



## **REINTEGRATION DIFFICULTIES OF EX-CONVICTS: REASONS FOR RECIDIVISM OF EX-CONVICTS IN CAMEROON**

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**ABSTRACT:** *To obtain information on the reintegration difficulties faced by ex-convicts in Cameroon, data was obtained from 96 ex-convicts randomly selected from seven cities in Cameroon. The analysis of data revealed that majority of ex-convicts in Cameroon become recidivist after leaving prison because they are unable to reintegrate in their society. In Cameroon, ex-convicts are generally rejected by the society that continues to label them as criminals. They are rejected in family circles by wives, children and their siblings. It is very difficult for employers to grant them employment opportunities. In case they are employed, they are paid meagre salaries and easily dismissed if suspected of any offence sometimes even without any investigation. The rejection of ex-convicts by the society in Cameroon pushes the ex-convicts to vices such as drug and alcohol consumption and to crimes. This causes their re-imprisonment shortly after leaving prisons of Cameroon.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rehabilitation, Reintegration, Prisoner, Ex-Convict, Recidivism, Cameroon

### **INTRODUCTION**

The number of ex-convicts serving imprisonment in Cameroon's seventy-nine prisons is high. From field survey, 47% of prisoners in Cameroon prisons are people who are serving at least their second imprisonment. These prisoners had been released from previous imprisonment but afterward committed crimes that made them to be imprisoned for at least the second time. This shows that the reintegration of ex-convicts in Cameroon society is very difficult, causing former prisoners to be recidivists. This write-up has as prime objective to show why the reintegration of ex-convicts is difficult in Cameroon.

It should be expected that many people who have served a prison sentence should not want to return to prison due to the hardship they faced in Cameroon prisons. This seems not to be the case in Cameroon today, as many ex-convicts are hardened criminals. Ex-convicts are easily caught in crimes and re-sentenced to serve new prison terms, yet others continue to commit crimes.

Prisons of Cameroon are supposed to be institutions that help to reduce criminality in the society. They are supposed to make the society more peaceful. Generally, since prisons are places of punishment and also places where inmates are made to avoid offending, it would be expected that ex-convicts will not want to return to prison after serving imprisonment. Unfortunately, this is not the reality of Cameroon. Many prisoners claim that imprisonment does not promote the rehabilitation of offenders as it instead promotes reoffending (Van Ginneken, 2016). This appears true in Cameroon as many ex-convicts who are supposed to have been punished and rehabilitated in prisons easily return to criminal activities.



Despite the evidence that many ex-offenders in Cameroon are hardened criminals who do not abandon crimes upon their release from prisons, many others claim to have abandoned offending but the many day-to-day societal difficulties they face might push them to reoffending. In Cameroon, ex-convicts are highly stigmatised by the society. Once a person has served imprisonment, the punishment of imprisonment is supposed to be atonement for the crime committed. Thus, ex-convicts are not supposed to suffer from the crimes they committed. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Cameroon as the criminal stigma is labelled on ex-convicts by the society. The society labels ex-convicts based on the crimes they committed. For example, an ex-convict who committed rape is labelled a rapist; another who committed murder is labelled a murderer and one who committed theft is labelled a thief. The stigmatisation of ex-convicts by the Cameroon society makes the ex-convicts to suffer from social, economic and political difficulties; which sometimes push them to go back to criminal activities.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The labelling theory was used to develop this study. This theory was developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially through the works of Howard Saul Becker in his book titled *Outsiders*. Promoters of labelling theory also include Edwin M. Lemert, Kai Erikson, and John Kitsuse. According to Becker (1963), society has laid down norms and all those who do not respect these norms are regarded as outsiders and their acts are termed deviance.

Becker (1963) claims that the society sometimes falsely accuses people of breaking social norms and labels them as deviants. Furthermore, the labels placed on the falsely accused persons finally transform these non-criminals into criminals. Thus, labelling theory helps to create criminals by labelling some behaviour as normal and other behaviour as abnormal. All those with abnormal behaviours in a society are stigmatised and labelled as deviants. Once a person is stigmatised and labelled as deviant, he finally accepts and develops the traits of the deviance. Thus, the society transforms people into criminals through the labels it places on the people. According to the labelling theory, an offender remains a criminal in the eyes of the society forever.

Secondary deviance, unlike primary deviance assists in creating criminals. In secondary deviance, the society places a stigma and a label on the offender. The label placed on the offender becomes his new identity. Unconsciously, the offender adapts his behaviour to suit this accepted identity (Lemert, 1967). From the works of Lemert and Becker, societal response to offending through stigmatisation and punishment triggers more offending.

From the labelling theory, the work of prisons of Cameroon as rehabilitation centres of offenders is annulled by the society. In addition, the conception that ex-convicts have paid for the crimes they committed through imprisonment is disregarded by the Cameroon society that continues to stigmatise and reject ex-offenders after they leave prison. The Cameroon society continues to label ex-offenders as criminals whereas prisons are supposed to have punished these offenders for the crimes they committed and also transformed them to law abiding persons.



## METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Concerning the sources of data collection, primary and the secondary sources were used. Secondary sources of data involved documentary research in libraries and internets sources. Primary source of data was collected during fieldtrips to seven selected cities in Cameroon. During these trips, questionnaires were administered to ex-convicts. The simple random sampling and the stratified random sampling methods were used to distribute questionnaires. A total of 112 questionnaires were distributed to ex-convicts and 96 were returned, giving an 85.7% realisation. The table below illustrates the distribution of questionnaires in the field.

**Table 1. Distribution of Questionnaires**

Cities	Number of questionnaires distributed to ex-convicts	Number of questionnaires returned
Douala	26	22
Yaounde	21	18
Buea	10	09
Kumba	15	13
Bamenda	16	14
Wum	11	09
Dschang	13	11
Total	112	96

Interviews were also granted to many resource persons in the field. The fieldtrips also permitted direct observation to be done. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analysed. This study therefore used the mixed method of data analysis and presentation of results.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Social Difficulties Faced by Ex-Convicts in Cameroon

The relationship many ex-convicts in Cameroon have with people in their community is not very good to facilitate their reintegration into the society. Many of these ex-convicts are treated as outcasts. They are not usually shown love by people around them. Prisoners and ex-convicts in Cameroon are maltreated by some family members and friends meanwhile they highly need the support of family members in particular and friends in general. Martinez, N. (2009) reveals that strong family support during the imprisonment of prisoners helps these offenders to abandon offending when they leave the prisons. Ex-convicts in Cameroon are not usually accepted by their former friends and their points do not usually count among the people they frequent. This causes isolation and pushes these ex-convicts to people who accept them for what they are. Generally, people who are ready to accept these stigmatised ex-convicts are mostly criminals. Thus, many of these ex-convicts tend to return to criminal activities.



## **Strained Relationship with Spouses**

Generally, majority of ex-convicts of Cameroon prisons are unmarried. However, there are some ex-convicts who were married before they were sentenced to prison. Many ex-convicts confessed that it was difficult for them to maintain their marital relationship with their spouses while they were in prison. The stigma of having a husband or wife who was a prisoner made the spouse uncomfortable with the husband or wife who was serving jail. Many ex-convicts claim their married and love lives were good before they became prisoners. Thus, their married relationship deteriorated from the time they became prisoners till date. According to many ex-convicts, during imprisonment, the number of visits they receive from their spouses reduced with increase in duration they spent in the prison. Some ex-convicts complained that somewhere along the time they spent in jail, their spouses abandoned them.

Comparatively, more male than female ex-convicts claim to have received poor treatment from their spouses. Out of a sample of 31 married ex-convicts randomly selected from seven cities in Cameroon, 1 out of 4 female ex-convicts claims to have poor relationship with the husband, while 21 out of 27 male ex-convicts claim to have problems with their spouses. Thus, from the 31 married ex-convicts, 22 of them have problems with their spouses. These are problems that mostly started when these ex-convicts were in prison. From field studies, out of the ex-convicts with marital problems, 9 of the ex-convicts are still with their spouses, while 13 of them have been abandoned by their spouses. Some of these spouses abandoned the ex-convicts while they were still in prison, while others abandoned them after their release from prison.

Most of the married ex-convicts who have marital problems wish to have good marital relationships with their spouses. From the field studies, 17 of the 22 of ex-convicts with marital problems regret the problems they are having in their marriages and wish to reconcile with their spouses. Many of these ex-convicts, that is, 12 of them are seriously making attempts to reconcile with their spouses. However, only 4 of them hope they will reconcile with their spouses based on the efforts made. Majority of the ex-convicts with marital problems are negatively affected by these problems. These ex-convicts show signs of depression and frustration. Many claim that life is difficult without their spouses. They regret why their marriages are collapsing.

From the marital problems faced by many ex-convicts, it is clear that reintegration is difficult for many ex-convicts in Cameroon. Many ex-convicts facing marital challenges are lonely. Some indulge in the consumption of alcohol and drugs like marijuana to find solace. Unfortunately, the consumption of alcohol and drugs by ex-convicts in Cameroon in attempts to find solace is a stepping stone to criminality. Wood (2010) shows a direct lay connection between the consumption of drugs and offending. In the effects of alcohol and drugs, many of these ex-prisoners in Cameron easily turn back to crimes. From field studies, 19 of the 22 ex-convicts with marital problems confirmed that they frequently consume alcoholic drinks with 12 of the 19 consumers of alcoholic drinks confirming that they get drunk of alcohol at least once a week. These ex-convicts who consume alcohol claim they do so to forget the pains caused by their marital problems. With the high rate of drunkenness from alcohol by ex-convicts with marital problems, their reintegration into society becomes difficult. The effect of drunkenness pushes some of these ex-convicts to consume other harmful drugs such as marijuana. In this study, only 6 of the 22 ex-convicts with marital problems accepted that



they consume marijuana. The consumption of alcohol and other harmful drugs by ex-convicts with marital problems pushes them to easily commit crimes and make them recidivists.

Lonely ex-convicts in Cameroon who have either been abandoned by their wives or are facing problems with their wives sometimes seek the companies of friends for comfort. Unfortunately, these ex-convicts are mostly rejected, as people continue to label them as criminals. Those who are usually ready to accept these ex-convicts are mostly gangs of criminals. Thus, marital problems push many ex-convicts into gangs of criminals.

A survey carried out in the Buea and New Bell central prisons in the South West and Littoral regions of Cameroon respectively involved 13 prisoners who were serving at least a second prison sentence and had marital problems prior to their present incarceration. Five of these recidivist prisoners confirmed that their marital problems are linked to their reoffending as they went back to offending after their previous release from prison when they could not find peace and love with their spouses in their homes.

### **Difficulty in Falling in Love**

The refusal of many people in Cameroon to fall in love with ex-convicts is a factor that makes the reintegration of ex-convicts into the society to be very difficult. Most people seeking a lover would not want to have an ex-convict as one. Davis (2014) declares that the ability of a person to get or remain married greatly reduces if he or she has been imprisoned. Out of 25 people chosen randomly in the city of Douala and questioned if they can have an ex-convict as a lover or spouse, 21 said they cannot, 3 said they can if the offence was a misdemeanour and only 1 person said that she will accept the man out of love and not whether he is an ex-convict or not.

A survey carried out with a sample of 48 male and 3 female unmarried ex-convicts chosen randomly in the city of Douala, the town of Buea and the town of Dschang led to the following revelations. Out of these 48 unmarried male ex-convicts, 34 have been struggling to fall in love. A total of 22 of these 34 unmarried male ex-convicts have always been rejected by women whenever they propose to have love relationship. Four of these unmarried male ex-convicts claim they have been accepted by some few women but claim their love relationship was short-lived. Only 2 unmarried male ex-convicts claim to be in a stable love relationship. Concerning the 3 unmarried female ex-convicts, 2 of them claim to have been in unstable love relationship, while 1 claims no man has proposed love to her for the past two years since she left prison. Ex-convicts in Cameroon claim that the difficulties they face in having people who will fall in love with them is making their reintegration process in their society to be very difficult.

In this study, 9 out of 31 married ex-convicts claim to be living happily with their wives. These ex-convicts claim the society still discriminates against them and they sometimes feel rejected by other people but the love they share with their wives is enough to make them happy. According to these 9 ex-convicts, they cannot return to offending because they have someone; their wives to spend their time with and they do not want to go back to prison. From these ex-convicts, it is clear that having love partners who keep the ex-convicts happy will promote their reintegration as the ex-convicts are happy and able to overcome societal challenges. Married men will avoid acts that can lead to imprisonment (Davis, 2014). In Cameroon, while majority of ex-convicts have difficulties having lovers, majority of married



ex-convicts have poor relationship with their spouses. Since these ex-convicts do not have lovers to keep them happy and at the same time the Cameroon society continues to label them as criminals, it has become very difficult for ex-convicts to reintegrate into the society when they leave prison.

### **Poor Treatment of Ex-convicts by their Children**

Generally, a parent will not want to have a criminal record. In case crime was committed and the parent imprisoned, the children should serve as motivation for the ex-convict to avoid his or her re-offending. Ex-convicts who have children try to be of good behaviour and abandon offending (Rocha, 2014). "I'm thinking of my kids; I thought of my parents and I thought of my family" (Pansag et al, 2016, p. 26); are three reasons given by an ex-convict as reasons why he wants to stop offending. Unfortunately, in Cameroon, some children do not help their ex-convict parents to stop offending. The role of children in the reintegration of parent ex-convicts in Cameroon depends on the attitude of the children towards their ex-convict parents. The ex-convict parent will easily make efforts to stop offending and reintegrate the society when he or she feels loved by the children. This might not be the case when the ex-offenders feel abandoned or detested by his children. In Cameroon, it is very rare to find a child who is comfortable with a father having a criminal record. This is mostly the case of ex-convicts who were convicted of felony. The poor treatment of ex-convicts by their children in Cameroon mostly begins when these ex-convicts are convicted of felony and sent to prison. Crimes like armed robbery, rape and murder place a stigma on the children of the offenders. Majority of children having parents with criminal records in Cameroon agree that the relationships they have with their parents changed greatly from the time the crimes were committed and especially when their parents were convicted.

In Cameroon, children of prisoners in particulars and offenders in general are usually insulted and rejected by their peers. The crimes committed by their parents are used to maltreat the children. Murray (2005) justifies that children of incarcerated parents are stigmatised, insulted and bullied. In Cameroon, the maltreatment of the children of prisoners sometimes continues even after the parents become ex-convicts. The rejection of the children of prisoners and ex-convicts is a serious problem that negatively affects the way the children behave towards these parents with the criminal records. Murray et al (2008) explain that the imprisonment of parents causes many negative effects on their children, including learning difficulties, offending, drug consumption and health problems. These negative effects mostly emerge when the children are maltreated by their guardians, when the children cannot provide their basic needs, and when the children are stigmatised for the crimes their parents committed.

Prison milieus in Cameroon are highly insecure for visitors and the conditions of the prisoners are so deplorable that many parents and caregivers mostly prevent children from visiting their incarcerated parents in prison. Unfortunately, this has a long run negative effect on the children. The limited contact between children and their imprisoned parents depreciates the bond between parents and their children and this may have far-reaching negative effects on the parents after their released from prisons (Scharff & Gampell, 2011). In Cameroon, the truth about the incarceration of parents is mostly hidden from their ignorant children. Sometimes, lies are told to these children, making them to know that their parents have been unjustly imprisoned. Many of these children become stigmatised and traumatised when they finally learn the truth from the society about the crimes their parents committed.



This shock makes many children of ex-convicts in Cameroon to detest their parents while they were in prison and even when they become ex-convicts.

The difficulties that the children of offenders endure especially during the imprisonment of their parents have made many children to blame their predicaments on their criminal parents. As earlier mentioned, offender in Cameroon are mostly permanently labelled as criminals even after serving imprisonment. The children of ex-convicts continue to suffer rejection mostly from their peers for the crimes their parents committed. Thus, even after their parents are released from prisons and become ex-convicts, many of these children continue to maintain strained relationships with them. Some of these children regret being children of ex-convicts.

A sample of 35 ex-convicts who have children above the age of 10 years was chosen randomly from seven towns in Cameroon. From this sample, 5 ex-convicts have been abandoned by at least one of their children; 19 ex-convicts are encountering serious disrespect from their children. This shows that 68.6% of ex-convicts in Cameroon receive poor treatment from their children.

The poor treatment that many ex-convicts receive from their children slows down their reintegration process into the society. Some of these ex-convicts become more frustrated when they are unable to receive love from their children. As some of the children abandon, disrespect or neglect their parents, these ex-convicts easily develop depression. In a state of depression, some of the ex-convicts turn to heavy consumption of alcohol in an attempt to overcome their frustration. Unfortunately, under the influence of alcohol, these ex-convicts easily commit crimes that cause some of them to be re-sentenced to prison. This is one of the reasons why many ex-convicts in Cameroon are recidivists. From this angle, the reintegration of many ex-convicts is difficult in Cameroon.

### **Poor Relationship with Siblings**

The relationship that many ex-convicts in Cameroon have with their brothers and sisters is vital as it influences their reintegration into the family in particular and into the society in general. Offenders mostly depend on all types of family support to stop offending (Martinez, D. J. 2009). Family members in general and siblings of young ex-convicts in particular either facilitate or retard the reintegration process of ex-convicts in Cameroon. Siblings are very important in the reintegration process of ex-convicts who live with them in the same family houses, especially young ex-convicts. Although there is little scientific evidence to support the following assertion, it was noticed that where the relationship between ex-convicts and siblings is poor, the ex-convicts showed traits of easy reoffending. In Cameroon, two-thirds of ex-convicts who show attitudes that can easily push them to reoffending have poor relationship with their siblings and sometimes other members of their homes. In addition, it was discovered that in homes where the young ex-convicts feel loved by his or her siblings, these ex-convicts show signs of happiness and the desire to avoid crimes. Ex-convicts in Cameroon depend on their immediate family members for support in their reintegration process. Ex-convicts claim that the most important reason why they have stopped offending is the family support that they receive (Martinez, D. J. 2009).

Imprisonment in Cameroon leaves a scar that can hardly be erased. People are not proud to have a brother or sister who is a prisoner or an ex-prisoner. Once a person is imprisoned for felony, it brings a negative label on the family members. The siblings of the prisoner are



maltreated in the neighbourhood. People sometimes insult them because of the crime committed by their brother or sister. Most often, they cannot get involved in an argument or quarrel in the neighbourhood without people insulting them based on the crime committed by their brother or sister.

In Cameroon, the poor relationship existing between many ex-convicts and their siblings started before and during imprisonment. Some siblings struggle and forgive their imprisoned brothers and sisters, while others continue to have poor relationships with these prisoners even after their release from prisons. Many siblings in Cameroon continue to regards their ex-convict brothers and sisters as criminals. This is not totally wrong as many ex-convicts continue to offend. Kelechi (2015) outlines that most ex-convicts still maintain their criminal behaviour as they continue to offend. Thus, many ex-convicts in Cameroon do not have good relationship with their siblings, especially when the ex-convicts live in the same houses with their siblings.

A sample of 53 ex-convicts randomly selected from seven towns of Cameroon shows that 34 ex-convicts have poor relationship; 15 ex-convicts have fair relationship and 4 ex-convicts have good relationship with their siblings. The prisoners having very poor relationship with their siblings make up 64.2%. This high percentage of ex-convicts having poor relationship with their sibling's proofs to have difficulties in their reintegration process. According to these ex-convicts, they are highly maltreated by their siblings in the family residences, their brothers and sisters do not respect them. Some ex-convicts claim that because of their criminal antecedence, some of their siblings secretly commit domestic offenses such as theft and blame the offenses on the ex-convicts. These aspects of maltreatment of ex-convicts by their siblings in particular and other family members in general push the ex-convicts into frustration and isolation.

The poor treatment given to many ex-convicts by their siblings in particular and family members in general pushes some ex-convicts towards people who can give them comfort. Unfortunately, such company is mostly made up of delinquents and criminals. These sidelined ex-convicts mostly join the company of marijuana smokers and thieves. Within short periods of sharing the company of these delinquents and criminals, the ex-convicts return to offending. As these ex-convicts become recidivists, it becomes difficult for them to be reintegrated in the society. Instead, the crimes they commit easily cause their return to prison. To corroborate this point, a survey was carried behind the Omnisport Stadium in Douala where firewood was being split near the New Deido Market. This area always has a group of thieves who mostly snatch bags and purses from women going to or coming from the New Deido market. Out of a sample of 15 of these thieves, 12 of them are ex-convicts of the New Bell Central Prison. These ex-convicts and their companions claim they are happy together as they understand one another and share each other's burden. They cited a number of reasons that brought them together among which is poor home treatment from siblings and other family members.

### **Rejection of Ex-Convicts by the Society**

The Cameroon society generally inhibits the reintegration of ex-convicts. Generally, in Cameroon, once a person commits a crime, he remains a criminal. An ex-offender in Cameroon is permanently labelled a criminal. The fact that many people in the society continue to label ex-offenders as criminals disfavours the rehabilitation of prisoners and the



reintegration of ex-convicts into the society. Despite the fact that when a person serves imprisonment, he has paid for the crime he committed, this is not true as the society continues to condemn ex-prisoners, making only a few of them to re integrate the society (Tammy, 2014). The Cameroon society pushes many ex-convicts who had decided to stop offending by the time they left prison to reoffend. Out of 96 ex-convicts randomly selected for this study, 29 of the prisoners left prisons less than one year ago. Thus, 67 of these 96 ex-convicts have been out of prison for more than one year. Most of these prisoners claim that they do not want to reoffend but the society is pushing them to reoffend by stigmatising them, and refusing them opportunities that can enable them provide their basic wants. This shows that all ex-convicts are not criminals else they will all return to prison shortly after they are released from the prison.

Many people in the Cameroon society contradict ex-convicts who claim to have abandoned offending but are forced to reoffend by the society that marginalises them. Out of 20 people randomly questioned, 18 claims that ex-prisoners in Cameroon do not stop offending when they leave the prison. People instead claim that prisons of Cameroon create hardened criminals who become more dangerous once they become ex-convicts. The declarations that follow made by a civil society activist in Douala supports the view of the general society of Cameroon:

The prison system of Cameroon is very poor. The main aim of prisons is to make sure that the society is a safe place. Prisons of Cameroon are supposed to make sure that bad people are transformed to good citizens when they leave the prisons. Unfortunately, this is not the case with Cameroon prisons. In Cameroon, majority of prisoners released from prison makes the society more unsafe. In the neighbourhood, people feel relatively safe when a known robber is captured and imprisoned but they feel more unsafe when another prisoner is released from prison. Once a known robber who was in prison returns to his neighbourhood after imprisonment, people start to tighten security around their residences.

Many people in Cameroon justify their points that ex-convicts are hardened criminals by the fact that many armed robbers, pick-pockets and hired murderers are ex-convicts. To these people, if prisons of Cameroon were places where people are rehabilitated, then the number of ex-convicts returning to prisons for committing crimes is supposed to be small.

Having the view that ex-convicts are mostly criminals; the society continues to maltreat most ex-convicts. These ex-convicts are labelled as criminals wherever they are by people who know them. As they pass through the neighbourhood, people talk negatively about them, informing others who do not know them to be careful. In the areas where the ex-convicts live, they are the prime suspects if any crime is committed. Ex-convicts are hardly entrusted with financial resources by the society. If they are accepted as members of local association, they are hardly elected as presidents, talk less of positions that enable them to collect or keep association money.

The poor treatment that ex-convicts receive from the society is so serious that even kids are warned by parents and other elderly persons to be on the alert whenever a neighbour is an ex-convict. Many people warn their kids not to open the door if the neighbour who is an ex-convict knock. Parents warn their children not to be friendly with ex-convicts who live close by.



Despite the fact that most people label ex-convicts as criminals, there are still many ex-convicts who have not returned to crimes. They do not commit criminal offences but are unfortunately treated as criminals by the society. The maltreatment of ex-convicts by the society pushes many ex-convicts to frustration and isolation. Since they are mostly isolated by the society, ex-convicts seek for bonding among peer ex-convicts and other people who readily accept them. Unfortunately, most of the people who easily accept the company of ex-convicts are criminals. In the company of these criminals, some ex-convicts who did not want to return to crimes find themselves being influenced by their companions to reoffend. Thus, the Cameroon society makes the reintegration of ex-convicts in the community to be difficult and this accounts for the high rate of ex-convict recidivism and re-imprisonment.

### **Economic Difficulties Faced by Ex-Convicts in Cameroon**

It has been found through this study that ex-convicts are generally discriminated upon by people who know their criminal records. Ex-convicts are hardly employed and their salaries are very low (Wodahl, 2006). Many people continue to label ex-convicts as criminals even if they do not show any evidence of recidivism. Major economic difficulties faced by ex-convicts in Cameroon include difficulties in getting new jobs; difficulties in maintaining acquired jobs; and very low pay packages. It is primordial for ex-offenders to be employed as this makes them useful to the society, enables them generate revenue to acquire their wants and makes them to avoid criminal activities (Ricci & Barry, 2011). The economic difficulties the ex-convicts in Cameroon face are among the reasons why their reintegration into the society is difficult.

### **Difficulties in Getting a Job**

Generally, it is difficult for people to be employed in Cameroon. In Cameroon's economic capital Douala, 35 out of 40 workers sampled randomly claim to be underemployed. In one commercial centre still in Douala, 871 applications were received from job seekers by the human resource department for only two vacancies that were advertised in the job market. The vocational training offered to prisoners in Cameroon prisons is poor and does not impart high skills that can make the ex-prisoners competitive in the job market. Ex-convicts are mostly unskilled, thus; they spend long periods of unemployment. (Rauma & Berk, 1987). With the high number of applications that business enterprises receive from job seekers in Cameroon, it becomes difficult for people with doubtful character and limited skills to be employed. Many employers through background investigations discover jobseekers with criminal history and most often do not employ them (Pettinato, 2014).

According to a clergy of the Roman Catholic Church in one of his sermons on Sunday, January 12, 2020, "Cameroon is a country where people have the urge to quickly get rich even with very little efforts made". The opinion of this clergy is valid as people in Cameroon commit several crimes in order to get rich. For example, out of 40 enterprises in Douala visited for the collection of data concerning modalities for the employment of workers, we discovered that 26 of these enterprises, that is, 65% of the enterprises do not promote the provision of employment opportunities to jobseekers who have criminal records. Some of these enterprises claim that criminals hardly change. They claim that when they employ these people with criminal records even as sales boys or night-watchmen, they easily arrange with other thieves and burgle the business enterprises once they have a mastery of the enterprises. These entrepreneurs and business persons claim that most theft cases in business enterprises



are masterminded by workers of these enterprises who work in collaboration with other bandits.

A person who misappropriates public fund will hardly be employed in a financial institution (Fahey et al., 2006). Managers of seven financial institutions comprising of 4 banks and 3 microfinance institutions declared that they do not employ anyone with criminal records. In these financial institutions all those seeking employment must present non-conviction certificates produced by the Ministry of Justice in Cameroon. This procedure clearly sidelines ex-convicts from working in financial institutions in Cameroon. Among the banks visited during this study, it was gathered that some bank tellers have vanished with huge sums of money belonging to their employers. This example among other malpractices by employees has made many employers to carefully scrutinise jobseekers before hiring them.

The government of Cameroon also makes it difficult for ex-convicts to gain employment. Most employment opportunities offered by the government demand a proof from the applicants that they have not served imprisonment. Government applicants are obliged to produce a certificate of non-conviction from its Ministry of Justice. In this case, ex-convicts cannot even apply for government employment opportunities. Government action which excludes ex-convicts from applying for many government employment opportunities is paradoxical as the government claims to promote the rehabilitation of prisoners in Cameroon prisons. If the government claims to promote the rehabilitation of prisoners in Cameroon prisons which aims at transforming prisoners from criminals to law-abiding citizens, then there are no justification why ex-convicts should be sidelined from applying for government employment opportunities.

In different regions of Cameroon, most ex-convicts complain of their inability to secure good jobs. These ex-convicts claim that most employers discriminate when employing their workers. According to many ex-convicts, once employers discover that an applicant is an ex-convict, the applicant loses his or her chance of being employed. Some of the ex-convicts declared that they usually try to hide the fact that they have been convicted in the past in order not to forfeit their chances of gaining an employment. Some ex-convicts declared that they have never applied for any employment opportunity mainly because they feel they will not be recruited. Some ex-convicts in this category of ex-convicts who do not apply for employment have created self-employment mostly in petty trade and in farming. Other group of ex-convicts apply several times for jobs but are mostly not employed. Out of a sample of 87 ex-convicts who have applied more than 10 times for job opportunities in different towns of Cameroon, only 15 ex-convicts have been employed. The unemployed ex-convicts claim to be rejected because of their criminal records. However, this is a weak argument as it is a general situation in Cameroon for job seekers to be rejected by employers many times.

Most ex-convicts decry the discrimination against them by employers as they claim to have abandoned offending and feel it is great injustice judging them based on their past. Out of the 96 ex-convicts questioned 91 of them, that is, 94.8% claim that if employed, it becomes very difficult for an ex-convict to continue offending. These ex-convicts claim that they offend in order to survive in a country that does not want to give them opportunities to live decent lives. In other words, they claim that one of the main reasons why ex-convicts become recidivists is the fact most of them are not given job opportunities by employers.



In brief, the difficulties that ex-convicts encounter due to their high unemployment push many to them to become idle. They mostly congregate in hideouts where they easily consume alcohol, marijuana and other harmful drugs. The congregation of unemployed youths in bars and in some hideouts encourages the development of street gangs and other deviant or criminal activities (Nana-Fabu, 2014). Among these gangs of criminals in Cameroon are unemployed ex-convicts whose main motivation to join street gangs and commit crimes is to provide their needs though through illegal means. Many of these ex-convicts would have stopped reoffending if employed. This high unemployment rate among ex-convicts in Cameroon makes it very difficult for the ex-convicts to reintegrate themselves in the society. They are pushed by unemployment to seek ways of earning a living which mostly involve criminal activities such as robbery. Thus, there is a high level of recidivism among ex-convicts in Cameroon mainly due to difficulties encountered by ex-convicts in securing jobs.

### **Difficulties in Maintaining an Acquired Job**

Many of the few ex-convicts employed in Cameroon work under difficult conditions. Their co-workers receive better treatments than them. According to these ex-convicts, they witness discrimination promoted by their employers and co-workers. Employers who manage to employ ex-convicts do not totally trust the ex-convicts. Even though these employers have given jobs to the ex-convicts, they are not ready to place their trust in them. Care is taken by these employers to make sure the ex-convicts do not succeed in committing any acts that can be detrimental to the enterprise. It was discovered that none of the employed ex-convicts were in positions that enable them to handle finances. Out of the 15 ex-convicts, that is, 15.6% who have been employed at least once after leaving prison, none was involved in any activities that permitted him to handle finances or handle keys that granted him access into the enterprises. Only 3 of these 15 ex-convicts were employed at the time of this survey as 12 others had lost their job, with 3 of them having lost their jobs more than once. These ex-convicts were employed as loaders of trucks that transport goods, as drivers, as receptionists and as assistant salespersons.

Although few business owners employ and are willing to employ ex-convicts, these people declare that they cannot place total trust on anyone who has a criminal record. Most employers declare that they will not hesitate to terminate the employment contract of any ex-convict who is involved in any criminal offence.

According to ex-convicts, their working conditions become very difficult when co-workers discover that they are ex-convicts. Whenever they have misunderstandings with co-workers, the co-workers mostly insult them as criminals. Some of the ex-convicts declare that they face great challenges in their places of work as they are mostly accused of most wrongdoings. Some ex-convicts claim that co-workers usually commit crimes in their places of work and impute the crimes on them, the ex-convicts. According to these ex-convicts, whenever they are accused by their co-workers, the senior members of staff and the owners of the enterprises mostly believe in the versions of story given by the co-workers. Sometimes, no investigations are made before the ex-convicts are sacked by their employers.

Some former employed ex-convicts claim that they were dismissed without any valid reasons. Two ex-convicts declared that they lost their jobs just because the owners of the enterprises that employed them discovered that they were ex-convicts meanwhile their criminal backgrounds were not needed at the time they applied for the jobs. Unfortunately for



them, they were sacked when their employers discovered that they are former prisoners. As earlier mentioned, 12 out of the 15 ex-convicts who were employed have lost their employment opportunities with 3 of them having been sacked more than once. According to the ex-convicts, most of the dismissals from their jobs are unjustified as they are based on mere suspicions. Thus, the ex-convicts claim to be sacked because everyone considers them as criminals.

The frequent dismissal of ex-convicts by their employers causes great frustration among ex-convicts. Many of these ex-convicts have developed great resentment against employers who maltreat them. The discrimination that ex-convicts face in their places of work and the arbitrary dismissal of many of them make many ex-convicts to feel that the society has not accepted them because they are former prisoners. Ex-offenders are not free after serving imprisonment as the society continues to stigmatise them using their criminal records (Pettinato, 2014). In Cameroon, the frequent dismissal of ex-convicts from their jobs has pushed many of them to turn against the society that continues to punish them for crimes they have already paid for in Cameroon prisons.

Once ex-convicts do not feel loved and accepted by those who give them employments, it becomes difficult for them to fully integrate themselves in the society. Secondly, if ex-convicts are dismissed mainly because they are considered prime suspects of any criminal offences committed in their places of work, they shall feel rejected by the society. All these easily push them to start reoffending, which some of them had abandoned and their reintegration process in the society becomes very difficult.

### **Low Pay Package**

A major challenge faced by ex-convicts is low wages. The work they do is not mostly commensurate to the pay they get. They generally do more work and get less pay. Most employers who employ them knowing that they are ex-convicts, do not usually place them at comfortable salary grids. These employers sometimes make the ex-convicts to know that they are being favoured to have been employed.

According to many ex-convicts, their low pay packages were not due to their nature of jobs. Some claim that they were paid less than other co-workers with whom they perform the same activities. According to these ex-convicts, they have discovered that other co-workers are paid higher wages despite the fact that they perform similar functions at their places of work. This is possible because of the fact that it is the discretion of most employers in Cameroon to determine the pay packages of their workers.

Some ex-convicts claim that their salaries were reduced without any negotiation when their employers discovered that they were ex-convicts. They were given the choices of either accepting salary deduction or dismissal. Two ex-convicts claim they lost their jobs when their employers decided to reduce their salaries by 25% for one and 40% for the other. They rejected this reduction of wages and were sacked from their jobs.

All the ex-convicts who were employed by different employers declared that they were paid low wages which did not permit them to live comfortable lives. Some of these ex-convicts had to look for other sideline jobs to augment their incomes. For example, one ex-convict who lives in Douala works with a security company where he works as a security guard. Each month, he works during the day for two weeks and for the other two weeks he works at night.



During the two weeks that he works at night, he works as a motorbike taxi rider during the day in order to augment his income. According to ex-convicts, their employers pay them wages that make life difficult for them. They claim that some of them are tempted to commit crimes such as theft in order to provide their needs because their salaries are low. Therefore, the low salaries that employers pay ex-convicts push the ex-convicts to recidivate and this makes their reintegration in the society to be difficult.

## CONCLUSION

The reintegration difficulties that ex-convicts face in Cameroon are caused by a plethora of problems. In Cameroon, most ex-convicts blame the society for making their lives difficult. They claim to want to abandon offending but need societal support to do this. Ex-convicts in Cameroon face many social and economic difficulties which make their reintegration in the society to be difficult. Before leaving the prison, many ex-convicts had developed very poor relationship with their spouses. Some of them had been abandoned by their spouses. Others have serious problems with their children and siblings who continue to reproach them for bringing disgrace to their families. Even the society as a whole does not make the reintegration of ex-convicts to be easy. People continue to insult them, referring to them as criminals even if they have not committed any crimes upon leaving the prison. It is very difficult for ex-convicts to gain employments. First of all, the government demands certificates of non-conviction from people who aspire to become civil servants and contract workers of the state and this excludes all ex-convicts. In addition, most entrepreneurs refuse to employ ex-convicts and the very few who venture to hire their labour decides to pay them very meagre wages. However, many ex-convicts are responsible for the stigma that the Cameroon society places on them as it is common for some ex-convicts to commit crimes and be arrested few days after they are released from prison. What is the role played by the state of Cameroon in promoting the reintegration process of ex-convicts? Are the rehabilitation programs for prisoners in Cameroon prisons not wanting in content considering the fact that many ex-convicts continue to reoffend after leaving prisons? These are questions that need to be researched to throw more light on the reintegration process of ex-convicts in Cameroon.

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