

## **NIGERIA CONVICTS AND PRISON REHABILITATION IDEALS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the effectiveness of the prison in reforming and rehabilitating convicted criminal offenders. The data used in the study are derived from three sources: a structured questionnaire, documentary sources, and direct observation. The finding revealed that either in terms of its facilities, personnel, or programs, the prisons are not predisposed to reforming and rehabilitating convicted criminal offenders. After making short and long term recommendations, it was concluded that, in order to effectively reform and rehabilitate convicts, fundamental steps must be taken to control the socio-economic basis of criminality.

**Key words:** Convicts; Prison; Reformation; Rehabilitation; Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most studies of the prisons have been concerned with the sociological analysis of the prison as a social system and have examined the social structure, role and normative system, and value orientation of inmates (Awe, 1968; Goffman, 1961). These and other studies developed propositions concerning the effect of the community on both the institutional and post institutional behaviors of convicts. Yet little attention has been given to an empirical evaluation of Nigerian convict as he or she is faced with the prison rehabilitative ideals.

The question is to what extent can the prison reform and rehabilitate convicts? The answer to this question will hopefully be achieved by empirically examining the experiences of Nigerian convicts. This will involve a critique of convicts' assessment of facilities in the prison, followed by an assessment of the convicts' view of the prison social setting and general practices. The convict's view of the prison's official attitude towards them and its implications for the rehabilitation ideals will be examined.

According to Quinney (1979), the philosophies of punishment are retribution, reformation, and deterrence. Retribution philosophy assumed that convicts must "pay" for their crime: the reformist assume that the convict

will be changed to prevent future criminality. Deterrence is to discourage current and potential criminals from committing crime. How are Nigerian prisons organized to achieve these objectives? In other words, what are the operational strategies adopted to achieve the reformation and ultimate rehabilitation of convicts? How do the convicts view all these vis-à-vis their rehabilitation? These are the questions that this paper will address.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the available literature indicates a deep and increasing disenchantment with the operations of the Nigerian prisons. Given its history, philosophy, and modus operandi, the prisons in Nigeria are perceived to be ill disposed to achieving any meaningful reformation and rehabilitation of incarcerated offenders (Awe, 1968; Odekunle, 1981; Alemika, 1990; Ahire, 1990; Tanimu, 2006). The Nigerian prison service, which operates under the prison Act number 9 of 1972, has reformation and rehabilitation of offenders as part of its fundamental objectives (NPS, 1979).

However, it has been observed that many claims of reformation and rehabilitation are made without a sufficient understanding of the concepts.

According to Ahire (1990),

Reformation refers to measures calculated to impart moral improvement in a persons character so that he will be less inclined to re- offend in the future....Rehabilitation refers to post Release efforts made to make it easier for the offender to resettle.. . in society (Ahire, 1990).

Given this conceptual clarification and in spite of the declared objectives of reformation and rehabilitation, the Nigerian prison is marred with numerous problems. According to Alemika (1983), the Nigerian prison system is a colonial creation and remains a monument to colonial experiences in the administration of criminal justice in Nigeria. The establishment of Nigeria's first "modern" prison in 1872 at Broad Street, Lagos, marked the beginning of the contemporary prison system in the country.

In a paper on crime and crime control in Nigeria, Odekunle observed that the contemporary criminal justice system is incapable of controlling crime because it operationally tilts against the poor and under privileged members of the society. He argued that criminal laws are enacted, broken, and sanctioned differentially within a certain socio-economic and political context. That the personnel, their mode of operations, and other attributes of the agencies of preventions, control, and correction do sometimes aggravate, rather than reduce the crime problem; "that these agencies, by their mode of operations, are sifting system where the great flies are usually screened -off to legal innocence and freedom, and the small ones are retained" Odekunle (1981). One

consequence of this, Odekunle notes, is that the prisons regularly receive back almost half of those they have reformed and rehabilitated.

The persistence of the problem have also been attributed to the lack of “fit” between the declared objectives of reformation and rehabilitation and the prisons practical operational realities. It has been argued, considering that the punitive, depriving, and dehumanizing state of Nigerian prisons that the declared objectives of reformation and rehabilitation can hardly be realized (Tanimu, 2006). Infact, contemporary Nigerian prisons have been described as “human cages with no facilities for correction, reformation, and vocational training” (Ahire, 1990).

Given these illuminating expositions on the Nigerian prison, this paper seeks to empirically probe into the experiences of convicted criminal offenders in Nigeria. This will be done with a view of assessing the Nigerian prisons rehabilitative potentials.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The data used in this paper were generated from Kaduna and Zaria prisons, both in Kaduna state of Nigeria. As at the time of the field work, Zaria and Kaduna prison had male convict population of 586 and 979, respectively. Similarly, the Kaduna and Zaria prisons had 19 and 6 female convicts, respectively. While stratified sampling technique was adopted to choose 209 male convicts in the two prisons, all 25 female convicts in both prisons were interviewed.

Three methods of data collection were employed, namely: interview, direct observation, and secondary sources. A single structured interview schedule was used. Interview time was between 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. from Monday to Friday. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The use of non participant observation was inevitable in the course of the data collection. Aspects observed included, among others: admission and discharge processes, occupational and educational facilities available in the prison, accommodation, feeding, medication, etc. More information was obtained through secondary sources.

While the data collected via directed observation and secondary source were analyzed qualitively, the data collected through personal interview were analyzed quantitatively.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS

### Convicts' Assessment of Prison Facilities

In order to critically examine the convicts assessment of the prison, the socio- demographic characteristics of the convicts will first be examined.

Table 1 presents the data on the characteristics of the convicts.

**Table 1: Social Demographic Characteristics of Convicts. N = 234**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
18-23	30.8
24-29	34.2
30 Years and above	35
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Male	89.3
Female	10.7
<b>Martial Status</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Married	50.9
Single	46.2
Widowed \ divorcee	2.8
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
No formal education	12.8
Primary/Koranic	38.5
Secondary	39.3
Tertiary	9.3
<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Unemployed	49.6
Self-Employed	35.0
Civil Servants	15.4

The data in table 1 shows that a typical convict in Nigerian prisons is a semi-literate male, in the prime of his youth (18-29 years). He is most likely convicted for committing a property or property-related crime. Occupationally, he is either unemployed or self employed (or apprentice) in the lowest occupational ladder. Thus, it is clear that a typical Nigerian convict is a member of the lower socio-economic class in the contemporary Nigerian society.

The effort made so far is aimed at enhancing the understanding of the convicts' socio-demographic characteristics. This, it is hoped, will provide the context for analyzing the current state of the Nigerian prison and its ability to rehabilitate convicts.

From the data collected, it was discovered that the Kaduna prison was built for 500 inmates. But at the time of the field study, it was housing 979 inmates. The Zaria prison, with a capacity for 200 inmates, housed 586 inmates at the time of study. It was discovered in the Kaduna prison that one room of 20 x 30 feet, contained 126 convicts. Females form a very insignificant percentage (10.7 percent) of the prison populations (see table one). Thus, they have adequate accommodation facilities reserved for females.

But for the ordinary male convict, the congestion has reached a stage where convicts sleep in "shifts": some even squat all night. One convict recounted that "The sleeping arrangement is terrible. There is just no space to stretch your legs except you are ready to exchange blows with other convicts. This makes the whole place stuffy". The unhygienic condition coupled with the indoor bucket toilet system accounted for the unbearable stench in the cells.

Furthermore, convicts reported that their cells are infested with bed bugs, lice, mosquitoes, and other infectious insects. In addition to the verbal complaint received from convicts, smashed lice, bed bugs, and other insects can be sighted all over the walls of the cells. These unhealthy living conditions account for the prevalence of numerous skin diseases, like scabbies, eczema, rashes, sores, and so on among the convicts. Many convicts were seen scratching bleeding sores on their skin during the interview.

At the center of the health problem is the shortage of medical facilities and medical personnel. At the time of this study, Zaria and Kaduna prison had a shortage of qualified medical staff. While Zaria prison had only a nurse, Kaduna prison had a nurse and a visiting doctor. These are expected to cater for the medical needs of 586 and 979 convicts, respectively. From observations and discussions with convicts, it is discovered that the prison clinic was affected by acute shortage of drugs and other basic medical facilities. To worsen the situation, sick convicts who need to be taken to the hospital either trekked or paid their transport fare and that of the accompanying warder. Given the non-functional state of the prison earning scheme, most convicts cannot afford the financial cost of going to the hospital outside the prison. It is, therefore, no surprise that prison mortality rates continue to rise in virtually all Nigerian prisons.

From surveys and observations, it was discovered that clothing were not adequately provided to convicts. When asked whether they were given any clothing, most convicts reported that they were never provided with any kind

of clothing by the prison authority. The responses of convicts as to whether they were provided with clothing was cross tabulated with their gender. Table 2 present the findings.

**Table 2:** The Relationship between Gender and Convicts Response to provision of clothing

Gender	Responses					
	Yes I was		No I was not		Total	
		%		%		%
Males	27	11.54	182	77.78	209	89.31
Female	16	6.84	9	3.85	25	10.69
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>18.38</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>81.63</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>100</b>

The findings in table 2 above reveals that the overwhelming majority of male convicts (77.78%) reported that they were not provided with adequate clothing. It also indicates that only 16 female convicts which represent 6.84% of total convicts were given adequate clothing. This can be attributed to the fact that the ratio of female convicts to the male convicts is few in number. So, the available uniform could reach more female convicts than males. While the majority of male convicts used their personal clothing, the few convicts with uniforms (most of whom were long term convicts) claimed to have bought them from discharged convicts. The responses of the subjects were later corroborated with the investigators’ direct observation. It is observed that most of the male convicts in the two prisons were half naked with tattered uniform.

The findings in table 2 reveals that the overwhelming majority of male convicts (87.1 percent) reported that they were never provided with any form of clothing. Although 64% of the female convicts said they were given clothing, it could be due to the fact that they are few in number. So the available uniform could reach more female convicts than males. While the majority of male convicts used their personal clothing, the few convicts with uniforms (most of whom were long term convicts) claimed to have bought it from discharged convicts. The responses of the subjects were later corroborated by the investigators direct observation. The investigator observed that most of the convicts in the prison were barely naked.

The feeding of convicts is another issue that requires close attention and assessment. The accounts of both ex - detainees and discharged convicts provide useful clues to the type of food served in the prisons. Tunde Thompson, a one time detained journalist says that the quality of food served is so bad that to talk about quality would be to do extreme violence to language. Nderibe, also an ex-detainee assert that, “you wouldn’t give that

food to your dog... what they did was mix a little paste of what passed for gari and give you some bitter liquid, which is supposed to be soup” (see Newswatch Magazine, 1989).

It is, therefore, not surprising that 76 percent of convicts interviewed rate the quantity of food served to them as unsatisfactory and 61.5 percent rate the quality as unsatisfactory. These findings correspond to the dissatisfactory rate reported by Charles (1988).

When the convicts were asked what, in essence, is wrong with the food provided, majority noted that the food is ill-prepared, the menu monotonous, the quantity insufficient, and the entire food tasteless. Furthermore, it was observed that the two prisons had no dining hall; as such food is served to convicts in their cells. While the general kitchen environment of Kaduna prison looked visibly clean, that of Zaira looks untidy and infested with flies.

Prison work is one of the aspects assessed in this study. According to convicts, the works assigned to them vary according to certain criteria. For instance, long term convicts who served up to half of their sentence are assigned gang work outside the prison. Such work includes the cleaning of official residential houses, office buildings, working on farm lands, and so on. It can be observed here that this work pattern is inherited from the colonial prison system. The short-term prisoners are assigned general duties inside the prison. These include sweeping, emptying feces, weeding, cooking, and so on. Convicts, with some form of technical or vocational skills, are assigned work in the workshop relevant to their area of specialization.

However, when the convicts were further probed on their work schedule, the majority of the convicts claim that no work has ever been assigned to them since their incarceration. Detail of this finding is contained in Table 3.

**Table 3. CONVITS WORK SCHEDULE.**

Responses	% ( N = 234)
Never Assigned	65.2
Occasionally Assigned	24.6
Regularly Assigned	10.2

The findings in table 3 reveals that while 65.2 percent of the respondents said they were never assigned any work since their incarceration, 24.6 percent said they were occasionally assigned work to do. The type of work assigned to this category of convicts include running errands in the prison, cooking, general cleaning, and such other manual labor. The table also reveals that only 10.2 percent of the convicts are regularly assigned work in the

prison. Their works include teaching out of prison duties, human/pastorships, and prison workshops. The respondents reported that indeed very few of them are exposed to very inadequate and, most often, non-functioning facilities in the workshop.

In terms of educational facilities, both prisons are found to be greatly handicapped. In the Zaira prison, for instance, only religious teachings take place. Religious teachers visit the prison to teach and preach to their followers. But in the case of Kaduna prison, in addition to the religious teachings, educational classes are organized for interested convicts to attend. Table 4 presents a cross tabulation of convicts class attendance with their educational attainment prior to incarceration.

**Table 4: Relationship between Respondents Educational attainment and their Response to the question, “Do you attend classes?”**

Educational attainment	Frequency				Total	
	Yes I do	%	NO I don't	%	No	%
Tertiary	1	4.8	20	95.2	21	9.0
Secondary	30	32.3	63	67.7	93	39.7
Primary	42	46.7	48	53.3	90	38.5
Others	5	16.7	25	83.3	30	12.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	78		156		234	

Table 4 reveals that majority of the respondents in all the categories of educational attainment reported that they do not attend classes. In fact, up to 95.2 percent of convicts with tertiary education claim they do not attend any class. This may be due to the fact that tertiary education holders may not find a place within a prison educational set-up. It was also discovered that the teaching is done by convicts who are not professional teachers prior to their incarceration. The paucity of instructional materials and qualified teachers in prison schools suggest that prisons are not in any position to effect offender reformation and rehabilitation.

Recreational activities and facilities in prisons are also limited and poor in quality. The recreational activities that convicts engage in depends on whether they are inside or outside their cells. When in their cells, convicts engage in games like draft, ludo, cards and “dara” (a game played like checkers). However, due to the shortage of these facilities, convicts have to take turns.



When convicts are let out of their cells for games, normally at 4pm, they engage in games like football and athletics. While the convicts of the Kaduna prison complained that there is only one football for all of the convicted offenders, the convicts of the Zaria prison complained that their only football had gone out of use for the past 2 months.

The Zaria and Kaduna prisons had, at the time of this study, one and three social welfare officers, respectively. The duties of the welfare officer included, among other things: arranging prison visits and handling convicts' mails. The welfare office is also expected to advise convicts on how to make use of the available facilities in the prison for their social, educational, and vocational training.

In order to assess the extent to which convicts benefit from the social welfare services, they were asked "whether they ever received a visitor". Most convicts (56.4 percent) said that they never received any visitors since their incarceration and only 15.8 percent said they do get occasional visits.

In respect of letter writing, convicts accused the welfare officers of dodging their responsibilities by always complaining of the lack of writing materials. Most of those interviewed said that most convicts lose touch with their family and other social ties. By implication, the role of social welfare officers as aids to convicts in writing and processing of appeals is handicapped. All these suggest that social welfare facilities are also inadequate in the locations of this study. It is clear from the above presentation of convicts' view that the facilities provided to them are inadequate for achieving the correctional, reformatory, and rehabilitative objectives of the Nigerian prison.

**Convicts' View Of the Prison Operations**

In assessing the convicts' view of the prison, the following issues will be considered: convicts' view of what the penal objectives are and convicts' view of prison life, in general. Convicts were first asked what, in their view, are the main objectives of the penal system in Nigeria. The findings are contained in Table 5.

**Table 5: Convicts Opinion of the Objectives of the Prison**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N = 234</b>
Oppression	64.6	
Reform/Rehabilitation	22.6	
Others	12.8	

The data reveals that majority (64.6%) of the respondent were of the opinion that the prison is an instrument of oppression. Only 22.6 percent perceive the prison as a reformatory. These findings show that the convicts hold a negative opinion about the objective of the prison. One of the convicts expresses his opinion as thus: "I feel the main objectives of the prison in Nigerian are to punish the poor people. As you can see, majority of the people inside here are poor".

These finding indicate that there is a divergence between the prison policy and the convicts' opinion as to the objectives of the prison. While the prison policy is said to be pursuing the reformatory and rehabilitative ideals, the convicts see things differently. A statement from one convict expresses their view of the class character of the prison as "once a person is incarcerated, nothing is made that will help him in any way; the aim of the prison, to me, is just to oppress the poor people." He concludes that, "as long one remains in prison, he will continue developing a negative view towards the prison and the whole society."

Furthermore, convicts were asked to assess the prison officials in relation to their integrity and incorruptibility. In all, 43.2 percent allege that the prison officials are corrupt. While 27.4 percent maintain that the officials are bias along tribal and religious lines. 17.4 percent are of the view that whatever anomaly is observed among prison officials is a reflection of the whole society and prison officials must not be blamed for a problem created by the society as a whole.

These finding's are interesting for two reason. First, they suggest that convicts are aware of the corrupt practices going on in the prison. One of the convicts interviewed alleged that, for convicts who can afford bribe, the warders can buy any item for them from the outside world. Such items range from food, drugs, cigarette, beer, and even Indian hemp. This finding corroborates Alemika's (1983) observation that: "some of the officials ... constitute themselves into prison traders, helping the prisoners to obtain contrabands, such as cigarettes and marijuana. In some cases, the officials serve as the link between the prison and the outside world for the few powerful individuals in the prison for a price."

It is discovered from observations and discussions that the relationship between staff and convicts is characterized more by hostility than friendship. Convicts reported that, for the majority of the underprivileged inmates, minor infringement of prison rules attracts undue punishment from the officials and that the hostility meted to them ranges from physical torture to solitary confinement. This assertion was confirmed by the researcher, who occasionally observed how convicts were being maltreated by the prison staff in order to obtain their conformity. On one such occasion, the researcher witnessed how a malnourished convict was being physically tortured. When

the researcher inquired to know the offense committed by the convict, he was told that the convict refused to do his share of the day's work (sweeping) on time.

These forms of hostile relationships between convicts and staff do pitch convicts against the officials with negative implication for the achievement of penal objectives of reformation and rehabilitation.

These findings lend support to the inmate social code hypothesis. According to Gresham and Sheldon, (1970) the inmate social code provides that:

Prisoners must present a unified front against their guards no matter how much this may cost in terms of personal sacrifice..... Further, inmates should not allow themselves to become committed to the values of hard work and submission to duly constituted authority (Gresham and Sheldon, 1970).

It is, therefore, no coincidence that when convicts were asked to generally assess the life in prison, most of them express animosity toward the system. They maintain that, life in prison is first, a life without privacy and, secondly, a life of idleness. They generally feel that it is not possible for any convicts to be corrected, reformed, or rehabilitated by the prison institutions. According to them, since the basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing are not satisfied, there is no way of achieving prison reformative and rehabilitative ideals.

These findings agree with those of Alemika (1983), who describes what life in prison entails: "loss of liberty, meaningful social relationships and responsibility, loss of contact with the outside world, forced dependency, feeling and sense of emptiness, boredom, regimentation, loss of discretion, and enforced idleness". Furthermore, Gresham and Sheldon (1970) report that: "in the prison... the inmate finds himself reduced to a level of living near bare subsistence and whatever physical discomforts this deprivation may entail. It, apparently, has deeper psychological significance as a basic attack on the prisoners' conception of his own personal adequacy" (Gresham and Sheldon, 1970).

All these findings indicate that the quality of life in prison is generally poor. Some convicts opine that their incarceration is nothing but a sign of oppression of the poor by the rich. This view is reinforced by convicts' experiences of idleness, deprivation, boredom, loss of discretion, etc., in the prison. All these convicts' experiences negate efforts of achieving prison reformative, corrective, and rehabilitative ideals.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

In discussing the results of empirical work like this, it is necessary to point out that, within the context of Nigerian penal practices, in spite of the influence of the rehabilitation ideals, reform and correctional programs are quite

inadequate and obsolete. The rehabilitation rhetoric is common, but the business of confinement still dominates the Nigerian penal practices.

This has led to many repressive practices under the guise of reform and rehabilitation. In pursuance of the rehabilitation ideals, convicts are kept in prison until authority says that they have been reformed. This reasoning has brought about the indeterminate sentence, which coerces the convict into behaving just to satisfy the expectations of the authorities.

In view of the above, the probe into convicts view led this study to maintain that the failure of the Nigerian prison is due to the disparity between the state philosophies and adopted measures. It can be said, without fear of contradiction, that the current facilities and programs of the prison are out dated, unsuitable, and irrelevant to the declared reformative and rehabilitation ideals. Thus, in the current confusion or even despairs that pervades official thinking and reaction to crime, convicted offenders have also lost faith in the rehabilitative ideals of the Nigerian prisons.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion of the Nigerian prisons, some recommendations become imperative. In the short term, one may be compelled to recommend for improved facilities and programs. There is the need to provide for more functional and adequate educational, occupational, and recreational facilities. Others are accommodation, feeding, clothing, medical, and all such other facilities. There is also the need to introduce more a reformative program, such as training inmates on Information and Computer Technology (ICT).

One way of reducing the deprivation suffered by convicts is the remuneration of work done by them. The resuscitation of the prison earring scheme is, therefore, highly recommended.

The implementation of these recommendations implies, virtually, a total re-organization of the prison system. This, of course, requires massive information, which is hardly available now. Therefore, an institution to generate the desired data for policy formation, planning, and implementation are needed. The need, therefore, to have a National Institute of Criminology in Nigeria becomes paramount. The institute should undertake a nationwide research in areas of crime prevention and control policies.

In conclusion, it is believed that only a radical change that will ensure an equitable system of production and distribution of economic goods and services can minimize the incidence of crime and effective rehabilitation of convicted offenders.

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