



Entrepreneurship as a Catalytic Agent for Rehabilitation and Recidivism Reduction in Correctional Systems: A Qualitative Case Study of the Zimbabwe Prison & Correctional Service

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examined entrepreneurship as a catalytic agent for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, and programme facilitators, alongside documentary analysis of institutional policies, the study explored how entrepreneurship training influences personal transformation, economic reintegration, and post-release desistance from crime. The research is grounded in Desistance Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Social Capital Theory, which collectively explain how skills acquisition, identity reconstruction, and network formation shape reintegration outcomes. Findings revealed that entrepreneurship programmes contribute significantly to inmates' self-efficacy, agency, and future orientation. Participants reported that acquiring business and vocational skills enhanced their confidence and provided viable alternatives to criminal activity. Entrepreneurship training was further associated with identity transformation, as individuals began to perceive themselves as productive economic actors rather than offenders.

These shifts were linked to a reduced perceived likelihood of reoffending. However, the study also identified critical structural barriers that constrain the long-term effectiveness of such initiatives. Limited access to start-up capital, persistent societal stigma, and weak post-release support systems undermine the translation of entrepreneurial skills into sustainable livelihoods. The absence of integrated reintegration frameworks further exacerbated these challenges. The study concluded by stating that while entrepreneurship holds substantial promise as a rehabilitative tool, its impact is contingent upon broader systemic support. Policy recommendations included strengthening entrepreneurship curricula, expanding access to microfinance, fostering public-private partnerships, and institutionalising post-release mentorship programmes. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on correctional entrepreneurship and provide context-specific insights for enhancing rehabilitation strategies in Zimbabwe and similar developing country contexts.

Keywords: Correctional Rehabilitation; Entrepreneurship; Recidivism; Zimbabwe Prison & Correctional Service; Qualitative Research

Introduction

Correctional systems globally are undergoing a paradigmatic shift from punitive models of incarceration toward approaches that prioritise rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society World Bank [1] UNODC [2]. This transition reflects growing recognition that incarceration, in isolation, is insufficient to address the structural and individual determinants of criminal behaviour World Bank [1] UNODC [2]. Despite these reforms, recidivism remains a persistent challenge, often exacerbated by limited access to employment, enduring social stigma, and

inadequate reintegration support for formerly incarcerated individuals ILO [3] PPI [4]. Empirical research consistently identifies unemployment and economic marginalisation as critical predictors of reoffending, underscoring the importance of equipping inmates with sustainable livelihood opportunities Davis [5] Zainal [6]. Consequently, traditional correctional approaches have been criticised for their limited capacity to foster the practical skills and psychosocial resilience necessary for long-term desistance from crime (Davis et al., 2022).

In response, contemporary correctional strategies increasingly incorporate education, vocational training, and entrepreneurial development as central components of rehabilitation frameworks (Davis et al., 2022; Zainal [6]). Among these, entrepreneurship has emerged as a particularly compelling intervention due to its dual capacity to address both economic and psychological dimensions of reintegration ILO [3] PPI [4]. Entrepreneurial training programmes enable incarcerated individuals to generate self-employment opportunities in contexts where formal labour market access is constrained by criminal records and societal prejudice (Davis et al., 2022; Hwang & Phillips [7] Williams [8]). Beyond economic benefits, entrepreneurship fosters self-efficacy, autonomy, and identity transformation and factors widely recognised as essential to the desistance process Maruna [9]; Muñoz & Wainwright [10]. Furthermore, evidence from correctional entrepreneurship initiatives indicates that participation in such programmes is associated with reduced recidivism rates and improved post-release outcomes, highlighting their potential as transformative tools within rehabilitative justice systems Hill [11]; Davis et al., 2022).

Within the African context, correctional institutions have increasingly adopted vocational and entrepreneurial initiatives as mechanisms for enhancing rehabilitation outcomes and facilitating reintegration Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. These programmes often encompass prison industries, agricultural production, and skills-based training designed to promote self-reliance and marketable competencies among inmates (Davis et al., 2022; Excellence-Oluye [13]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]). In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) has embraced a correctional philosophy grounded in rehabilitation through productive engagement, incorporating agricultural activities, vocational training, and small-scale enterprise development into its institutional framework (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]). Such initiatives are intended not only to impart technical skills but also to cultivate discipline, responsibility, and pro-social behaviour, thereby enhancing inmates' preparedness for reintegration into society (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12] Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]).

Notwithstanding these progressive developments, there remains a paucity of empirical research examining the specific role of entrepreneurship in shaping rehabilitation trajectories and reducing recidivism within Zimbabwe's correctional system. This study therefore addresses this gap by exploring entrepreneurship as a catalytic agent for rehabilitation within the ZPCS through a qualitative case study approach. By analysing the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals and institutional stakeholders, the research seeks to elucidate how entrepreneurial training and participation in prison-based enterprises influence skill acquisition, identity transformation, and post-release opportunities. In doing so, the study contributes to the expanding body of scholarship on correctional entrepreneurship while

offering contextually grounded insights to inform policy and programme development in Zimbabwe and comparable settings.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurship explicated

The transformation of correctional systems globally has increasingly shifted from punitive incarceration toward rehabilitative and restorative justice frameworks World Bank [1]; UNODC [2]. This paradigm shift is closely aligned with the principles of Restorative Justice, which emphasise offender rehabilitation, accountability, and reintegration into society rather than mere punishment Dandurand & Griffiths [15]. Consequently, there has been growing scholarly and policy interest in interventions that promote the social and economic reintegration of incarcerated individuals Cooney [16]; Hill [11]. Thus, within this evolving framework, entrepreneurship has emerged as a strategic intervention for offender rehabilitation (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]). Entrepreneurship can be defined as the process of identifying opportunities, mobilising resources, and creating value through innovation and enterprise development. In correctional settings, entrepreneurship education equips inmates with competencies in opportunity recognition, business planning, financial management, and strategic decision-making Munyoro [17]; Munyoro [18]. These competencies enhance human capital and contribute to personal transformation by fostering self-reliance and pro-social behaviour (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12] Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]). Such transformation aligns with the broader goals of rehabilitation, including identity reconstruction and the development of productive citizenship Williams [8].

Entrepreneurship is particularly relevant for justice-impacted individuals because it offers an alternative pathway to economic participation in contexts where formal employment is often inaccessible Pager [19]; Cooney [16]; Dandurand & Griffiths [15]. Former inmates frequently face structural barriers such as employer discrimination, low educational attainment, and limited vocational skills, which collectively constrain their labour market integration Pager [19]; Cooney [16]. These barriers contribute to unemployment and economic marginalisation, both of which are strongly associated with recidivism Dandurand & Griffiths [15]. Entrepreneurship, therefore, provides a viable mechanism for overcoming these challenges by enabling individuals to generate their own employment opportunities and achieve economic autonomy (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Williams [8]).

Empirical studies indicate that entrepreneurship education enhances self-efficacy, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial intention among incarcerated populations (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Zainal [6] Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]). These outcomes are critical for successful reintegration, particularly when supported by mentorship and post-release

support systems (Dandurand & Griffiths [15]. In the Zimbabwean context, the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) has increasingly incorporated entrepreneurial activities into its rehabilitation programmes (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Zainal [6] Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Through correctional industries such as agriculture, carpentry, welding, and leatherwork, inmates acquire practical and income-generating skills (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. These initiatives aim to transform prisons into productive institutions while equipping inmates with competencies necessary for sustainable livelihoods (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Despite these promising developments, entrepreneurship alone cannot fully address reintegration challenges. Scholars highlight persistent barriers such as limited access to start-up capital, weak social networks, and societal stigma Muñoz & Wainwright [10]. Therefore, entrepreneurship programmes must be embedded within comprehensive reintegration frameworks that include mentorship, microfinance, and community support systems.

Review of relevant literature

Recidivism remains a persistent global challenge and is widely defined as the tendency of formerly incarcerated individuals to reoffend and return to prison Dandurand & Griffiths [15]; Moyo [20]. Within the field of Criminology, recidivism is considered a key indicator of the effectiveness of correctional interventions Dandurand & Griffiths [15]. In Zimbabwe, structural barriers such as unemployment, stigma, and limited post-release support significantly contribute to high recidivism rates Moyo [20]. Scholarly literature consistently identifies unemployment as a primary driver of recidivism and hence, Cooney [16] argues that economic marginalisation increases the likelihood of reoffending, particularly in developing economies where formal employment opportunities are scarce. In Zimbabwe, the dominance of the informal sector makes entrepreneurship a viable alternative pathway for reintegration Munyoro [18] Munyoro [14]. Thus, entrepreneurship enables ex-offenders to generate income independently, thereby reducing reliance on exclusionary labour markets (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14].

Global studies further demonstrate the effectiveness of entrepreneurship programmes in reducing recidivism Hill [11]; PEP [21]. For instance, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program in the United States reports significantly lower recidivism rates among programme participants compared to national averages PEP [21]. These programmes combine business education with mentorship, networking, and post-release support, creating a holistic approach to reintegration Hill [11]. Additionally, research suggests that formerly incarcerated individuals often possess entrepreneurial traits such as resilience, adaptability, and risk tolerance Williams

[8]. When harnessed through structured training programmes, these attributes can be transformed into productive economic activities Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. However, scholars caution that entrepreneurship is not a universal solution. Barriers such as limited access to finance, regulatory constraints, and weak support networks can undermine the sustainability of entrepreneurial ventures Muñoz & Wainwright [10]. Recent systematic reviews (e.g., Zainal [6] confirm that entrepreneurship-based interventions improve reintegration outcomes by addressing key determinants of recidivism, including unemployment and social exclusion. These findings underscore the importance of integrating entrepreneurship within broader rehabilitation frameworks.

Theoretical review

This study is anchored in several theoretical frameworks that explain the relationship between entrepreneurship, rehabilitation, and recidivism reduction. One of the most relevant is Desistance Theory, which posits that individuals cease criminal behaviour when they adopt new identities and social roles that are incompatible with crime Maruna [9]. Entrepreneurship facilitates this transformation by enabling individuals to redefine themselves as business owners and contributors to society (Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Another relevant framework is Human Capital Theory, which emphasises the role of education and skills development in enhancing individual productivity and economic outcomes Becker [22]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. Accordingly, entrepreneurship education within correctional settings enhances inmates' skills, knowledge, and competencies, thereby increasing their employability and capacity for self-employment Becker [22]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12].

The Social Capital Theory also provides important insights, highlighting the role of social networks, relationships, and trust in facilitating economic and social opportunities Putnam [23]. For formerly incarcerated individuals, access to mentorship, community support, and professional networks is critical for successful entrepreneurial ventures Putnam [23]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Additionally, Theory of Planned Behavior explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence entrepreneurial intentions Ajzen [24]; Munyoro [18]. Entrepreneurship education in prisons can positively shape these factors, thereby increasing inmates' intentions to engage in self-employment after release Becker [22]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how entrepreneurship can serve as a catalyst for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction.

Research gap

Despite the growing body of literature on entrepreneurship and offender rehabilitation, significant gaps remain, particularly within the Zimbabwean context. Existing studies have largely

focused on general vocational training and rehabilitation programmes, with limited attention given to entrepreneurship as a distinct and structured intervention within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Furthermore, much of the existing research is quantitative in nature and does not adequately capture the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals participating in entrepreneurship programmes. There is a lack of qualitative studies that explore how such programmes influence identity transformation, self-efficacy, and long-term reintegration outcomes. Another critical gap relates to the integration of entrepreneurship with post-release support systems. While global literature highlights the importance of mentorship, access to finance, and business incubation, there is limited empirical evidence on how these components are implemented within Zimbabwe's correctional system. This study therefore seeks to fill these gaps by providing a qualitative case study of the ZPCS, focusing on entrepreneurship as a catalytic agent for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction. By examining inmates' experiences, institutional practices, and reintegration outcomes, the study contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding of entrepreneurship in correctional settings, particularly within developing country contexts.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this study positions entrepreneurship as a catalytic mechanism through which correctional rehabilitation can be transformed from a predominantly punitive paradigm into a developmental and reintegrative process. Within the context of the Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Service (ZPCS), entrepreneurship-based initiatives are conceptualised as multidimensional interventions that simultaneously build economic capability, reshape offender identity, and strengthen social reintegration pathways Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. By integrating entrepreneurship education, vocational training, and enterprise development programmes, correctional institutions enhance inmates' human capital, equipping them with market-relevant skills and fostering self-reliance Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Contemporary empirical evidence suggests that prison-based education and employment-oriented programmes significantly improve post-release employment outcomes and reduce recidivism by increasing access to legitimate income-generating opportunities Sprick Schuster & Stickle [25]; Davira [26]; Makombe [27]. In Zimbabwe, ZPCS initiatives such as agricultural production units, prison industries, and vocational workshops exemplify this shift toward rehabilitative correctional models, aligning with broader global trends that emphasise skills development and economic empowerment as central to effective offender reintegration (Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]).

The framework is theoretically anchored in Desistance Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Entrepreneurial Empowerment Theory, which collectively explain the mechanisms through which entrepreneurship influences behavioural change and reintegration outcomes Ajzen [24]; Becker [22]; Putnam [23]; Maruna [9]; Munyoro [18]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Desistance Theory highlights the importance of identity transformation, suggesting that entrepreneurial engagement fosters pro-social roles and future-oriented thinking among inmates, thereby reducing the likelihood of reoffending Maruna [9]. Human Capital Theory reinforces this by asserting that investments in education and vocational competencies enhance employability and productivity, mitigating the structural drivers of criminal behaviour such as unemployment and economic exclusion Becker [22]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. Entrepreneurial Empowerment Theory further extends this perspective by emphasising the role of entrepreneurship in cultivating self-efficacy, autonomy, and resilience, particularly among marginalised populations such as formerly incarcerated individuals Putnam [23]. However, while these theoretical perspectives provide a robust explanatory foundation, critical analysis reveals that their applicability within correctional systems in developing contexts such as Zimbabwe may be constrained by systemic limitations, including resource scarcity, institutional inefficiencies, and limited alignment between prison training programmes and external labour market demands Makombe [27]; UNODC [2] Munyoro & Chihobvu [14].

Despite its conceptual strengths, the framework must be critically interrogated in relation to contextual and structural barriers that mediate the effectiveness of entrepreneurship-based rehabilitation. Access to financial capital, persistent social stigma against ex-offenders, and weak post-release support systems remain significant impediments to the successful translation of entrepreneurial skills into sustainable livelihoods Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Moreover, the institutional capacity of ZPCS to deliver high-quality, market-responsive training programmes is often constrained by funding limitations, outdated infrastructure, and insufficient partnerships with private sector actors Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Recent studies caution that without integrated reintegration support, including mentorship, access to credit, and policy frameworks that facilitate ex-offender participation in the formal economy, entrepreneurship interventions may have limited long-term impact on recidivism reduction Davira [26]; Sprick Schuster & Stickle [25]; UNODC [2]. Therefore, while entrepreneurship presents a promising rehabilitative strategy, its effectiveness is contingent upon a holistic, systems-based approach that addresses both individual-level capacity building and broader socio-economic and institutional constraints, ensuring that correctional reforms translate into meaningful and sustained reintegration outcomes.

Conceptual framework diagram (Figure 1)

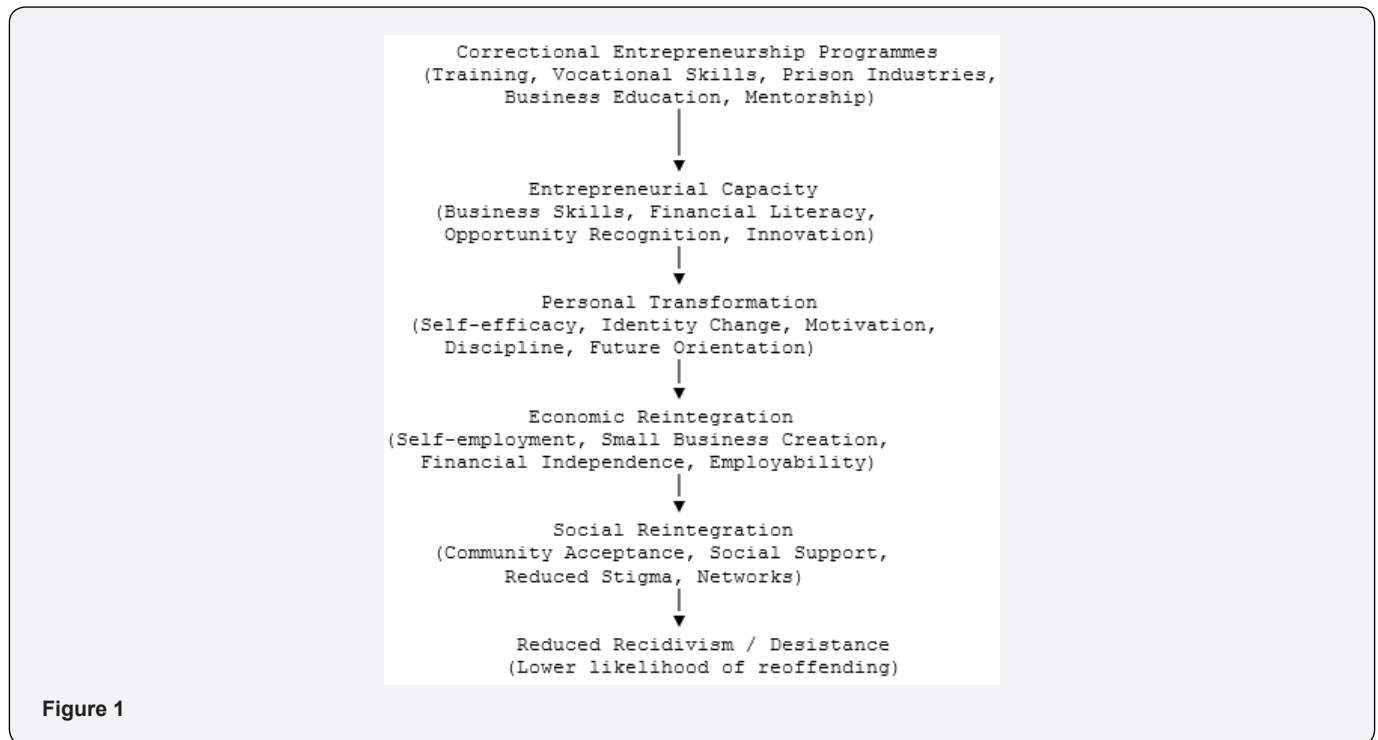


Figure 1

Moderating Factors:

- i. Access to financial resources
- ii. Institutional support (ZPCS policies)
- iii. Social stigma toward ex-offenders
- iv. Post-release mentorship and reintegration programmes
- v. Economic environment

Conceptual Framework: entrepreneurship as a catalytic agent for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction

This conceptual framework positions entrepreneurship as a transformative mechanism within correctional systems, particularly within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS), for promoting rehabilitation and reducing recidivism Makombe [27]; UNODC [2] Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. It integrates elements of human capital theory, desistance theory, and social reintegration models to explain how correctional entrepreneurship programmes (independent variable) influence a sequence of interrelated outcomes such as entrepreneurial capacity development, psychological transformation, economic reintegration, and social reintegration, and ultimately leading to reduced recidivism (dependent variable) Ajzen [24]; Becker [22]; Putnam [23]; Maruna [9]; Munyoro [18]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. The framework further recognises the moderating role of structural and contextual factors that may

enhance or constrain these outcomes.

Correctional entrepreneurship programmes (independent variable): Correctional institutions worldwide increasingly incorporate entrepreneurship programmes as part of broader rehabilitation strategies aimed at equipping inmates with market-relevant skills and facilitating successful reintegration Putnam [23]. Within ZPCS, such initiatives include vocational training, prison industries, agricultural production, and small-scale enterprise development, transforming correctional facilities into productive hubs of skills development and economic participation Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Zimbabwe’s correctional model has notably embraced agricultural and industrial programmes such as farming, carpentry, textile production, and metalwork and not only to enhance inmates’ technical competencies but also to contribute to national food security and institutional self-sufficiency ZPCS [28]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. These programmes align with global correctional trends that view prisons as centres for human capital development rather than mere custodial institutions Putnam [23]; Williams [8] Zainal [6].

Empirical research indicates that entrepreneurship education in correctional settings improves employability, fosters self-reliance, and enhances post-release economic prospects Williams [8]; Zainal [6]. However, critical analysis reveals that while such programmes are conceptually robust, their effectiveness often

depends on programme quality, relevance to market demands, and continuity after release Putnam [23]; Williams [8]; Zainal [6]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. In many developing contexts, including Zimbabwe, resource constraints, outdated training infrastructure, and weak linkages with external markets limit the scalability and long-term impact of these initiatives UNODC [29]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Thus, while correctional entrepreneurship programmes serve as a foundational intervention, their success requires systemic alignment with broader economic and institutional frameworks Munyoro & Chihobvu [14].

Entrepreneurial capacity development: Entrepreneurial capacity development represents a key mediating variable through which correctional programmes influence post-release outcomes Putnam [23]; Williams [8] Zainal [6] Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Thus, entrepreneurship training equips inmates with essential competencies such as financial literacy, business planning, opportunity recognition, and innovation Putnam [23]; Williams [8]; Zainal [6] Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. In addition, financial literacy enhances individuals' ability to manage resources, make informed financial decisions, and sustain business operations Al-Hattami [30]; Rapina et al., 2023). Business planning skills enable structured decision-making, risk assessment, and strategic resource allocation, while opportunity recognition allows individuals to identify and exploit market gaps Ramos-Rodríguez [31]. Additionally, innovation and problem-solving skills foster adaptability in dynamic economic environments Munyoro [18]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. From a theoretical perspective, these competencies contribute to human capital development, which is strongly associated with productivity and employment creation Munyoro [18]; Mubango [32]. For formerly incarcerated individuals, entrepreneurial capacity is particularly significant because it offers an alternative to formal employment, where discrimination and structural barriers are prevalent (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Munyoro [18]; Mubango [32]; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. Critically, however, the assumption that skills acquisition automatically translates into entrepreneurial success is often overstated. Evidence suggests that without access to financial capital, mentorship, and enabling ecosystems, entrepreneurial capacity alone may not result in sustainable ventures Muñoz & Wainwright [10]. Therefore, while capacity development is necessary, it is insufficient in isolation, highlighting the need for integrated support systems.

Personal transformation (psychological change): Entrepreneurship education also facilitates psychological transformation, a crucial dimension of rehabilitation because participation in such programmes enhances self-efficacy, confidence, motivation, and personal agency and attributes essential for successful reintegration (Munyoro & Gumisiro., 2017; Mubango [32]; Muñoz & Wainwright [10]; Munyoro & Chihobvu [14]. Studies show that entrepreneurship training fosters an entrepreneurial mindset and strengthens perceived behavioural

control Martin-Gutiérrez [33]; Nabi et al., 2024; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. Within correctional contexts, this contributes to identity reconstruction, enabling individuals to transition from criminal identities to pro-social roles such as entrepreneurs Martin-Gutiérrez [33]; Nabi et al., 2024; Munyoro & Uzhenyu [12]. This aligns with desistance theory, which emphasises identity transformation as central to sustained behavioural change Grosholz [34]. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that entrepreneurship programmes promote discipline, responsibility, and goal orientation Hamenda & Hamenda [35]; Zainal [6]. Nevertheless, a critical perspective suggests that psychological transformation is not solely dependent on training interventions but also on broader environmental and relational factors, including family support, societal acceptance, and post-release opportunities. Without these, identity transformation may remain fragile and susceptible to relapse.

Economic reintegration: Economic reintegration is a direct outcome of entrepreneurial capacity and psychological transformation because entrepreneurship enables formerly incarcerated individuals to engage in self-employment, establish small enterprises, and participate in informal economic activities, that is entrepreneurship research Naudé [36]; Acs [37]. This is particularly significant given the barriers ex-offenders face in formal labour markets, including stigma and limited qualifications Pager [19]; Western [38], and entrepreneurship provides an alternative pathway to financial independence, reducing reliance on illicit activities Fairlie & Uberti [39]; Naudé [36]. Empirical studies indicate that stable employment and entrepreneurial engagement significantly lower recidivism rates by improving income stability and fostering social responsibility Schnepel [40]; Hwang & Phillips [7] Zainal [6]. However, in the Zimbabwean context, the informal economy dominates, which presents both opportunities and risks. While it allows easier entry for ex-offenders, it often lacks stability, legal protection, and access to finance World Bank [41]. Consequently, the sustainability of economic reintegration through entrepreneurship remains contingent on broader economic conditions and policy support.

Social reintegration: Social reintegration complements economic reintegration by facilitating the rebuilding of social networks and community acceptance Maruna [9]; Berg & Huebner [42]. Accordingly, gainful employment or entrepreneurial activity enhances social legitimacy and reduces stigma associated with criminal records Pager [19] Western [38]. Entrepreneurship can reshape public perceptions by demonstrating responsibility and productivity Bajwa [43]; Lee & McCright [44]. Moreover, social support systems that is, including family, mentorship, and community organisations, play a critical role in sustaining reintegration outcomes (Robby et al., 2022; Oswald [45]. The UNODC [29] emphasises that reintegration programmes are most effective when they adopt a holistic approach integrating economic, social, and psychological support mechanisms.

Nonetheless, persistent stigma and weak institutional support in many societies, including Zimbabwe, continue to undermine reintegration efforts.

Reduced recidivism (dependent variable): The ultimate objective of the conceptual framework is the reduction of recidivism Duwe & Clark [46]; Hwang & Phillips [7]. The interaction between economic stability, psychological transformation, and social reintegration addresses both structural and individual drivers of criminal behaviour Andrews & Bonta [47]; Maruna [9]. Entrepreneurship contributes to this outcome by providing legitimate income opportunities, fostering personal agency, and strengthening pro-social bonds Oladejo & Dastile [48]; Muñoz & Wainwright [10]. Empirical evidence consistently shows that individuals who achieve stable livelihoods and social integration are less likely to reoffend Hwang & Phillips [7] Zainal [6]. Critically, however, causality remains complex. While entrepreneurship is associated with reduced recidivism, it is often one component within a broader ecosystem of interventions Duwe & Clark [46]. Consequently, over-reliance on entrepreneurship as a standalone solution risks overlooking structural inequalities and systemic barriers that contribute to criminal behaviour.

Moderating factors: Within the qualitative case study of entrepreneurship as a catalytic agent for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction in the Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Service, moderating factors emerge as critical determinants shaping the efficacy and sustainability of entrepreneurial interventions among formerly incarcerated individuals. Access to finance remains a persistent structural barrier, as ex-offenders frequently encounter exclusion from formal credit systems, thereby constraining start-up viability and reinforcing reliance on informal survivalist enterprises Onyekwelu [49]; World Bank [41]. Equally, the role of policy and institutional support is pivotal; while pro-entrepreneurship frameworks can stimulate inclusive economic participation, weak policy coordination and limited reintegration strategies in many developing contexts, including Zimbabwe, undermine these efforts Ebewo [50]; Ncube [51]. Social stigma, as originally conceptualised by Devah Pager and reaffirmed in contemporary analyses by the UNODC [29], continues to restrict access to markets, networks, and trust-based transactions, thereby diminishing the transformative potential of entrepreneurship programmes Pager [19]; Western [38].

Furthermore, mentorship and structured aftercare services are shown to significantly enhance post-release adjustment, fostering both business continuity and psychosocial resilience; however, such support mechanisms remain inconsistently implemented and under-resourced in correctional systems UNODC [29]; Berg & Huebner [42]. Macroeconomic conditions, particularly Zimbabwe's prolonged economic volatility, currency instability, and high levels of informality, further complicate entrepreneurial success by limiting market predictability and investment confidence IMF [52]; World Bank [41]. Critically, this

analysis reveals that entrepreneurship alone cannot function as a panacea for recidivism reduction; rather, its impact is contingent upon an enabling ecosystem that integrates financial inclusion, stigma reduction, institutional coherence, and macroeconomic stability Naudé [36]; Acs et al [37]. Thus, without systematically addressing these moderating variables, entrepreneurship programmes risk reproducing structural inequalities and yielding only marginal rehabilitative outcomes, necessitating a more holistic and context-sensitive policy approach.

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

Research design

The present study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the nuanced experiences and perceptions of stakeholders engaged with entrepreneurship initiatives within the Zimbabwe Prison & Correctional Service (ZPCS) Creswell & Poth [53]; Yin [54]. A qualitative case study is particularly appropriate for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life context when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not sharply defined Yin [54]. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how participants conceptualize and experience entrepreneurship as a rehabilitative pathway within the complex social, institutional, and economic structures of ZPCS Stake [1995] Creswell & Poth [53]. Through detailed examination of individual lived experiences, this design enables researchers to uncover contextual influences that shape attitudes toward rehabilitation and recidivism, rather than seeking generalizable causal relationships typical of quantitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell [56].

As literature on correctional entrepreneurship programs indicates, qualitative inquiry is essential for capturing the subjective realities of justice-impacted individuals and the corrective environment they navigate Berg & Lune [57]; Ontong & Fourie [58]. Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit a diverse yet targeted group of participants who could offer rich, experiential insights into prison-based entrepreneurship training Palinkas [59]. This sampling strategy intentionally selects individuals most knowledgeable or directly involved with the phenomenon of interest, including incarcerated learners engaged in entrepreneurship, correctional officers supporting rehabilitative programming, and external facilitators or trainers Etikan et al [60]. Such purposeful selection enhances the study's ability to generate in-depth, contextually grounded knowledge about entrepreneurial activities and their perceived impact on personal transformation and future economic aspirations Patton [51]. Purposive sampling has been widely used in qualitative research examining complex social processes, such as recidivism management and rehabilitation in correctional settings, because it enables the researcher to focus on information-rich cases that illuminate the topic under investigation Muntingh [62].

Data collection

Data for this qualitative inquiry were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews complemented by document review to triangulate findings and enhance construct validity Bowen [63]; Yin [54]. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible yet systematic means of eliciting participants' perceptions, allowing for exploration of individual meanings, aspirations, and contextualized experiences while maintaining core lines of inquiry across interviewees Kallio [64]. This flexibility is especially valuable in correctional research, where participants' interpretations of rehabilitation programs, entrepreneurial skills training, and challenges encountered often unfold in complex, multi-layered narratives Tracy [65]. Interview protocols focused on participants' engagement with entrepreneurship training, perceived personal growth and changes while incarcerated, expectations for economic participation post-release, and anticipated barriers to reintegration Creswell & Poth [53]. Methodological literature underscores that semi-structured interviews are a cornerstone of qualitative case studies where deep engagement with subjective perspectives is required to uncover underlying themes and patterns Turnbull [66] Kallio et al [64].

In addition to interviews, document reviews were conducted to contextualize participants' accounts within institutional frameworks and programmatic histories Bowen [63]. These included reviewing ZPCS policy documents, training manuals, and reports related to prison industries and rehabilitative programming. Document review serves as a non-reactive data source that enriches understanding of organizational priorities, procedural norms, and program structures that shape entrepreneurial interventions Bowen [63]; Yin [54]. By integrating interview data with documentary evidence, the study achieves methodological triangulation, which strengthens credibility and depth of analysis in qualitative research Flick [67]. This multi-source approach allows for a more robust interpretation of how entrepreneurship initiatives operate within ZPCS and how these initiatives are perceived to contribute to rehabilitation and recidivism reduction Yin [54].

Data analysis

In alignment with the study's qualitative case study design, data were analysed using thematic analysis, a rigorous and systematic approach suitable for identifying, interpreting, and reporting patterns of meaning across textual data Braun & Clarke [68]; Munyoro [69]; Braun & Clarke [70]. Thematic analysis allows researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions to articulate richer insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and the socio-institutional contexts that shape their engagements with entrepreneurship as a rehabilitative intervention Munyoro [69]; Braun & Clarke [70]. This method is widely recognized in qualitative research examining complex phenomena within correctional and rehabilitation settings,

where understanding subjective meanings, social processes, and participants' interpretive frameworks is paramount Tracy [65]; Chauke [71]. Such analysis enabled the research team to systematically code interview transcripts and documentary materials, develop meaningful categories, and consolidate these into coherent themes reflecting key aspects of entrepreneurial engagement, identity transformation, and reintegration aspirations among justice-impacted stakeholders Munyoro [69]; Braun & Clarke [70].

The analytic process commenced with verbatim transcription of semi-structured interviews, followed by iterative open and focused coding to capture salient concepts related to rehabilitation, economic empowerment, self-efficacy, and barriers to reintegration Saldaña [72]. Codes were then organized into broader thematic clusters that captured shared experiences and divergent perspectives across stakeholder groups Braun & Clarke [68]; Chauke [71]. Coding was both inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives, and deductive, informed by theoretical constructs relevant to entrepreneurial rehabilitation and recidivism Munyoro [69]; Saldaña [72]. Comparative analysis across participant categories (incarcerated learners, correctional staff, and external facilitators) enhanced interpretive depth and analytic triangulation Flick [67]. Through this iterative, reflective process, the research identified patterns that illustrated how entrepreneurship initiatives within the Zimbabwe Prison & Correctional Service (ZPCS) are perceived to influence personal transformation and prospects for lawful economic participation post-release Tracy [65]. Thematic analysis, therefore, served not only as an analytic tool but also as a mechanism for integrating subjective lived experience with institutional and policy contexts shaping correctional entrepreneurship outcomes (Braun & Clarke [70]; Munyoro [69]).

Findings

Empowerment through skills acquisition

Findings from the qualitative interviews indicate that entrepreneurship education within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) plays a transformative role in empowering incarcerated individuals through the acquisition of practical and cognitive skills Alemu [73]; Hwang & Phillips [7]. Participants consistently reported that engagement in entrepreneurial training, particularly in areas such as business planning, financial literacy, and small enterprise management, enhanced their sense of self-efficacy and agency Nisser [74]; Zainal [6]. These skills were perceived not only as technical competencies but also as catalysts for psychological transformation, enabling participants to envision constructive futures beyond incarceration Kolodziejczyk & Włodarczyk [75].

Participant narratives reflected a strong sense of renewed personal capability. One respondent explained: "Learning how to plan and run a business made me believe I can start over after release" (Participant A).

Such testimonies suggest that entrepreneurship education functions as a mechanism for restoring self-belief among incarcerated individuals who often enter correctional institutions with diminished confidence due to marginalization and prior socioeconomic disadvantage Alemu [73]. The development of entrepreneurial competencies appears to cultivate a forward-looking orientation, encouraging participants to view themselves as potential contributors to economic and social development rather than as perpetual offenders Naudé [36].

These findings align with international scholarship emphasizing that entrepreneurship education fosters critical forms of human capital among justice-involved populations Naudé [36]; Kolodziejczyk & Włodarczyk [75]. Studies show that programs focusing on business development, financial literacy, and opportunity recognition can significantly enhance participants' problem-solving abilities and economic self-reliance Hwang & Phillips [7] Zainal [6]. Similarly, research on correctional education programs demonstrates that skill-based training improves inmates' self-efficacy and preparedness for employment or self-employment following release Nisser [74]. Within Zimbabwe's correctional system, entrepreneurial learning is frequently integrated with vocational training initiatives that provide inmates with practical production skills ZPCS [28]. Programs in agriculture, leatherwork, construction, and manufacturing expose inmates to income-generating activities while simultaneously contributing to institutional productivity Muzvidziwa & Madhuku [76]. Participants noted that skills such as brick-making, curio production, carpentry, tailoring, and shoe manufacturing could translate into viable livelihoods after release Muzvidziwa & Madhuku [76].

One inmate participating in a prison industry program explained that learning these trades provided "life survival skills" and renewed confidence in the ability to earn a legitimate living upon reentry into society.

From a qualitative analytical perspective, these narratives illustrate how entrepreneurship education contributes to capability development, consistent with human capital and empowerment frameworks widely applied in rehabilitation research Sen [77] Naudé [36]. Skills acquisition not only equips inmates with economic tools but also fosters identity reconstruction, transforming self-perceptions from offenders to potential entrepreneurs Kolodziejczyk & Włodarczyk [75]. Consequently, the findings suggest that entrepreneurship training within correctional settings can serve as a critical rehabilitative intervention that strengthens inmates' capacity for socioeconomic reintegration.

Perceived reduction in recidivism risk

Another salient theme emerging from the interviews was

the perceived relationship between entrepreneurial competence and reduced likelihood of reoffending Alemu [73]; Hwang & Phillips [7]. Participants frequently articulated the belief that possessing viable business ideas and entrepreneurial skills diminished their inclination to return to criminal activities Zainal [6]. The acquisition of legitimate economic opportunities was described as a key deterrent against recidivism. For instance, one participant remarked: "I now have ideas I want to pursue; I don't want to go back to crime" (Participant B). Such statements illustrate a psychological shift in which participants began to view entrepreneurship as a realistic alternative to illicit income-generating strategies Kolodziejczyk & Włodarczyk [75]. Through thematic analysis, these narratives reveal that entrepreneurial training can foster both economic motivation and identity transformation and two mechanisms widely recognized in criminological desistance theory (Maruna [9]; Farrall [78]).

Existing research supports these perceptions. Studies examining entrepreneurship among formerly incarcerated individuals indicate that self-employment often emerges as a viable pathway for economic reintegration, particularly in contexts where criminal records create barriers to conventional employment Hwang & Phillips [7] Naudé [36]. Formerly incarcerated individuals frequently turn to entrepreneurial activities as a strategy to overcome labour market discrimination and limited job opportunities Zainal [6]. Importantly, these entrepreneurial pathways have been associated with improved income stability and reduced tendencies toward reoffending Hwang & Phillips [7]. Program evaluations of prison-based entrepreneurship initiatives in other jurisdictions demonstrate similarly promising outcomes. For example, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program in the United States has reported significantly lower recidivism rates among program graduates compared to national averages Hill [11]; Sonfield [79]. Although such outcomes are influenced by additional support mechanisms, including mentorship, networking, and post-release employment assistance, they nonetheless illustrate the potential impact of entrepreneurship education on long-term desistance from crime Alemu [73].

Within the Zimbabwean context, participants' perceptions correspond with broader correctional policy goals aimed at transforming prisons into centres of rehabilitation and productivity ZPCS [28]. Industry-based training programs implemented by the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service seek to equip inmates with knowledge and practical skills that enable them to become productive members of society upon release Muzvidziwa & Madhuku [76]. The convergence between participant narratives and global empirical evidence therefore strengthens the argument that entrepreneurship can serve as a viable mechanism for reducing recidivism by addressing both economic vulnerability and identity transformation.

Systemic barriers to post-release entrepreneurial success

Despite the positive perceptions associated with entrepreneurial training, participants consistently highlighted significant structural barriers that could undermine their ability to translate acquired skills into sustainable livelihoods following release Zainal [6] Hwang & Phillips [7]. The most frequently cited obstacles included limited access to startup capital, persistent social stigma against formerly incarcerated individuals, and inadequate institutional support mechanisms for post-release reintegration Alemu [73]. Participants expressed concern that without financial resources or institutional backing, launching a small enterprise would remain difficult despite the skills gained during incarceration Naudé [36]. One respondent noted that while entrepreneurship training provides valuable knowledge, the absence of funding opportunities could prevent many former inmates from implementing their business ideas. This finding aligns with existing literature indicating that justice-involved individuals often face restricted access to financial services, credit facilities, and investment capital due to criminal records, limited collateral, and financial exclusion Zainal [6].

Social stigma also emerged as a critical barrier. Participants believed that negative societal perceptions of formerly incarcerated individuals could hinder their ability to attract customers, secure business partnerships, or access community support networks Hwang & Phillips [7]. These concerns reflect broader empirical findings demonstrating that stigma and discrimination significantly impede reintegration processes by limiting access to employment, housing, and financial services Farrall [78]. Furthermore, participants emphasized the need for structured aftercare programs to bridge the gap between incarceration and community reintegration Alemu [73]. While ZPCS provides training during incarceration, interviewees indicated that sustained mentorship, business incubation support, and access to entrepreneurial networks would be essential for translating training into viable enterprises Naudé [36]. Some reintegration initiatives in Zimbabwe have begun addressing this gap by providing starter packs and livelihood support to released inmates ZPCS [28]. For example, individuals trained in horticulture or agriculture have received basic inputs and tools to initiate small-scale farming enterprises upon release, illustrating emerging efforts to support reintegration through entrepreneurship Muzvidziwa & Madhuku [76].

These findings highlight the importance of adopting a holistic rehabilitation framework that extends beyond prison-based training. While entrepreneurship education can empower inmates with skills and motivation, its long-term effectiveness depends on broader structural support systems that facilitate access to financial capital, mentorship, and community acceptance. Without these complementary mechanisms, the transformative potential of entrepreneurial training may remain constrained.

Policy Implications

The findings from the Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Service (ZPCS) case study foreground entrepreneurship as a strategic policy lever for advancing rehabilitation through skills acquisition and empowerment Munoz & Wainwright [10] Nisser [74]. Evidence from participant narratives demonstrates that structured entrepreneurial training enhances self-efficacy, goal orientation, and adaptive competencies, reinforcing its role as a transformative correctional education tool rather than a peripheral activity Zainal [6] Cooney, 2021). From a policy perspective, this necessitates a paradigmatic shift toward embedding entrepreneurship within formal correctional education frameworks as a core rehabilitative pillar European Commission [80] Munoz & Wainwright [10]. Contemporary research supports this approach, emphasizing that entrepreneurship education contributes to human capital development by equipping incarcerated individuals with financial literacy, opportunity recognition, and problem-solving capabilities essential for post-release economic participation Zainal [6] Nisser [74]. Furthermore, the perceived link between entrepreneurial competence and reduced recidivism risk highlights the importance of aligning correctional policy with desistance-oriented frameworks that integrate economic empowerment with behavioural transformation Maruna [9]; Cooney, 2021). Studies suggest that entrepreneurship offers a viable alternative for justice-involved individuals facing structural labour market exclusion, thereby fostering identity reconstruction and long-term desistance from crime Hwang & Phillips [7] Zainal [6]. Accordingly, policymakers should institutionalize standardized entrepreneurship curricula across correctional facilities, integrate these programs with existing prison industries such as agriculture and manufacturing, and adopt multidimensional evaluation metrics that capture intermediate reintegration outcomes, including entrepreneurial intention and employment stability (Munoz & Wainwright [10].

However, the persistence of systemic barriers to post-release success underscores the need for a comprehensive and integrated policy framework that extends beyond incarceration (Travis, Western, & Redburn [81] Nisser [74]. Participants identified limited access to startup capital, social stigma, and the absence of structured mentorship as critical constraints that hinder the practical application of entrepreneurial skills Hwang & Phillips [7] Cooney, 2021). Empirical literature corroborates that the success of correctional entrepreneurship initiatives is contingent upon the availability of financial, institutional, and social support mechanisms that enable formerly incarcerated individuals to operationalize business ventures (Munoz & Wainwright [10] Zainal [6]. Consequently, policy responses must move beyond prison-based training to encompass holistic reintegration ecosystems, including targeted microfinance schemes, business incubation programs, and cross-sector partnerships with private enterprises and community organizations European Commission [80] Nisser [74]. The concept of “restorative entrepreneurship”

further reinforces the importance of integrating economic opportunity with social reintegration and institutional support, thereby promoting sustainable desistance and social cohesion Munoz & Wainwright [10]. In the Zimbabwean context, this would require coordinated policy alignment between ZPCS, government ministries, and development stakeholders, alongside public awareness initiatives aimed at reducing stigma toward formerly incarcerated individuals. By adopting an integrated and evidence-based policy framework, correctional systems can maximize the rehabilitative potential of entrepreneurship, enhance post-release outcomes, and contribute to long-term reductions in recidivism [81-150].

Conclusion

Overall, the integration of entrepreneurship into rehabilitative programming represents a promising and forward-looking strategy for enhancing the social and economic reintegration of individuals following incarceration. By equipping participants with practical business skills, fostering self-reliance, and encouraging innovative thinking, entrepreneurship-based interventions can address structural barriers to employment that many formerly incarcerated individuals face. Moreover, such initiatives contribute not only to individual empowerment but also to broader community development through the creation of sustainable livelihoods and reduced recidivism. While the effectiveness of these programs depends on adequate institutional support, access to financial and mentoring resources, and policy environments that enable entrepreneurial participation, the existing evidence suggests that entrepreneurship-focused rehabilitation can serve as a valuable complement to traditional correctional education and employment programs. Consequently, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should continue to expand, refine, and rigorously evaluate these initiatives to ensure their long-term impact and scalability within diverse correctional and post-release contexts [151-212].

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