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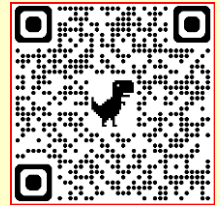
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Centering African Epistemologies: A Decolonial Approach to Juvenile Recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

Juvenile Recidivism remains a persistent challenge in Zimbabwe and Eswatini and the world at large, with rising cases of children reoffending despite going through rehabilitation to mend their behaviors. This study adopts a decolonial lens exploring the causes of recidivism amongst the juveniles and appreciating the culturally sensitive strategies for reducing the phenomenon. Drawing on indigenous knowledge ways and restorative justice principles, this research investigates the interconnectedness of community participation, social justice and culture. The study utilized a qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Juvenile offenders were engaged, the community elders and also professionals such as social workers, psychologists and superintendents from rehabilitation homes who worked with the juvenile offenders in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. Data collected from participants revealed that factors such as; poverty, negative peer influence, mass media, poor parental skills, poor implementation of reforms and substance abuse are causing children to reoffend. The findings highlight the limitations of colonial- era justice systems and the potential of decolonial community interventions to reduce recidivism amongst juveniles.

KEY WORDS: recidivism, juveniles, decolonisation, rehabilitation, community-centered, justice

1. INTRODUCTION

The rehabilitation of juvenile offenders is a crucial aspect of the criminal justice system in any country. Despite numerous attempts to reform young offenders, recidivism defined as the re-offending of individuals after receiving rehabilitation remains a significant challenge. Studies indicate that recidivism rates are rising among offenders in Zimbabwe, Eswatini, and globally, despite the

implementation of Westernized rehabilitation programs (Zinyemba, Maushe, and Mangwiro, 2020). This is particularly concerning in developing countries like Zimbabwe and Eswatini, where youth constitute a significant portion of the population.

Juvenile recidivism poses a considerable challenge for juvenile justice systems globally, especially in Africa. In Zimbabwe, despite government efforts to implement a juvenile justice system focused on rehabilitation and restoration, rates of youth relapse into criminal

behavior continue to rise. This situation necessitates culturally relevant and systemic measures to effectively address recidivism rates in Africa. Recidivism, as defined by Samuel, Roman, and Schoeman (2024), refers to the reoffending of a person previously released from prison, leading to subsequent rearrest, conviction, and imprisonment. The lack of reliable statistics and systematic studies on recidivism in Africa complicates the understanding of this issue. For instance, while South Africa has one of the highest crime and recidivism rates globally, insufficient attention has been given to identifying effective programs to address these issues (Murhula and Singh, 2019).

The United Nations (2021) reports that nearly 40% of Africa's population is under the age of 18, highlighting the urgency of addressing juvenile recidivism across the continent. Traditional rehabilitation models, often based on Western ideals of punishment and deterrence, emphasize individual accountability through incarceration and community service (Mambende, Rugaranganda, & Moyo, 2016). However, these models are not always suitable for Eswatini and Zimbabwe due to significant cultural and socio-economic differences. Limited resources and economic challenges further hinder the effectiveness of these models in promoting rehabilitation and reducing recidivism among juvenile offenders.

Efforts to reduce juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini must embrace culturally relevant approaches, such as the integration of Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes values of respect, connectedness, and community. These approaches can include traditional healing practices, community-based interventions, and victim-offender mediation. By addressing underlying social and cultural factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, and exposure to violence, these interventions can tackle the root causes of juvenile delinquency and encourage successful reintegration.

Despite the introduction of reforms in Eswatini and Zimbabwe, such as the prohibition of corporal punishment and the Child Justice Bill, juvenile criminal activity and recidivism remain persistent issues. Factors such as poor implementation of reforms, poverty, parental negligence, peer influence, and substance abuse contribute to the problem. If left unresolved, juvenile recidivism can lead to severe consequences, including increased crime rates, mental health issues, and an intergenerational cycle of criminal activity. Current approaches often prioritize Western-based models that neglect local values and cultural practices, resulting in ineffective interventions and high recidivism rates (Mupedziswa & Marambanyika, 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to assess the impact of these models on juvenile offenders in Eswatini and Zimbabwe and advocates for the integration of culturally relevant, decolonial approaches to effectively address this issue.

Objectives and research questions

The study aims to explore juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, proposing interventions rooted in African values, traditions, and community structures to better prevent and address juvenile recidivism. The specific objectives include:

- Examine the causes of juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini.
- Explore decolonial interventions that can be employed in Zimbabwe and Eswatini to reduce juvenile recidivism.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the causes of juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini?

- Which decolonial interventions can be employed in Zimbabwe and Eswatini to reduce juvenile recidivism?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Juvenile recidivism in Africa as a persistent challenge

Juvenile recidivism remains a significant issue in Africa, driven by a complex interplay of systemic, socio-economic, and cultural factors. Research indicates that rehabilitation efforts in many African countries, including Zimbabwe and Eswatini, are often undermined by poverty, peer influence, substance abuse, and weak family structures (Murhula & Singh, 2019; Samuel, Roman & Schoeman, 2024). For instance, in South Africa, a substantial percentage of juvenile offenders reoffend within two years of release, primarily due to the absence of comprehensive reintegration programs (Murhula & Singh, 2019).

The limitations of Western-Based rehabilitation models

Western rehabilitation models, which are characterized by punitive approaches such as incarceration, frequently fail to address the root causes of juvenile delinquency in African societies. These models often overlook cultural values and community-based support systems, rendering them ineffective in fostering sustainable behavioral change (Zinyemba et al., 2020). In contrast, culturally embedded practices, such as family mediation and community accountability, have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing reoffending rates (Mambende et al., 2016).

Cultural and community-centered approaches to rehabilitation

Culturally relevant rehabilitation approaches leverage traditional practices to tackle the underlying causes of juvenile delinquency. The Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes interconnectedness, respect, and communal responsibility, has been successfully integrated into restorative justice programs in Southern Africa (Oyewale, 2021). Additionally, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as community councils and spiritual cleansing ceremonies, have proven effective in fostering accountability and promoting social reintegration (Rugaranganda & Rugaranganda, 2016).

The role of Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) provide valuable insights into addressing juvenile recidivism. In Zimbabwe, practices such as "*butho*," where elders mentor and guide young offenders, have been credited with reducing reoffending rates (Parisi, 2020). These practices emphasize moral education, community accountability, and the reintegration of offenders into supportive social networks. However, their potential remains underutilized due to the prevailing dominance of Western frameworks in policy and practice.

Theoretical Frameworks for Juvenile Recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini

This study centers on the application of African epistemologies, particularly the Ubuntu philosophy, to address juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. By integrating Social Learning Theory and Cultural Theory with Ubuntu, the research aimed at developing culturally relevant interventions that resonate with local communities. Social Learning Theory posits that behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In the context of Ubuntu, this theory can be enriched by emphasizing the role of community and relationality. Positive role models within the community can significantly influence juvenile behavior, as youth are likely to imitate behaviors demonstrated by respected elders and peers. For example, mentorship programs that involve community elders can provide opportunities for youth to observe and learn pro-social behaviors, reinforcing positive actions through community

support. Socio-economic challenges such as poverty and broken family structures in Zimbabwe and Eswatini create environments where negative behaviors are often modeled. Addressing these challenges through culturally relevant interventions can help mitigate the factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency.

Culturally appropriate mentorship, where elders demonstrate positive behaviors, aligns with Bandura's concept of modeling and can foster a supportive community environment that encourages youth to engage in constructive activities. Cultural practices, such as spiritual cleansing ceremonies in Zimbabwe and community councils in Eswatini, play a crucial role in rehabilitation. These practices can be integrated into formal rehabilitation programs to enhance their effectiveness and promote healing. By recognizing and incorporating local cultural identity into rehabilitation efforts, the justice system can create a more supportive environment for young offenders, facilitating their reintegration into society.

Ubuntu emphasizes collective accountability and restorative justice, offering a framework that contrasts with punitive justice systems. This philosophy can be operationalized within the juvenile justice system by involving community members in the rehabilitation process, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility among youth. The principles of Ubuntu challenge the punitive nature of traditional justice systems, advocating for a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of delinquency, such as poverty and lack of access to education.

Eurocentric approaches to juvenile justice often overlook the cultural and social dynamics present in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. These models may fail to address the unique challenges faced by youth in these contexts, necessitating a shift towards decolonial interventions that prioritize local knowledge systems and cultural practices. By emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant practices, the study aims to create a more equitable and effective juvenile justice framework.

Community networks can serve as informal social workers, providing support and guidance to young offenders. This aligns with the Ubuntu philosophy of interconnectedness and communal responsibility, highlighting the potential of community involvement in addressing juvenile recidivism. Recognizing the role of community in rehabilitation efforts can enhance the effectiveness of interventions and promote a sense of shared responsibility for youth outcomes.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. Qualitative research was essential for gaining in-depth knowledge and understanding of complex issues, particularly the socio-cultural factors contributing to reoffending (Braun and Clarke, 2024). This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences, making it ideal for examining the interplay between cultural practices, systemic challenges, and individual behaviors. The research was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants.

The research utilized a phenomenological design to investigate the everyday experiences of individuals while suspending preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This design was particularly relevant as it aimed to explore lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how individuals understand their circumstances and challenges related to juvenile recidivism.

The target population included children in conflict with the law, superintendents from three selected rehabilitation centers (two in Zimbabwe and one in Eswatini), pretrial diversion officers, probation officers, and social workers knowledgeable about the juvenile justice systems in both countries. Engaging community elders allowed for insights into indigenous knowledge systems and approaches that can be adopted to reduce recidivism. Data triangulation enhanced the research by incorporating a wide range of professional insights and firsthand experiences, facilitating data saturation and ensuring diverse perspectives are included.

The study employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically using purposive and convenience sampling techniques (McCombes, 2022). This technique was used to select key informants who are information-rich and can provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon. Participants included social workers, probation officers, diversion officers, superintendents from rehabilitation homes, and community elders from Zimbabwe and Eswatini. The researchers also used convenient sampling for juveniles. This method was applied to select children in conflict with the law, aged 8 to 17, who were readily available for participation. Data was collected from juveniles at three selected rehabilitation homes in Eswatini and Zimbabwe, identified through referrals from the Department of Social Welfare. The selected children had undergone rehabilitation but had reoffended, highlighting gaps in Eurocentric approaches to juvenile justice. Additionally, the research included a literature review of causes of juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, utilizing sources from Google Scholar, Research Pub, and ResearchGate from 2022 to 2025.

Data was collected from a total of 47 participants, comprising: 6 social workers; 6 probation officers; 2 pretrial diversion officers; 6 superintendents from rehabilitation homes; 6 community elders and 24 juveniles from rehabilitation homes. This sample size was relevant as it captured diverse experiences and perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from both affected children and professionals working with them (Creswell, 2014).

The researchers collected data through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and literature review. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with both key informants and primary participants, allowing for deeper exploration of the phenomenon through open-ended questions. Focus Group Discussions were conducted with juveniles, organized into three groups of eight participants each, facilitating the sharing of diverse views in a group setting. A review of relevant online sources to contextualize findings within existing research.

Data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research method focused on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith and Nizza, 2022). The IPA process includes: Interviewing, transcription, reading and re-reading, initial coding, identifying emergent themes, looking for superordinate themes and interpretation and writing up findings (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023).

Ethical approval was obtained from institutional review boards in both countries, as well as from the Department of Social Development and heads of rehabilitation homes. Participants provide informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The study adheres to culturally sensitive research practices, including consultations with community leaders to respect local customs and traditions. Ethical considerations are paramount in protecting both participants and researchers, facilitating a respectful

and responsible research process.

4. FINDINGS

Perceived causes of recidivism amongst the juveniles in Zimbabwe and Eswatini

The study highlighted that factors such as poor implementation of culturally relevant reforms, poverty, substance abuse, lack of sufficient resources, mass media and peer influence causes juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. This is supported by verbatims below:

Poor implementation of culturally relevant reforms

Participants emphasized the need for rehabilitation programs that are tailored to the unique cultural contexts of Eswatini and Zimbabwe. One of the participants stated:

"The Western-based models for rehabilitation do not consider the cultural values and practices of our society, which makes it difficult for the juvenile offenders to relate to the programs."

Another participant echoed:

"When you have lived in a good environment like Blue Hills, which provides good food, shelter and food it would not be helpful to return home where there is no food and abuse from parents. As a result of poverty at home, one may be forced to steal or commit any other crime so that I can be returned to this home or get better help."

On the same note another participant added;

"A child may commit a crime of theft because of poverty at home, and is referred to the rehabilitation home for 3 years to modify behavior. However, if the child's environment is not improved, the child is likely to commit more crimes to get basic needs such as food."

The findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing juvenile recidivism, one that takes into account the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of Eswatini and Zimbabwe.

Lack of resources as a barrier to effective rehabilitation

Participants consistently identified the scarcity of resources as a significant obstacle to rehabilitation programs in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, ultimately contributing to reoffending amongst juveniles.

One participant succinctly stated: *"Insufficient funding and inadequate facilities severely compromise the quality and effectiveness of rehabilitation programs."*

A key informant elaborated on the specific challenges posed by resource constraints:

"Limited resources, such as transportation and finances, hinder the delivery of essential services like home visits and counseling sessions, as recommended by the Pre-trial Diversion program. This absence of psycho-social support and exposure to negative peer influences often leads to relapse."

Another key informant highlighted the consequences of incomplete or ineffective rehabilitation services:

"When recommended services, such as educational reintegration, are incomplete or unavailable, juveniles are more likely to reoffend. For instance, a child may be referred to the Ministry of Education for school fees

assistance, but if this support is not provided, the underlying causes of their offending behavior remain unaddressed, increasing the likelihood of recidivism."

These findings emphasize the critical need for increased resources and support to ensure the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs and reduce reoffending amongst juveniles in Zimbabwe and Eswatini.

Peer Influence as a powerful factor in juvenile recidivism

Participants identified peer influence as a significant contributor to recidivism amongst juveniles. The pressure to conform to group norms can lead children to reoffend, as illustrated by the following accounts:

One participant shared:

"After my parents' divorce, I lived with my father, who was often drunk and neglectful. At 12, I ran away and joined a gang of older peers who introduced me to car theft, robbery, and assault. Despite counseling, I reoffended to bail out a gang member, leading to my second arrest."

Another participant revealed:

"I was admitted to the reprimand home for indecent assault. My older friends showed me a pornographic video, and I experimented on my friend's younger sister. I was caught before penetration, but this incident highlights how peer influence can lead to harmful behavior."

These narratives demonstrate how peer influence can normalize deviant behavior, provide opportunities for criminal activity and foster a sense of belonging through shared experiences. To mitigate the effects of peer influence, rehabilitation programs must address the root causes of juvenile offending, provide positive role models, and foster a supportive environment that encourages prosocial behavior.

Poverty as a catalyst for juvenile recidivism

Poverty emerged as a pivotal factor contributing to recidivism amongst juveniles. Participants shared poignant accounts illustrating how economic hardship drives children to engage in criminal behavior:

One participant recounted:

"After my parents' divorce, I lived with my grandmother, who struggled to provide food for my siblings and me. I began stealing clothes to obtain money and food. Despite counseling, the situation at home remained unchanged, leading me to continue stealing."

During focus group discussions, another participant echoed this sentiment:

"My stepmother would often leave me hungry for days, without fault. I would attend school without proper attire, food, or settled school fees. I started stealing from her, then ran away and lived on the streets, begging or stealing to survive."

Key informants concurred, emphasizing the environment's influence on juvenile criminal behavior:

"An orphan may go hungry for days. To survive, they steal, and if returned to the same environment, they're forced to reoffend."

These narratives highlight poverty's devastating impact on juveniles,

driving them to engage in survival crimes such as theft, experience food insecurity and hunger, face neglect and abandonment and develop negative coping mechanisms. To break the cycle of poverty and recidivism, it is essential to address the root causes of economic hardship and provide supportive environments that foster positive development and rehabilitation.

Mass media as a contributing factor to juvenile recidivism

Mass media was identified as a significant factor contributing to recidivism amongst juveniles. Participants shared personal experiences and insights on the impact of media on their behavior. One participant recounted:

"My friends showed me a pornographic video, and I wanted to experiment on my friend's sister. I was caught by her parents and arrested for indecent assault. I learned the behavior through observation and peer influence."

A key informant elaborated on the broader implications of media exposure:

"Television, radio and social media such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok have caused significant harm to our community by promoting sex, profanity, violence, and crime. Parents' distraction with their phones and lack of supervision enable children to learn and emulate these behaviors, leading to issues like drug abuse, LGBTQIA related conflicts, and violent outbursts."

These narratives highlight the ways in which mass media can contribute to juvenile recidivism by promoting harmful behaviors and attitudes, providing access to explicit content, encouraging peer influence and social learning and distracting parents and caregivers from supervising children's media consumption. To mitigate these effects, it is essential to promote media literacy, responsible parenting, and community-based initiatives that foster positive values and behaviors.

Substance abuse as a catalyst for recidivism among juveniles

The study revealed a significant link between substance abuse and recidivism among juveniles. Participants shared personal experiences illustrating how substance misuse contributed to their reoffending:

"After my parents' divorce, my father's alcohol abuse escalated. He would return home drunk daily, neglecting my basic needs. I began stealing his alcohol out of hunger. Friends introduced me to drugs, and we would go days without sleep."

Key informants corroborated the role of substance abuse in recidivism:

"Children use drugs as an escape from harsh realities like poverty and suffering. Crystal meth, for instance, allows users to go days without food or sleep. With parents migrating to diaspora communities, children are left unsupervised, leading to substance abuse and reoffending."

These narratives highlight the ways substance abuse contributes to juvenile recidivism such as escapism from adverse circumstances, neglect and lack of parental supervision, peer influence and social learning and altered mental states leading to impulsive behavior. Addressing substance abuse through targeted interventions, family support, and community-based programs is crucial to reducing recidivism rates among juveniles.

Decolonial interventions for reducing recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini

This study sought to identify culturally relevant strategies to reduce recidivism amongst juveniles in Africa, promoting context-specific reforms that diverge from Eurocentric approaches. By embracing decolonial interventions, Zimbabwe and Eswatini can foster community involvement, youth development, and successful rehabilitation of young offenders.

Engaging the Community in the Rehabilitation Process of Young Offenders

Participants underscored the significance of community involvement in the rehabilitation process to foster a supportive environment for juvenile offenders. The following quotes illustrate this emphasis:

One of the key informants emphasized: *"Community involvement is vital in reducing stigma and providing a supportive environment for juvenile offenders."*

Another key informant added:

"Community education is essential to raise awareness about the importance of rehabilitation and the role community members can play in supporting juvenile offenders."

A participant highlighted the importance of culturally sensitive approaches:

"As children, we need community meetings that provide counseling on the effects of crime and alternative strategies. This helps us understand our virtues as Shona people, guiding us upon reintegration into the community."

These quotes highlight the importance of community engagement in the rehabilitation process. Participants emphasize the need for community involvement to reduce stigma and provide support, education and awareness-raising about rehabilitation and community roles and culturally sensitive approaches that incorporate traditional values and virtues. These narratives underscore the significance of a collaborative and culturally informed approach to rehabilitation, recognizing the community's potential as a positive influence on juvenile offenders.

Reintroduction of contested corporal punishments strategy

Participants proposed the reintroduction of corporal punishments as a potential strategy to reduce recidivism. They argued that the adoption of European-style human rights and the subsequent ban on corporal punishment have eroded parental authority and contributed to a lack of discipline among children. One participant stated:

"Corporal punishments should be reintroduced. Not beating the child causes delinquent behaviors. In our time, children were disciplined by parents, teachers, and elders through corporal punishment. The Shona culture says, 'If one spares the rod, they spoil the child.' Because of children's rights, children are misbehaving. Inflicting pain reminds the child of their mistakes and reduces recidivism."

Another participant added:

"Corporal punishment should be allowed in Zimbabwe to restore parental authority and control children's behavior. I'm working on a case where a 15-year-old girl reported her parents for beating her after she slept at her boyfriend's house. What image does this create for the

family? Do you think these parents will love their child the same after going through this ordeal?"

These quotes highlight a contested strategy for reducing recidivism. Participants argue that corporal punishment can serve as a deterrent and reminder of the consequences of misbehavior, the erosion of parental authority has contributed to a lack of discipline among children and cultural values, such as those reflected in Shona culture, emphasize the importance of discipline and authority. However, it is essential to acknowledge the potential risks and controversies associated with corporal punishment, including physical and emotional harm to children, potential long-term negative effects on mental health and well-being and inequitable application and potential for abuse. Therefore, any consideration of reintroducing corporal punishment must be carefully weighed against these concerns and alternative strategies for promoting discipline and reducing recidivism.

Cultural and spiritual healing as a traditional approach to rehabilitation

Participants emphasized the significance of cultural and spiritual healing in addressing the root causes of juvenile offending and promoting positive rehabilitation. One participant noted:

"Cultural and spiritual healing are essential in addressing the underlying causes of juvenile offending. This approach fosters positive healing and reduces recidivism. Growing up, we participated in cleansing ceremonies that promoted spiritual well-being and positive growth."

Another participant added:

"In our culture, we believed that a child belongs to the community. This collective approach to childcare helped reduce offending and reoffending, as community elders guided children and instilled values of respect and Ubuntu."

A third participant suggested:

"We should revive traditional practices, such as sending young girls and boys to cultural camps, where they can learn valuable life skills and positive behaviors. These camps, common in the pre-colonial era, helped shape us into responsible individuals and contributed to lower crime rates."

These quotes highlight the importance of cultural and spiritual healing in rehabilitation, emphasizing: the need to address underlying causes of juvenile offending through traditional practices; the value of community-based approaches to childcare and rehabilitation and the potential benefits of reviving traditional cultural practices in promoting positive youth development. By incorporating cultural and spiritual healing into rehabilitation programs, Zimbabwe and Eswatini can leverage traditional knowledge and practices to promote positive outcomes for juvenile offenders.

Mentorship and remodeling as essential components of traditional African justice

Mentorship and remodeling are vital elements of the traditional African justice system, emphasizing the importance of positive relationships, guidance, and behavior. Participants highlighted the significance of positive remodeling through the following verbatims:

One participant, a Probation Officer, shared:

"I have witnessed the impact of positive role modeling on

reducing reoffending. Pairing young people with positive role models from their community helps them develop attitudes and behaviors consistent with our cultural values."

Another participant emphasized:

"In our culture, we have the saying 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,' meaning 'a person is a person because of other people.' Mentorship is crucial as it helps our children become law-abiding citizens, reducing reoffending."

A third participant highlighted the traditional Zimbabwean practice of *butho*:

"A child with delinquent behaviors is assigned to stay with an elder from the community, where values and morals are taught to reduce reoffending. Adopting this practice can help reduce recidivism amongst our children."

These quotes underscore the importance of mentorship and remodeling in rehabilitation, emphasizing: positive role modeling as a tool for reducing reoffending; the value of community-based mentorship in promoting cultural values and the significance of traditional practices, such as *"butho,"* in teaching values and morals. By incorporating mentorship and remodeling into rehabilitation programs, Zimbabwe and Eswatini can leverage traditional knowledge and practices to promote positive outcomes for juvenile offenders.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini is influenced by a range of systemic, cultural, and individual factors. Addressing these issues requires a decolonial and culturally sensitive approach, one that integrates the Ubuntu philosophy and insights from Social Learning Theory to foster sustainable rehabilitation.

Poor implementation of culturally relevant reforms

One of the key findings of this study is the inadequacy of Western-based rehabilitation models in addressing the socio-cultural realities of African societies. Participants noted that these models fail to resonate with local cultural values, which are critical to sustainable behavioral change. This aligns with the literature, such as Mupedziswa and Marambanyika (2020), who critique Eurocentric approaches for neglecting the communal and relational nature of African societies. Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes interconnectedness, collective accountability, and the reintegration of individuals into their communities (Mugumbate & Naami, 2024). By integrating culturally relevant reforms rooted in Ubuntu, such as family group conferencing and restorative justice, rehabilitation efforts can become more meaningful. These approaches align with the values of relationality and community participation, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for juvenile offenders. Additionally, the failure to implement culturally appropriate reforms reflects broader systemic gaps in the justice system, as highlighted by Oyewale (2021). The literature underscores the importance of aligning rehabilitation programs with the cultural and social realities of African communities, emphasizing that this alignment can improve program effectiveness and reduce recidivism.

Lack of Resources

Resource constraints emerged as a major barrier to effective rehabilitation, with participants highlighting the lack of funding, inadequate facilities, and limited capacity for follow-up interventions. The literature supports this observation, with

Mambende, Ruparanganda, and Moyo (2016) noting that underfunding of juvenile justice programs in Zimbabwe and Eswatini undermines their effectiveness. Ubuntu philosophy offers a potential solution through the principle of communal resource pooling, where communities collectively mobilize resources to support juvenile rehabilitation. This approach emphasizes the shared responsibility of the community in ensuring the well-being of its members (Udah et al., 2025). Furthermore, the interconnectedness emphasized by Ubuntu suggests that community-led initiatives, such as vocational training programs and psychosocial support interventions, could compensate for resource deficits. Such efforts would not only enhance program effectiveness but also foster a sense of ownership and accountability within the community.

Poverty

Poverty was identified as a significant driver of juvenile recidivism. Participants described how economic deprivation forces juveniles to engage in criminal behavior as a survival strategy. This finding resonates with Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior is influenced by environmental factors (Bandura, 1977). Juveniles in impoverished settings are often exposed to negative influences that reinforce delinquent behavior. The literature also supports this, with Samuel, Roman, and Schoeman (2024) highlighting the link between economic deprivation and high recidivism rates in Africa. Ubuntu philosophy offers a preventative framework by fostering community networks that collectively address the needs of vulnerable children. For instance, community-driven feeding programs, educational sponsorships, and vocational training initiatives can alleviate the economic pressures that drive juveniles to reoffend. This aligns with the Ubuntu principle of *"umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"* (a person is a person through other people), emphasizing the collective responsibility of the community to ensure the well-being of its members (Ngubane & Makua, 2022).

Mass Media

The influence of mass media on juvenile behavior was another significant theme. Participants noted how media often exposes children to inappropriate content, which normalizes delinquent behaviors. This observation aligns with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of observation and reinforcement in shaping behavior (Bandura, 1977). Juveniles who are exposed to violent or unethical media content may imitate these behaviors, especially in the absence of positive role models. Ubuntu philosophy provides a counterbalance to the negative influence of mass media through community-led interventions. For instance, mentorship programs guided by elders can provide juveniles with positive role models, reinforcing cultural values and ethical behaviors. Furthermore, media literacy programs, rooted in Ubuntu's principles of collective accountability and mutual support, can help communities critically evaluate the content consumed by juveniles, promoting healthier media habits.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse emerged as both a coping mechanism and a driver of delinquent behavior. The literature substantiates this finding, with Murhula and Singh (2019) identifying substance abuse as a significant contributor to recidivism in South Africa. Social Learning Theory explains this behavior as a learned response to environmental stressors, often reinforced by peer influence. Ubuntu philosophy offers culturally relevant solutions to this issue, such as spiritual cleansing ceremonies and community-led rehabilitation programs. These interventions address both the behavioral and spiritual dimensions of substance abuse, fostering holistic healing. By involving elders and community leaders in the rehabilitation

process, Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of collective healing and support, reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

Engagement of the community in the rehabilitation process

Participants emphasized the importance of community involvement in creating a supportive environment for juvenile offenders. This finding aligns closely with Ubuntu philosophy, which underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities. Mugumbate and Naami (2024) highlights that community engagement can reduce stigma, foster a sense of belonging, and promote successful reintegration. Practices such as family group conferencing and victim-offender mediation, rooted in Ubuntu principles, can enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs by emphasizing reconciliation and collective accountability.

Cultural and Spiritual Healing

Traditional practices, such as spiritual cleansing ceremonies, were identified as effective tools for addressing the root causes of juvenile delinquency. This reflects the Ubuntu principle of holistic healing, which considers the emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions of rehabilitation. Research by Tshugulu and Simbine (2023) supports this by emphasizing the role of cultural practices in promoting positive behavior and reducing recidivism. By integrating such practices into rehabilitation programs, communities can address not only the behavioral aspects of delinquency but also its underlying emotional and spiritual causes.

Mentorship and Role Modeling

Mentorship and positive role modeling were highlighted as critical components of successful rehabilitation. This finding aligns with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of observational learning and positive reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Ubuntu philosophy further reinforces this perspective by promoting the concept of *"butho"*, a traditional mentorship practice where elders guide young offenders toward positive values and behaviors. By fostering collective responsibility and interconnectedness, mentorship programs inspired by Ubuntu can create sustainable pathways for behavioral change.

6. IMPLICATION FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study highlight critical gaps in current rehabilitation approaches for juvenile offenders in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. The reliance on Western-based models has overlooked the socio-cultural realities of African societies, resulting in ineffective interventions and high recidivism rates. The integration of Ubuntu philosophy and Social Learning Theory offers a culturally grounded framework for addressing juvenile recidivism.

- **Culturally relevant rehabilitation programs:** Rehabilitation efforts must align with local cultural practices and values, such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and collective responsibility. By incorporating traditional practices like spiritual cleansing ceremonies, family group conferencing, and mentorship by elders, rehabilitation programs can foster a sense of belonging and accountability.
- **Community involvement:** Ubuntu philosophy underscores the importance of community engagement in supporting juveniles. Communities should be educated about their role in rehabilitation, creating a supportive and stigma-free environment for reintegration. Collaborative efforts between government, NGOs, and local leaders are essential for building sustainable support systems.

- **Addressing systemic challenges:** Resource limitations, poor implementation of culturally relevant reforms, and economic deprivation are systemic barriers that undermine rehabilitation. Governments must prioritize funding for juvenile justice programs, ensuring adequate resources for vocational training, counseling, and home visits.
- **Targeted interventions for poverty and substance abuse:** Poverty and substance abuse are significant contributors to recidivism. Addressing these requires multifaceted strategies, such as economic empowerment programs for families, community-led feeding schemes, and culturally sensitive substance abuse interventions.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and implications, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Develop culturally embedded policies:** Policymakers in Zimbabwe and Eswatini should integrate traditional practices into juvenile justice systems. Collaborating with community elders, cultural experts, and academics can ensure that these policies reflect local values and are effective in reducing recidivism.
- **Expand community-based rehabilitation programs:** Governments and NGOs should establish community-based rehabilitation programs that incorporate mentorship, vocational training, and psychosocial support. Programs like *butho* in Zimbabwe can be scaled to other regions, pairing juveniles with positive role models.
- **Strengthen restorative justice mechanisms:** Restorative justice approaches, such as victim-offender mediation and community accountability forums, should be incorporated into rehabilitation efforts. These mechanisms, rooted in Ubuntu, promote reconciliation, collective accountability, and reintegration.
- **Enhance family support systems:** Families play a central role in preventing recidivism. Interventions should include parenting workshops, family counseling, and financial assistance for vulnerable households. These measures address the root causes of juvenile delinquency and provide a stable foundation for rehabilitation.
- **Promote media literacy and responsible use:** Educational campaigns on responsible media consumption should be implemented at the community level. By teaching juveniles and families to critically evaluate media content, the negative influences of mass media can be mitigated.
- **Document and share best practices:** Successful culturally relevant interventions, such as mentorship programs inspired by Ubuntu, should be documented and shared across regions. This enables policymakers and practitioners to replicate effective strategies and build on existing successes.
- **Invest in collaborative research:** Academic institutions, NGOs, and community organizations should conduct further research on culturally grounded approaches to juvenile rehabilitation. Findings should inform policy and practice, advocating for the decolonization of juvenile justice systems in Africa.
- **Allocate adequate resources:** Governments must allocate sufficient funding to juvenile justice programs. This includes providing resources for vocational training,

educational sponsorships, transportation, and infrastructure development for rehabilitation centers.

8. CONCLUSION

Juvenile recidivism in Zimbabwe and Eswatini highlights the limitations of Western-based rehabilitation models in addressing the socio-cultural realities of African societies. This study demonstrates the potential of culturally grounded interventions, such as Ubuntu-inspired mentorship and community-based restorative practices, to reduce reoffending. By integrating Social Learning Theory with decolonial approaches, rehabilitation programs can foster sustainable behavioral change, promoting the reintegration of juvenile offenders into society. Future research should explore the scalability of these interventions across other African contexts to enhance their impact.

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