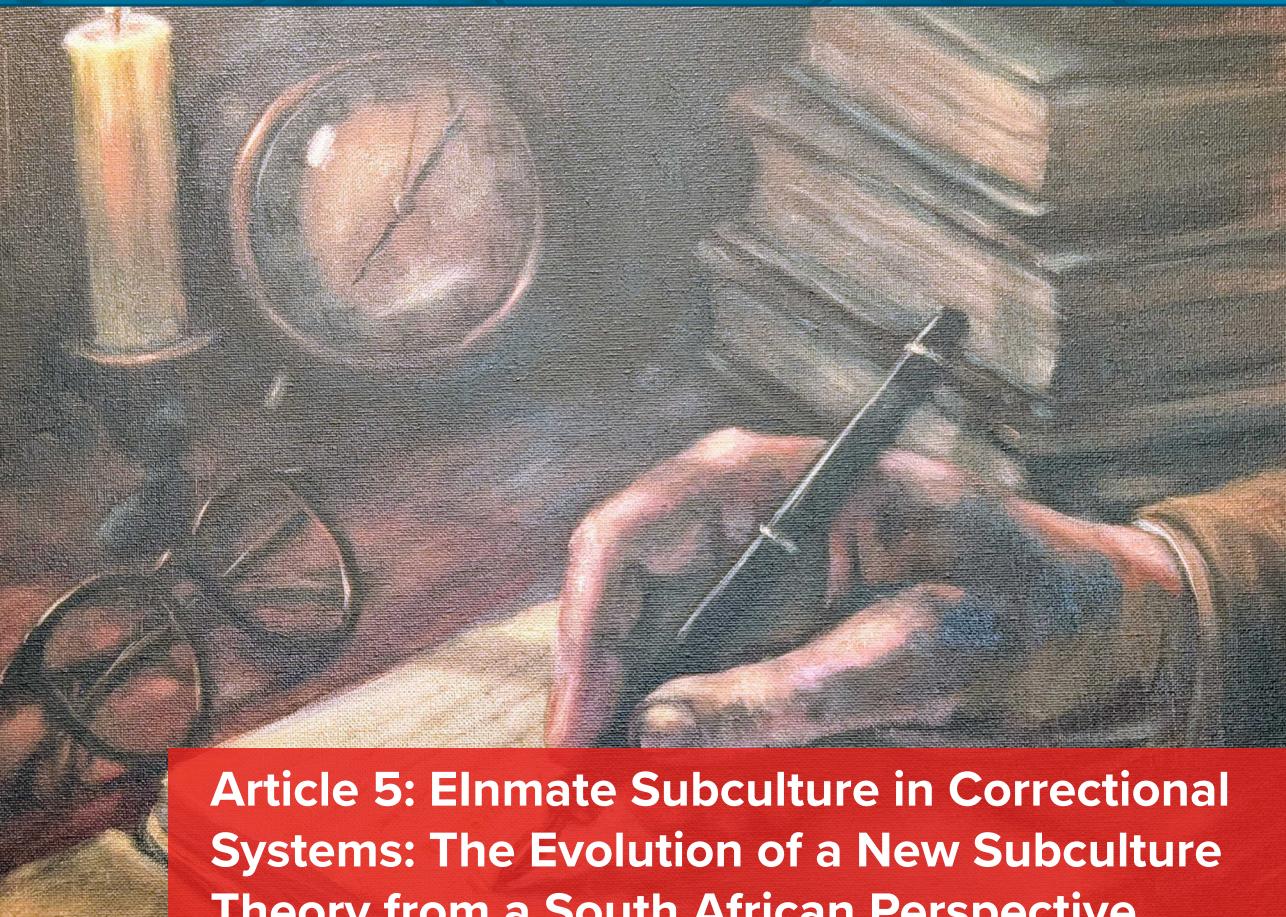


ADVANCING CORRECTIONS

Journal of the International Corrections and Prisons Association



Article 5: Inmate Subculture in Correctional Systems: The Evolution of a New Subculture Theory from a South African Perspective (ACJ20-A005)

INMATE SUBCULTURE IN CORRECTIONAL SYSTEMS: THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW SUBCULTURE THEORY FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article explores a new development concerning inmate subculture in the form of the Exportation Theory. The South African correctional system has developed into an exporter of crime into society. There are several contributing factors ranging from poor staff policies, inmate developments, the role of technology, and Constitutional court decisions. Theorising about the new developments is not easy within the limited scope of this contribution. However, scientists and practitioners alike should take notice of the developments and the contribution it makes to best practices, or rather, in this case the absence of best practices. Gangsterism is central to the new theory and the poor role the criminal justice system plays in general, and corrections in particular, necessitates that new approaches should be considered. The article also calls for more research into the phenomenon.

Keywords: Exportation theory, inmate subculture, gangsterism, crime in correctional centres, deprivation theory, importation theory

Introduction

Correctional institutions are closed environments with a heterogeneous moral and emotional climate, causing the formation of different social orders within systems (Slade, Kelbakiani & Tsagareli, 2020). Generally, the social order is formed by the institutional culture, in coexistence with the criminal subculture of the correctional system. Inmates are socialised into the institutional culture (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2001).

Inmates' adaptation to their physical environment has been termed prisonisation (Clemmer, 1940). Naderi (2014) describes it as adapting to the culture and social life of the incarcerated society and dominant inmate subculture. Sentence length is directly related to adoption of the inmate subculture norms and values (Clemmer, 1940).

Inmate subculture refers to unique social structures with distinct norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours that develop amongst inmates in adaptation to correctional environments (LegalClarity, 2025). It encompasses unwritten rules, specialised language, and informal systems that shape relationships and interactions in response to forced limitations, like freedom and others. Origins are historically influenced by two primary factors: deprivation and importation. Researchers (Jiang & Fisher-Girolando, 2002) find support for both the deprivation and importation models. Cheeseman (2003) argues that integrated theories of the two models have offered new understanding of the crime phenomenon.

However, Luyt (2018) coined a new inmate culture with the term "exportation model" where the correctional environment now executes significant prison-like and other criminal influences on society itself. This is observed as a new development trending in South Africa with origins in the mid 1990's, but where full fruition was reached since around 2015. Crime export from inside the correctional system to society is now fully flexed.

The aim of this manuscript is to introduce this new inmate subculture theory, coined as the Exportation Theory. Inmate subculture directly influences the unique need for social order, but is shaped by fundamentals within incarceration, which will also be addressed. I briefly discuss the deprivation and importation theories, while the emphasis falls on new developments, at least in the South African correctional context, and their influence on best practices within the correctional environment.

Background

The formation of inmate subculture is traditionally influenced by two primary factors: deprivation and importation. Deprivation theory suggests that the harsh realities of incarceration compel inmates to create a new social order to cope with psychological and emotional stresses (Shamas, 2017). On the other hand, the Importation theory posits that inmates import pre-existing norms, values, and behaviours from outside society into the prison. These external influences are then adapted and integrated into the closed environment (Shamas, 2017). The subculture becomes a coping mechanism to the unique challenges of prison life.

The new Exportation theory, however, originates from South African criminal justice and gangsterism (Luyt, 2018). It probably started with the notorious Staggie twins and their Hard Livings gang, who

began dealing drugs as teenagers in the 1970s. Their reign partly ended in August 1996, when Rashaad was killed in a vigilante attack by People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) members. Twenty-three years later (2019) the twin brother, Rashied was killed in the same street, in front of their home. In 2003, Rashied Staggie was sentenced to 15 years for kidnapping and rape after ordering the gang rape of a 17-year-old girl (Voice Reporter, 2020). An alleged 28s gang leader was associated with his killing (Nene, 2024). The 28 gang is a long-standing prison gang, and it is theorised that the Hard Livings gang interfered in the domain of the traditional prison gangs, creating inevitable conflict, and that resulted in the exportation of prison gangs to the streets.

Gang proliferation in South Africa has a long history. There was always a clear distinction between street gangs and prison gangs. However, today prison gangs wield significant influence both inside correctional facilities and in outside communities **from inside correctional centres**. Highly organised, gangs maintain strict hierarchies and codes of conduct, extending their reach through networks of former inmates and family connections (Ifearless, 2025), and correctional staff. Today, gang violence remains one of South Africa's most pressing social challenges, despite strategies against it.

Three existing inmate subculture theories

The inmate subculture is historically maintained under either the deprivation theory, or the importation theory, or a combination, known as the integrated theory.

Deprivation theory

Sykes (1958) sought to understand why inmates develop their own subcultures during incarceration. Sykes formulated the pains of imprisonment, leading to gang formation, and identifiable by deprivation of autonomy, liberty, goods and services, heterosexual intimacy, and security. Losses caused by incarceration can be mitigated through inmate social interaction (Sykes, 1958). Inmates unite for cooperation, or they withdraw into self-satisfaction. Both reactions are adaptations to deprivation (Luyt, 2018).

Importation theory

Irwin and Cressey (1962) argue that not all inmate behaviour result from prison environment deprivation, creating three categories:

- Those oriented toward a criminal subculture, due to values inherent to dimensions of the professional career criminal.
- Those oriented toward the inmate subculture, inmates who seek positions of influence, power and sources of information.
- Those oriented toward a legitimate subculture, not forming part of the criminal subculture before entering prison and reject involvement in the inmate subculture while incarcerated.

A combination of career criminal dimensions gives origin to the inmate subculture. Although the criminal and inmate subcultures are conflicting, they share values. Irwin and Cressey (1962) argue that it is not known how much the first two categories influence the third (legitimate subculture), but they hypothesise that all three categories import patterns of knowledge, skills and attitudes from past experience into the prison.

Integration theory

The integration model argues that both the above theories influence inmates (Schmallegger & Smykla, 2001; Luyt, 2018). As a result, some inmates acquire pre-prison experiences, while others do so after incarceration. The integration model theorises that each inmate has earlier criminal experience that is integrated with subculture values.

The Exportation model as a potentially new inmate subculture theory

The influence of South African prison gangs had largely been limited to the correctional environment. During the 1990s, a new phenomenon occurred. These gangs began to function outside the prison environment with initial activities largely limited to the Western Cape (Roloff, 2014). When this occurred, Luyt (2018) identified it to be a new trend (more than just an occasional occurrence) and coined it as the exportation model.

Meanwhile, the tendency grew into a fully-fledged phenomenon. By 2025 it was so well developed that newspaper reporters (Fengu, 2025) asked questions like "Are hit-style murders being plotted from St. Albans prison?" The Eastern Cape Transport and Community Safety MEC raised alarm over claims that serious crimes were being planned inside correctional facilities (Fengu, 2025).

Where prison gangs struggled to make ends meet for decades, the so-called Numbers gangs are now regarded as one of the seven most dangerous South African gangs (Tenpas, 2024). Kgosana (2023) highlights notorious prison Numbers gangs increasingly working with street gangs. Starting since the Staggie era, the Numbers gangs now have controlling influence on street gangs, a concept which was previously not endorsed. Street gangs were regarded as "the fourth" camp and not allowed to be active in correctional centres.

Drug trade factors forced the acknowledgment of street gangs, whose members started to enter the correctional environment as Numbers gang members, while the Numbers gang members joined street gangs after release. These two groups now work closely together, for example, in smuggling contraband into prisons (Kgosana, 2023; Williams, 2023). Major street gangs aligned with the 28s prison gang include the Terrible Josters, Mongrels, G-Units, the Firm, Mobsters and Junior Mafias, while those affiliated with the 26s/27s include the Junky Funky Kids, Americans, Sexy Boys, Fast Guns, Clever Kids, Junior Cisko Yankees (Kgosana, 2023).

The researcher acknowledges that one country cannot be regarded as sufficient scientific evidence of a universal new crime theory. Therefore, much research still needs to be done in this regard. The framework for this article does not allow the scope for that. However, with these developments it would be safe to hypothesise that correctional institutions may be influential in exporting crime to communities through causal factors that allow inmates to plan and execute crime from within.

Government initiatives

The Commission for Gender Equality (2024) report that gang members mentioned that there was no strategy to combat gangs. Government's strategy of mass incarceration was bringing together idle men who had committed heinous crimes to spend long periods together without addressing the issues of gangsterism. Available programmes were not strategies targeted at offenders. Participation in prison gangs did not afford the opportunity to make changes, particularly during long sentences.

Participation resulted in despondency and frustration with the correctional facility and limited the scope of imagining a different future.

The DCS's Gang Combatting Strategy of 2021 had the following objectives (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024):

1. To maintain secure and safe environments conducive to rehabilitation of inmates
2. To prevent and reduce the impact of disruptive groups (e.g., gangs) on the management of correctional centres
3. To enable inter-sectoral co-operation to promote correctional centre and community safety
4. To develop and build knowledge about gangs and effective responses to combatting gangsterism and to inform, review and monitor/improve these strategies
5. To develop programmes for preventing and combatting gangsterism
6. To combat gangs/gang activities of parolees and probationers under community corrections.

The strategy acknowledges the problem of gangsterism within correctional centres that contributes to gang formation outside the centres. Participants echoed this point by highlighting the exchange of information, resources, and personnel between the traditional prison gangs and the outside street gangs. This exchange system compounded the problem and worsened the success of efforts towards combating gangsterism (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024).

Causality

In research titled Prison Reform and the Inmate Population in SADC Countries, Luyt (forthcoming) determined fundamental causal factors that may further contribute to exportation of crime from correctional centres. These are now discussed in more detail.

Career advancement and staff motivation

After demilitarisation in 1996 the entire promotion system within South African corrections collapsed. Staff members could not be promoted unless a senior position became vacant. Several individuals had to apply, but only one received appointment, sometimes expecting transfer, and often destructing family structures and spousal employment. To exacerbate the lack of promotion, overtime payment was stopped in favour of time off, leaving staff in tatters because most could only make ends meet through overtime.

Staff neglect went further. Lack of uniforms became critical. Once known for their neatness, correctional officials today are amongst the worst dressed uniform-bearers in the country. Other benefits also disappeared, for example an allowance obtained after completing tertiary qualifications.

Motivation and pride of staff was depleted, resulting in negative attitudes. The National Commissioner (NC) reported on Crimewatch (ENCA, 2025) that 180 staff members were dismissed in 2025 for smuggling with inmates, while 600 disciplinary cases are ongoing.

Covid

The NC (ENCA, 2025) argued that during the Covid-19 pandemic staff were the only link between inmates and the outside world. Yet, staff became the only source of all smuggled goods, including drugs, cell phones, and other contraband. The NC declared that staff became criminals. This is ironic,

given that staff are supposed to be the greatest asset (Bergh & Theron, 2005), but this is not the case in South Africa due to marginalisation, and lack of career advancement opportunities.

Corruption

Inmates and staff reported corruption (Luyt, forthcoming). According to the Commission for Gender Equality (2024) corrupt DCS officials work in partnership and under the authority of gang leaders, as though they were subordinate gang members. Staff are involved in smuggling cell phones, drugs, money, and other contraband. Officials even run gang affairs outside of correctional centres. This is no surprise, seen that career advancement opportunities are non-existent.

Cash

Historically, inmates never carried cash and possession of money was prohibited. In a braindead moment this long-standing limitation was reversed. In the late 1990's the new, transformed DCS management allowed inmates to carry cash on their person during incarceration. This was a fatal mistake. Officials reported that carrying money "creates the breeding ground for acts of mismanagement, corruption and bribery." A DCS statement said the move should help reduce the opportunities for corruption, bribery and mismanagement (Mail & Guardian, 2002). Worse, it took a whole year to undo the worst decision in correctional history. According to DCS "the new system had already been implemented at some prisons and it was expected to be in place at all jails by the end of the year" meaning the end of 2002.

Luyt (forthcoming) reports that inmates confirmed that they have largely ignored these instructions. The minimum amount of money has been paid into inmate accounts. Money remained a powerful tool that inmates were not prepared to give up. Inmates report bribing staff, buying almost anything, and living a life of luxury with available cash. This aspect has also sparked the exportation of crime from inside the correctional centres to the community.

Technology

The use of technology by inmates became a major obstacle in recent years. The main culprits are laptops and cell phones. Dolley (2025) reports that correctional centres became smuggling hubs, plagued by an abundance of cell phones, cash, drugs, knives and alcohol.

Staff attitudes about regular searching for contraband have become so bad that raids under supervision of the National Commissioner must be executed under instruction of the Minister of Correctional Services (ENCA, 2025). Weak DCS systems and corrupt officials are contributing factors (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024).

To exacerbate matters, inmates receive official training in fixing cell phones, as was reported by the National Commissioner (ENCA, 2025). In the general absence of properly structured inmate training programmes, one would argue that this specific training initiative was poorly considered, considering that dismantled cell phones are smuggled in and are assembled inside. Also, cell phones are confiscated in their hundreds during raids. Apart from being used to export crime, they also become a business inside where thousands without them pay to use them.

There are calls for cell phone jamming equipment to be installed in correctional centres, warning that

criminals are using mobile phones behind bars to co-ordinate extortion rackets (Times Live, 2025). The National Commissioner also reported that different financial scams are executed from behind bars, while staff look the other way because of protection fees that inmates pay (ENCA, 2025). Jamming is a rather expensive solution for a problem with much wider causal effects, the most obvious that of poor staff motivation and commitment. Job enrichment, promotion opportunities and career advancement should take priority in all solutions, or else the rotten apple theory (Brecher, 2014) remains on fertile ground.

Laptops pose their own challenge. The Constitutional Court has unanimously ruled and declared that barring inmates from using personal computers in their cells for studying is unconstitutional. The court ordered that the constitutional invalidity be suspended for a year and directed the National Commissioner of Correctional Services to promulgate a revised policy. Pending that, the court said that any inmate registered as a student with a recognised tertiary or further education institution and who reasonably needs a computer to support their studies, would be entitled to use their personal in their cell, but without the use of an internet modem (Broughton, 2025).

The above decision is particularly problematic, as it creates further grounds for smuggling of laptop parts and cell phones to allow for internet access. This will enlarge the exportation of crime. We must consider the fact that inmate rights can be limited. Since inmates do not have daily jobs, those that study should do so from a dedicated study centre during normal working hours. To allow laptops in cells, given that most correctional centres have dormitories, will lead to future challenges that could have been avoided.

Correctional programmes

Very few correctional programmes remain available countrywide. If offered, it is done through NGO's. There is no job enrichment for staff, little opportunity to build rapport with inmates, and no promotion of direct supervision (Luyt, 2020). Staff are not empowered in the current system, which is why so many cases of corruption and security breaches occur.

Summary

There can be little doubt about the development of the exportation theory. Wider research is needed to ascertain broader implications, but the theory is already a custom in the South African correctional system. The direction for research is set here, but with it goes a call for action into more research, as many open questions remain. The scope of this article, however, does not allow for a more comprehensive discussion, but it is hoped that what is written, provides invaluable insights into the phenomenon.

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About the Author

An experienced academic whose career started in 1994, Willem Luyt has been a Professor in the College of Law at the University of South Africa since 2006. He has been a rated researcher of the National Research Foundation in South Africa for nearly two decades. He is experienced in academic management, research and research ethics, curriculum design, academic teaching and correctional industry training, as well as in open, distance and e-learning. Willem is equipped with intimate knowledge of the South African correctional system and the child-justice system, while he has vast international experience in criminal justice and both correctional and community-based systems. This includes various research visits and fact-finding missions to African countries, Europe and the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Lithuania, Russia, Argentina and Indian Ocean islands. He was a guest lecturer at the Polytechnic of Namibia and the Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST) for more than a decade. Willem holds a DLitt et Phil from the University of South Africa (Unisa), a Teaching English as a Foreign Language Certificate from the TEFL Academy (UK) and a Research Ethics Certificate from the University of Hong Kong. He serves on the editorial boards of a number of international scholarly journals and served on the Research Ethics Committee of the South African Department of Correctional Services (DCS) for more than a decade. Willem has published widely in national and international journals and is the author or co-author of several books and chapters in books on criminal justice, international corrections, child justice and unit management. In addition, he has delivered many papers at national and international conferences. He has been a promotor of PhD students and a supervisor for Master's students over the years.

