



The role of ex-offenders in implementing the Community Work Programme as a crime and violence prevention initiative

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the perceived impact of the Community Work Programme (CWP) (a state-sponsored job creation project) in preventing crime and violence in the townships of Ivory Park and Orange Farm, South Africa. The focus of this article is on the role that ex-offenders who work in the CWP play in the implementation of crime and violence prevention initiatives in the two communities. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with ex-offenders involved in the CWP. The thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings show that the involvement of ex-offenders in the CWP was found to be a positive factor in that it protected them from recidivism by providing them with job opportunities and facilitating their re-integration into their communities. Ex-offenders described their involvement in the CWP as an opportunity to apologise for the pain they had caused community members when they committed crimes against them. It is against this background that the CWP is perceived to have a positive impact through the community work done by ex-offenders who talk to the youth-at-risk about the negative consequences of crime and violence, as well as of substance abuse.

Key words: Community Work Programme, crime, ex-offenders, violence, youth.

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INTRODUCTION

The rates of crime and violence in South Africa are considered to be amongst the highest in the world (Arlene, 2014; Ratele, 2013). For example, the latest crime statistics (2013/14) show an increase in the most significant categories of crime in South Africa. These statistics show that murders increased from 16, 259 in 2012/13 to 17,068 in 2013/14. Other categories of crime reported to be on the increase included robbery, especially ‘aggravated robbery’, which is defined as the excessive use of force or threats of violence against victims in order to steal their belongings (Institute of Security Studies, 2014). The number of aggravated robberies increased from 105 888 in 2012/13 to 119 351 in 2013/14 (an increase of 13 463 or 12.7% year-on-year). Given these statistics, crime and violence in South Africa are no longer exclusively social and/or economic problems; they have also become a major public health problem. Estimates calculated in 2007 showed that the aggregated cost of crime and violence in South Africa amounted to 7.8% of gross domestic product (Alda & Cuesta, 2011). The most burdensome category within that statistic was the economic costs of crime and violence, followed closely by health-related costs (Alda & Cuesta, 2011). Tragically, the weighty burden of crime and violence in South Africa is disproportionately carried by the poor and the historically disadvantaged communities, due in large part to the legacy of apartheid (Louw & Shaw, 1997).

Since 1994, the new democratic South African government has devised all kinds of strategies and policies aimed at dealing with the problem of crime and violence. For example, a National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) was adopted in 1996, a White Paper on Safety and Security was published in 1998, and a Crime Combating Strategy appeared in 2000, all intended to address violent crime. Despite this, crime and violence have remained excessively high, even in relation to South Africa’s socio-economic peers. It is argued that the failure of these strategies is that they have “never [been] fully institutionalised as holistic and comprehensive programmes to deal with all factors that produce crime and violence” (National Development Plan, 2011, p. 357).

This article looks at the perceived impact of the Community Work Programme (CWP), a state-sponsored programme, which is showing some promise in reducing crime and violence in two South African townships in Johannesburg, namely Ivory Park in the east and Orange Farm in the south. The CWP is a government initiative under the aegis of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (Department of Cooperative Governance, 2015, p.1), and was designed to provide ‘an employment safety net’ to eligible, unemployed people by offering them regular work two days per week, totalling 8 days per month. In the period covered in this article, general CWP participants were earning R75 per day and their coordinators were earning R2 000 per month. In terms of eligibility, any unemployed person over the age of 18 years is qualified to join the CWP. In April 2015,

there were 186 sites operating in 140 municipalities across the country, with an average of 1 000 participants per site (Department of Cooperative Governance, 2015, p. 4). The government's plan is to extend the CWP to every local municipality by 2017.

The work undertaken in the CWP is identified, prioritised and decided on by community members in collaboration with local councillors and other key stakeholders in the community. Typically, CWP participants identify social problems in their communities and work towards addressing them. Crime and violence prevention initiatives are some of the community projects that CWP participants in Ivory Park and Orange Farm have undertaken. The focus of this article is on the role that ex-offenders in the CWP play in the implementation of these initiatives in the two communities, specifically in organising public awareness campaigns (including soccer matches) and addressing crime and substance abuse, especially the growing use of *nyaope*², which is often linked to the increase in crime in these two townships. The article also focuses on ex-offenders' involvement in the public awareness campaigns aimed at dealing with the problem of domestic violence, with a specific focus on the role that men need to play in order to mitigate this.

In South Africa, it is estimated that close to 6 000 offenders are released from various correctional facilities each month, either through parole or expiry of their sentence (Muntingh, 2008). It is hoped that upon their release many will stop engaging in criminal activities (Albertus, 2010; Muntingh, 2008). However, due to a lack of dedicated interventions aimed at facilitating their reintegration, many ex-offenders re-offend and return to prison. Currently, there are no available statistics on recidivism in South Africa, but it is estimated to be high (Gaum, Hoffman, & Venter, 2006). Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) such as the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders, Khulisa and others work hard to support ex-offenders to readjust and reintegrate into society. The major challenge facing ex-offenders in South Africa is a lack of employment opportunities due to the stigma of being ex-offenders. Creating job opportunities for ex-offenders may be an effective strategy to ensure that they do not reoffend (Albertus, 2010; Uggen & Staff, 2001).

It is important to mention that the CWP was not specifically developed as a project for ex-offenders. However, given its character and implementation methods, it does have the potential to prevent crime and violence, as has been shown in other studies (Bruce, 2015; Langa & Von Holdt, 2011). As noted, the CWP is community-oriented in its approach in that it requires community members to take a lead in deciding which of the many identified projects to undertake in their communities. Given that crime and violence are major

2 *Nyaope* is an illegal drug in which dagga and mandrax or heroin are mixed. It is alleged that HIV antiretroviral medication, as well as rat poison, also gets mixed in with these substances.

concerns for many South African communities³, it is not surprising that various crime and violence initiatives have been undertaken by ex-offenders in Orange Farm and Ivory Park.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is purely qualitative in its orientation. The word qualitative “implies an emphasis on the processes and meanings” that people employ and derive from their own lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 10). This qualitative methodology was considered appropriate for the purpose of the study as it allowed participants to express their views about the perceived impact and success of the CWP in preventing crime and violence in their communities. A key assumption in qualitative research is its ‘sensitivity to the context,’ in other words, how the ideological, historical and socioeconomic climates influence participants (Coyle, 2007, p. 22). It is thus important to discuss the research context in which this study was conducted in order to understand the meanings that the participants ascribe to interventions intended to prevent incidents of crime and violence in their respective communities.

RESEARCH SITES

The study was conducted in two South African townships, namely Ivory Park and Orange Farm. Ivory Park is a high-density residential area situated in the east of Johannesburg, near Thembisa and Alexandra Township. Omenya (2006, p. 3) describes Ivory Park as an area “characterised by high levels of unemployment, low annual household income, inadequate access to housing and basic services and the proliferation of informal settlement”. Ivory Park, like many South African townships, also experiences high levels of crime and violence.

Orange Farm is situated in the south of Johannesburg, near Soweto. Both Orange Farm and Ivory Park are located within the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. In 2011, a quarter (25%) of the adult population and close to a third (31.5%) of the young people in Johannesburg were unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2015). Due to their extremely high levels of unemployment and poverty, Ivory Park and Orange Farm were chosen for the implementation of the CWP. As noted, the CWP targets poor communities by providing temporary job opportunities to the unemployed, and it is the aim of this study to explore its potential as a crime and violence prevention programme.

3 Statistics South Africa, ‘Victims of Crime Survey,’ Statistical release P0341, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0341/P03412012.pdf> (accessed 3 December 2015).

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

At the time of this research, the CWP in Ivory Park had a total of 743 participants, while 367 participants were working in the Orange Farm CWP. A total of forty-four (44) individual interviews and ten focus groups were conducted in Ivory Park, while 28 individual interviews and four focus groups were conducted in Orange Farm. The participants interviewed in both Ivory Park and Orange Farm included ward councillors, police officers, community police forum leaders, police officials, school principals, NGO representatives and CWP representatives (participants, coordinators, facilitators, and site staff members). Interviews with all these participants were wide-ranging, covering the history of the CWP, its recruitment processes/identification of potential participants, and the community projects undertaken. This paper's focus, however, is limited to the work done by ex-offenders (in collaboration with other CWP participants) to implement crime and violence prevention initiatives in Ivory Park and Orange Farm.

In total, the ex-offenders interviewed in the study were eighteen. All of them have been out of prison for the last two to six years. Some (twelve) have been part of the CWP for the last five years since its inception in 2009/10, while others (six) joined the CWP in the last three years. It was reported during the interviews that other ex-offenders (the number is not known) left the programme after they found other job opportunities, while others left due to the social stigma of being an ex-offender. This is one of the challenges that we discuss later in the paper.

DATA ANALYSIS

Many of the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for thematic data analysis. Thematic content analysis was applied to the data to identify recurring themes. For the purposes of this article, we discuss only the analysis of themes in which participants spoke about the CWP's impact in preventing crime and violence in their communities. The work of Clarke and Braun (2006) was used to guide the analysis of our data, in that we read and reread the interview notes and transcripts as a way of familiarising ourselves with the data. We then coded the themes into specific categories (discussed in the next section).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE STUDY

The study was first approved by the Internal Ethics Committee of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. Permission was also sought and granted by COGTA for the study to be undertaken in different communities. Representatives of different implementing agencies were also consulted for their approval of the study.

An information sheet about the study was given to all the potential participants. Key ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity were also taken into account to ensure that the

identity of the participants is protected. Any identifying information was removed. The study did not pose any risk to the participants. On the whole, the ex-offenders were excited about the opportunity to share their personal experiences of working in the CWP to prevent crime and violence in their communities.

DISCUSSION

This section provides key findings on the active involvement of ex-offenders in crime- and violence-related activities as part of their CWP work, through targeting youth at risk, organising public campaigns against substance abuse and dealing with the problem of domestic violence.

ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF EX-OFFENDERS IN THE CWP

In both Ivory Park and Orange Farm, ex-offenders have been recruited to join the CWP to participate in anticrime campaigns intended to raise awareness about the consequences of crime amongst youth, both in and out of school. It is evident from interviews with ex-offenders about their participation in the campaign that they seem to be playing a positive role in encouraging young people to stay away from criminal activities. They use their own life stories to tell others (especially the youth) that 'crime is not good' and that 'crime does not pay'.

We want to spread a message that crime is not good as well as drugs. We have public anti-crime campaigns by telling young people to stay away from crime because crime is not good. We tell them as ex-offenders because we know that crime is not good. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

With crime prevention programmes in CWP, we have a project whereby we motivate young people [in and out of school] not to do crime and drugs. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

You see [we] use our experiences as former criminals that crime does not pay. We want to show young people that crime does not pay. We have been there. We know what we are talking about because we served long sentences. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

In their article, Uggen and Staff (2001) argue that the involvement of ex-offenders in various community projects can be a 'turning point' in their lives, motivating them not to reoffend. David Bruce (2015) contends that involvement in community work hastens ex-offenders' reintegration into society and enables them to resist returning to a life of crime. It was also

evident in the interviews that ex-offenders saw their involvement in the CWP as positive, giving meaning to their lives through the work they were doing in schools and the wider community. They interpreted their CWP work as 'payback time' for the crimes that they committed in the community.

We realised that we did people wrong, so we needed to come up with a project that will pay the community back. We regret what we have done. It is payback time. We took from the community, and then it's time to pay them. So we help the community members who are unable to do anything for themselves such as the elderly, disabled people and so on. We clean their yards, repair fences and paint their houses in partnership with CWP. We help them paint their houses. We help rebuild shacks that [are] burnt down. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

It is important to note that ex-offenders work with other CWP participants in helping the elderly and disabled, and in cleaning streets, painting public buildings and so forth. For ex-offenders, serving the community through CWP work is seen as a form of public apology and an expression of remorse to the community members who were once negatively affected by their criminal activities. As argued earlier, this is evidence that participation in CWP work facilitates ex-offenders' reintegration into a normal community life. The social nature of the CWP work also forces ex-offenders to show empathy while assisting community members. In this way, participation in the CWP decreases their risk of reoffending as the work encourages them to think about the wellbeing of others, which is an element that is usually lacking when criminals commit crime (Watts & Eagle, 2002). Furthermore, this work motivates ex-offenders to reject the playing out of violent masculinities associated with involvement in criminal activities (Langa, 2012). The CWP work thus encourages them to embrace alternative forms of masculinity, including caring for and nurturing others and being sensitive to their needs.

CWP TARGETING YOUTH-AT-RISK THROUGH SOCCER

One of the groups identified for ex-offenders to work with was youth-at-risk, both in and out of school, as many research studies (e.g. Newburn & Shiner, 2006; Newburn & Stanko, 1994) have shown that young people in this age group (18 to 25 years old) are more at risk of becoming involved in criminal activities than they are later in life. Soccer matches have been used as a vehicle to reach many young people and to talk to them about the dangers of crime and substance abuse. All the ex-offenders in the study saw their involvement with these youths as helping to reduce crime in their respective communities.

As you can see Ivory Park has many people who are unemployed and have nothing else to do. These young people end up committing crimes because they are also bored. This programme aims to bring together all these young people and keep

them occupied with sports..... As you can see across the field, we have so many unemployed boys gambling and getting high on drugs. It is these people that we want to attract to this programme so that we can also contribute towards reducing crime and related problems. (*Female CWP coordinator for the programme implemented by ex-offenders.*)

We do not just play but we use soccer to recruit many people because they all like. It is easy to get them if you ask to come and play soccer or other sports. This is when we talk to them [about] many other things, like crime, nyaope and other things. We tell them about school and education you see. (*Male CWP soccer coach for the ex-offenders programme.*)

It is evident that soccer matches are used as spaces in which to provide mentorship about what it means to be a young person in South Africa, and to identify opportunities that young people can explore rather than resorting to crime and drugs. Ex-offenders play an important role in organising these soccer matches in both Ivory Park and Orange Farm. Gary Barker (2005) found that the use of soccer as a violence prevention tool was effective in the Favelas in Brazil, especially where these soccer events were linked to the acquisition of other life skills, mentorship programmes and career opportunities. This is what the CWP participants are doing: soccer matches are used as spaces for awareness raising and education about the impact of crime, TB and HIV and Aids, as well as identifying and promoting job opportunities that are available in the local municipality.

CWP PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS AGAINST SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The existing literature identifies a strong link between substance abuse and crime, both within South Africa and worldwide (Kilpatrick et al., 1997). It is for this reason that the ex-offenders in both Ivory Park and Orange Farm have been actively involved in public campaigns aimed at preventing substance abuse (especially *nyaope*) amongst the youth.

This year alone we have been involved in two campaigns, including *Thiba Nyaope (Stop Nyaope)*. We went to raise awareness in school during assembly and spoke to school children about the dangers of using drugs and getting involved in sexual activities at an early age. We assisted with distributing pamphlets and putting up posters [about the dangers of nyaope] in schools and public places. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

The biggest challenge we have now in fighting the abuse of drugs and alcohol is that these things are easily available and are cheap. I mean even school-going children can easily afford the nyaope or marijuana. (*Individual interview with a CWP ex-offender.*)

Yes we have worked and supported SANCA [South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence] many times in their awareness campaigns because drug and alcohol abuse are a serious problem in our community. We support them by going with them to the community and distribute pamphlets and put up posters. SANCA had a programme which we were part of called *Phuza wise* (Drink Responsibly) This programme was targeted at women who drink while they are pregnant, at children who drink while at school and [at] people who abuse alcohol. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

In addition to these public awareness campaigns about the risks of substance abuse, the ex-offenders, especially in Orange Farm, also work closely with SANCA to assist young people (mainly boys) who are addicted to *nyaope* to get assistance and rehabilitation. Parents of some of the *nyaope*-smoking boys have approached the ex-offenders to ask for assistance in getting their sons to the local SANCA offices as a first step to rehabilitation.

With the work that we are doing with the boys who are smoking *nyaope*, every day you would get people coming to us and say they have children who have a problem and then we would go to help them. So the community does recognise the work that we are doing. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

We talk to them, and then those who are willing, we take them to SANCA and then SANCA puts them under treatment. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders.*)

Ex-offenders feel a sense of pride when parents approach them for assistance with their male children addicted to *nyaope*. Furthermore, there is also a sense of pride associated with being publicly recognised and appreciated for their good work in assisting these boys. These positive views endorse ex-offenders' reintegration into community life and remove, or at least significantly diminish, the stigma associated with being an ex-offender. Reflecting on their work, the ex-offenders felt that they play a positive role in preventing crime and violence by assisting and interacting positively with youth at risk in their various communities.

EX-OFFENDERS ASSIST IN EFFORTS TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In many group discussions, domestic violence (especially against women) was reported as a major problem in Ivory Park and Orange Farm. As a result, ex-offenders in Orange Farm work closely with the local police station to deal with this problem. In addition to the direct assistance provided to victims, CWP participants also take part in public campaigns to raise awareness about domestic violence in Orange Farm. The campaigns are run by the Victim Empowerment Programme (also a CWP beneficiary) in collaboration with the

police, the Community Policing Forum and other NGOs. The campaigns acknowledge that women are most often the victims of domestic violence, but also encourage men to seek help if they are in abusive relationships.

About domestic violence, most of the time it is between spouses, and ex-partners. Those are the matters we come across a lot. And then mostly people who report are [women]. But we do embark on awareness campaigns to make men aware that they are also welcomed to [get help]. (*Group interview with CWP ex-offenders working with the police.*)

Organising events that involve men is in line with emerging literature that identifies the importance of including both men and women in anti-domestic violence campaigns. It is a way of moving beyond the idea that only men are perpetrators of domestic violence, without acknowledging the possibility that they can also be victims (Ratele, 2013; Sathiparsad, 2008). These campaigns also give men the opportunity to reflect about violent practices associated with hegemonic masculinity, which often oppress and subjugate women.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY THE EX-OFFENDERS IN THIS WORK

On the whole, ex-offenders did well in facilitating crime and violence initiatives in their respective communities. However, many acknowledged that the process of gaining public trust was not easy as some community members were still suspicious of them.

People have a notion that prison is prison and not a correctional centre. They think you do not deserve a second chance. So we are trying to show people that we deserve a second chance, we belong to the community. Some parents may be supportive but others won't because their children are not criminals. But the community around Region G is starting to realise that we are good people. (*Group interview with ex-offenders.*)

Some people still see us as criminals but the attitude is slowly changing because of our work to deal with crime. (*Individual interview with ex-offender.*)

The ex-offenders asserted that lack of acceptance by some community members (including relatives and parents) was one of the major challenges encountered in their community work. In his work, Albertus (2010) found that communities often find it hard to accept ex-offenders and that potential employers discriminate against them. He argues that this lack of acceptance is one of the factors pushing ex-offenders to reoffend. Ex-offenders in this study asserted that despite these challenges – such as being seen as the first suspect when a crime has been committed in the community – they still work hard to prevent crime and violence in their communities and to educate community members to accept ex-offenders.

Their work is slowly and positively changing community members' attitudes towards them, which helps to make them feel more accepted in their neighbourhoods. As a result, they do not feel isolated and tempted to reoffend.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the interviews discussed in this article that the CWP has moved beyond being 'an employment safety net' and now plays an important role in addressing various forms of violence in communities, including violent crime, through the work that ex-offenders and other CWP participants do. Although the CWP was not developed primarily as a violence-prevention programme, some of its work in Ivory Park and Orange Farm has been explicitly oriented towards addressing crime and violence. Ex-offenders' involvement in the CWP may have had crime and violence prevention benefits, as suggested by Uggen and Staff's (2011) research, and Bruce's (2015) work. These authors identify that ex-offenders' involvement in community-based initiatives may be a positive 'turning point,' enabling them to resist recidivism. In addition, the CWP provides ex-offenders with an opportunity to be reintegrated into society. This is because their CWP work involves working with other CWP participants, with community members and with youth-at-risk through soccer initiatives and public campaigns against substance abuse. These public campaigns have been important in providing youth-at-risk with support and skills that enable them to avoid involvement in crime, violence and the abuse of drugs. Some of them have also been recruited to join the CWP, which has further decreased their involvement in crime-related activities and exposure to other risks. Based on this, the CWP is perceived to have had a positive impact on young people, discouraging them from becoming involved in crime and other forms of violence. Messages from ex-offenders appear to be powerful tools in this regard, as many draw on their personal life histories and experiences – both as criminals and as ex-offenders – when they talk to youth-at-risk about the negative consequences of crime, violence and substance abuse. As a result, ex-offenders can be seen as an important resource, further decreasing their risk of reoffending.

CWP ex-offenders in Orange Farm also work with the local police to organise public awareness campaigns about the problem of domestic violence and the places where people can go to seek help. This represents an important shift, signifying support for men to be involved in anti-domestic violence campaigns. These public campaigns are perceived to be changing some men's attitudes to domestic violence. The active involvement of ex-offenders – who may have embraced violent notions of hegemonic masculinity before their release from prison – is important as they are now seen as role models in efforts to reject patriarchy and its associated subordination of women and justification of violence against them. Domestic violence is no longer seen as a problem faced uniquely by women,

but one with which men also need to engage publicly. The message conveyed by ex-offenders' participation in this campaign may turn out to be pivotal for young boys and men, encouraging them to be involved in anti-domestic violence campaigns.

Lastly, it seems that the CWP has facilitated the reintegration of ex-offenders into the community. This would not ordinarily have happened (the label 'once a criminal, always a criminal' justifying the automatic exclusion from society) were it not for the CWP and its focus on crime and violence prevention initiatives. In this way, the CWP has facilitated the emergence of a spirit of solidarity and unity between community members and ex-offenders as they work together for the 'good' of the community. This has helped to strengthen social bonds and to foster an attitude of mutual assistance that is manifesting as creative strategies on how crime and violence can be mitigated and ultimately prevented in Ivory Park and Orange Farm. This is a critical initiative, since crime and violence are considered to be major concerns for the majority of communities in South Africa.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

A major limitation is that this is a study of perceptions. The conclusions regarding the actual impact of the CWP thus need to be treated with some caution. Further research needs to be conducted that would assess changes in attitudes and actual involvement in crime and violence in order to better understand the nature and extent of the impact of the various CWP initiatives with ex-offenders.

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