and antagonistic perception of the society together with the social stigma attached to being a discharged offender that makes their reintegration nearly impossible and therefore crime becomes their only source of solace and livelihood.

Benson-Mengla (2020) explained that the society labels discharged offenders based on the crimes they committed. For example, a discharged offender who committed rape before going to prison is labelled a rapist; another who committed murder is labelled a murderer and one who committed theft is labelled a thief. The stigmatization of discharged offenders by the society makes them suffer from social, economic and political difficulties; which sometimes push them to go back to criminal activities. Osayi (2015) explained that over time, people have developed a strong belief system influencing their relationship with persons who violates the laws of their land. These beliefs have however been carried over to the present day society, such that even with the introduction of modern correctional facilities where offenders are supposedly truly reformed and rehabilitated with the hope of giving back value to their society after their sentence, the negative perception still remains strong. Despite this positive development, the negative perception and treatment

of discharged offenders in the Anambra appears to still persist. To date, few or no study have actually addressed the cause of negative public perception and reoffending of discharged offenders in Anambra State. Therefore, this study will bring to limelight various negative challenges facing discharged offenders as a result of negative public perception towards them and how they may reoffend. To this end, the objective of this study is to examine the effects of negative public perception of discharged offenders on reoffending in Anambra State. In order to achieve this, the study investigated, among others, how negative public perception makes discharged offenders reoffend and measures to eradicate negative public perception towards discharged offenders.

Theoretical Framework

The theory underpinning this study is Social Identity Theory (SIT). Social Identity Theory was propounded by Tajfel in the 1970's. It frames this study as it explains how individuals display group behaviors such as discrimination, stereotyping, and stigmatization against persons they consider to be members of out-groups. This means that social identity is built around inter-group relations and the treatment of those categorized as members of out-groups. Following this theory, discharged offenders are seen as out-group in the society as a result of their perceived criminal tendencies. Thus, this newly acquired status shapes the perception and attitude of the public towards them which can result to discrimination, stereotyping and stigmatization. These may lead to reoffending by discharged offenders if measures are not taken to address them.

Methodology

The area of study for this research is Anambra state which has twenty-one local governments, out of which five play host to the five (5) federal correctional facilities. The first correctional service is located within the capital city, at Amawbia (Awka South LGA), the second, at Onitsha North LGA, third, at Aguata LGA, fourth, at Nnewi North LGA, and the fifth at Ekwuluobia, Aguata L.G.A. This makes Anambra suitable for the study as it hosts correctional officers, discharged offenders and a large number of members of the public who hold various perceptions about discharged offenders due to the strong belief system and laws that are prevalent in the area against criminal activities.

The study adopted a quantitative and qualitative research design. It drew its quantitative data from 400 adults (18 years and above) residents within the purposively selected local governments in the study area using a structured questionnaire made up of twenty-one questions. The qualitative data was also obtained from five purposively selected correctional officers (one from each of the five identified correctional facilities located in each of the five selected local governments) using a semi-structured in-depth interview schedule. Data collected from the field were processed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and subsequently presented and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Specifically, frequency tables were used for data presentation, interpretation and analysis of the data for easy understanding and clarity. On the other hand, the qualitative data collected were analyzed using content analysis after which excerpts were isolated and used to complement quantitative data.

Analysis of Findings

The analysis of this study was done based on the 390 (out of 400) correctly filled and returned questionnaires. The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents were first analyzed followed by the research objectives.

Table 1: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentage (%)</i> |
|---|------------------|-----------------------|
| Age | | |
| 18-27 | 12 | 3.1 |
| 28-37 | 112 | 28.8 |
| 38-47 | 66 | 16.9 |
| 48-57 | 187 | 47.9 |
| 58 and above | 13 | 3.3 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 230 | 59.0 |
| Female | 160 | 41.0 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Single | 103 | 26.4 |
| Married | 233 | 59.7 |
| Divorced | 7 | 1.8 |
| Separated | 35 | 9.0 |
| Widowed | 12 | 3.1 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |
| Religious Affiliation | | |
| Christianity | 355 | 91.0 |
| Islam | 4 | 1.0 |
| African Traditional Religion | 21 | 5.4 |
| Atheist | 10 | 2.6 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |
| Occupation | | |
| None | - | - |
| Civil Servant | 115 | 29.5 |
| Trader | 103 | 26.4 |
| Teacher | 12 | 3.1 |
| Business person | 147 | 37.7 |
| Military/Paramilitary | 13 | 3.3 |
| Others | - | - |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |
| Level of Education | | |
| First School Leaving Certificate | 72 | 18.5 |
| Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination | 188 | 48.2 |
| B.Sc. | 101 | 25.9 |
| M.Sc. | 24 | 6.2 |
| PhD | 5 | 1.2 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

Table 1 shows that majority (47.9%) of the respondents are within the age-range of 48-57. Thus majority of the respondents are in their late forties, early fifties and late fifties. The

table also shows that majority of the respondents are made up of males (59.0%). Table 1 further shows that majority of the respondents are married and they made up (59.7%) of the study. From the presentation of religious affiliation in table 1, it shows that majority (91.0%) of the respondents are Christians by religion. Table 1 also displayed the occupation of the respondents and shows that majority (37.7) of the respondents are business persons. Lastly, table 1 displayed the level of education of the respondents and showed that majority (48.2%) of the respondents are Senior Secondary School Certificate holders, although a considerable number (25.9%) has degree certificates.

Analysis of Research Objectives

Table 2: RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON HOW DISCHARGED OFFENDERS ARE PERCEIVED BY THE PUBLIC IN ANAMBRA STATE

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentages (%)</i> |
|------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Positively | 12 | 3.1 |
| Negatively | 378 | 96.9 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

Table 2 shows that majority (96.9%) of the respondents agreed that discharged offenders are perceived negatively by the public in Anambra State. By implication, Anambarians have negative perception towards discharged offenders. This quantitative finding in table 2 is in line with the response given by an IDI respondent who stated that:

The mindset of most people in Anambra State is negative towards discharged offenders. This mindset of people against discharged offenders is not just negative but also contagious because the negative perception of a person towards discharged offenders can make many people have the same mindset and perception towards anyone who has been convicted and released. So most people have negative perception towards criminals in Anambra State. **(47 years old male correctional officer Ekwulobia).**

Another respondent has a contrary opinion when he stated that:

Many people do not think about the criminal background of people in Anambra state except when a person display such character. As long as a person is business minded and relate well with others, I don't think the person will be seen in a negative light irrespective of past criminal records **(39 years old male correctional officer, Onitsha North).**

This response shows that public perception towards discharged offenders is negative in Anambra State.

Table 3: RESPONDENT VIEWS ON CHALLENGES FACED BY DISCHARGED OFFENDERS AS A RESULT OF NEGATIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentages (%)</i> |
|---------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Discrimination | 43 | 11.4 |
| Stigmatization | 64 | 17.0 |
| Isolation/Rejection | 4 | 1.1 |
| None of the above | - | - |
| All of the above | 160 | 42.4 |
| I don't know | 106 | 28.1 |
| Total | 377 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

Table 3 shows that discharged offenders are faced with discrimination, stigmatization isolation and rejection as a result of negative public perception in Anambra State. A response from an IDI respondent is in line with this response when he opined that

The bad perception of discharged offenders by the public and their community affects their lives without doubt because most people in Anambra don't associate with criminals even after their release because they are seen as those who betrayed their community and society thus they face lots of challenges (**37 years old female correctional officer Nnewi North**).

Following this, the respondents were asked the rate discharged offenders reoffend as a result of negative public perception in Anambra State and result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON THE RATE OF REOFFENDING BY DISCHARGED OFFENDERS AS A RESULT OF NEGATIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentages (%)</i> |
|------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Very high | 41 | 10.5 |
| High | 207 | 53.1 |
| Low | 109 | 27.9 |
| Very low | 33 | 8.5 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

From the presentation in table 4, reoffending rate by discharged offenders as a result of negative public perception towards them in Anambra State is high. This response can be seen in a respondent's opinion which stated that:

Cases of discharged offenders coming back to the prison is always seen and the reason not farfetched because if they are welcomed or given good treatment in their environment, there won't be need for them coming back to prison (**37 years old female prison attendant, Amawbia**).

Another respondent opined that:

Offence committed by discharged offenders as a result of negative perception by the public towards them is not on record so it will be difficult to say. However, anyone who engage in crime is not supposed to blame it on the public so I don't think the way the public see discharged offenders can lead them to reoffend. **(44 years old male correctional officer, Onitsha North).**

The respondents were further asked the pattern of crime discharged offenders commit as a result of negative public perception and result is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON PATTERN OF CRIME COMMITTED BY DISCHARGED OFFENDERS AS A RESULT OF NEGATIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentages (%)</i> |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| Committing the same crime | 100 | 25.6 |
| Committing another crime | 20 | 5.1 |
| Accompanying others to commit crime | 15 | 3.9 |
| Leading/influencing others to commit crime | 5 | 1.3 |
| All of the above | 250 | 64.1 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

Table 5 shows that discharged offenders are likely to commit the same crime, or commit another crime or accompany others to commit crime as well as lead others to commit crime as a result of negative public perception towards them. This shows that they do not have regular pattern to the crime they commit

Table 6: RESPONDENTS VIEWS ON HOW NEGATIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION TOWARDS DISCHARGED OFFENDERS IN ANAMBRA STATE CAN BE CHANGED

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentages (%)</i> |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| Orientation of the public on the acceptance of discharged offenders as fit for the society | 77 | 19.7 |
| Giving proper training and skill acquisition to discharged offenders before re-integration | 32 | 8.2 |
| Building an effective and efficient judicial system that serves the public with integrity | 88 | 22.6 |
| Engaging discharged offenders in community programs that will benefit their community | 64 | 16.4 |
| All of the above | 129 | 33.1 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

Table 6 shows that measures that can be put in place to curb negative public perception towards discharged offenders in Anambra State are, that there should be periodic

orientation of the public on the acceptance of discharged offenders as people who are fit for the society, that proper training and skill acquisition should be given to discharged offenders before re-integration, that an effective and efficient judicial system that serves the public with integrity should be built and that discharged offenders should be engaged in community programs that will benefit their community. An IDI respondent with respect to how discharged offenders can be properly integrated and accepted back opined that:

Government and its officials can make the integration of discharged offenders possible and also make the public see them in a positive light when they make proper arrangement in correctional facilities and also follow up discharged offenders after their release to ensure they do not commit another crime and also put in efforts to see that these discharged offenders are seen as changed people in their various communities (37 years old female prison attendant, Amawbia).

Table 8: RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON THE ROLES DISCHARGED OFFENDERS CAN PLAY TO ERADICATE NEGATIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION TOWARDS THEM

| <i>Responses</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentages (%)</i> |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| Acquiring skills that will help and keep them resourceful | 53 | 13.6 |
| Assisting and engaging in community social services | 106 | 27.2 |
| Total disengagement from crime and any criminal activities | 38 | 9.7 |
| Encouraging other people to desist from crime | 78 | 20 |
| All of the above | 115 | 29.5 |
| Total | 390 | 100.0 |

Field survey, 2021

Table 8 shows that there are roles discharged offenders can play to eradicate negative public perception towards them and these include acquiring skill that will help and keep discharged offenders resourceful, assisting and engaging in community social services, Total disengagement from crime and any criminal activities and to encourage others to desist from crime and any criminal activities.

Discussion of Findings

The quantitative analysis showed that most people have negative perception towards discharged offenders and this negative perception is very high in the state. This finding supports the finding of Brown (2016), Nsaze (2017) and Raboloko et al. (2019) whose studies found negative public perception towards discharged offenders in Uyo, Kenya and Botswana respectively. Thus, the negative perception of discharged offenders by the public is not just prevalent in Anambra but in other countries of West Africa.

It was further found by this study that discharged offenders are faced with discrimination, stigmatization, isolation and rejection as a result of their newly acquired

status which in turn leads them to commit the same pattern of crime. This finding partly supports the findings of Ogbozor and Obi (2016) who found stigmatization as the major challenge facing discharged offenders as they do not know where to go after their release from correctional facilities. Again, the result from the present study partly supports the findings of Osayi (2013) which found the disengagement of discharged offenders from social activities as one of the challenges facing discharged offenders in Anambra State. In another vein, the present study partly supports the finding of Besin-Mengla (2020) that found engagement in crimes by discharged offenders as a result of negative public perception towards them in Cameroon. The finding of the present study as well as that of previous studies shows that discharged offenders are faced with lots of challenges after their correctional programs in many parts of Africa. Further, it can be deduced that the perception towards discharged offenders in Africa have not change over time as they are still seen in a negative light.

Also, this study found that measures to eradicate negative public perception towards discharged offenders include orientation of the public on the acceptance of discharged offenders as fit for the society, giving them proper training and skill acquisition before re-integration and engaging discharged offenders in community programs that will benefit their community. This finding partly supports Langa and Masuku (2019) who found that discharged offender's involvement in community works programme is an opportunity to apologies for the pain they had caused community members by their offence.

Recommendations

The study recommends that (a) Discharged offenders should acquire skills that will help and keep them resourceful so that they do not get engross with the negative public perception displayed towards them. (b) Discharged offenders should be allowed to assist and engage in community social services that will benefit their society as this will help convince societal members that they are changed functional members of the society (c) Discharged offenders should totally disengage from crime and any criminal activities as with time this will help the public to build trust and positive perception towards them (d) Discharged offenders should engage in activities that encourage other people to desist from crime as this will convince the public to see discharged offenders in positive light.

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