

9 out of 10 South African criminals reoffend, while in Finland it's 1 in 3—here is why

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A very large percentage of South Africans who are released from prison end up being rearrested and being convicted for crimes again. The country has one of the highest recidivism rates [in the world](#).

Criminologist Casper Lötter sets out his findings in [a recent paper](#) on what can be learned from Finland's experience in reducing this trend.

What's the difference between the two countries' approaches?

About 9 out of 10 ex-offenders reoffend in South Africa. Expressed as a percentage of 90% of the [prison population](#) of roughly 260,000 at any one point in time, this is one of the highest and most unsustainable in the world.

The US has a rate of recidivism of around [67%](#) while China, an authoritarian country where mass executions of recidivists are the norm, has a rate between 6% and 8%.

In Finland, a liberal democracy, the rate is a very acceptable 31%.

The primary cause of reoffending in South Africa appears to be the state's unwillingness or inability to clear up areas of conflict in society which either breed criminality or fuel reoffending. Examples of these are inequality (a breeding ground for violent crimes), poverty in an otherwise affluent society, chronic unemployment and government [practices](#) that marginalize and stigmatize people.

Not only has the state failed to keep citizens safe from preventable crime and harm, but politicians have also used the issue to campaign on a "tough on crime" ticket.

South Africa also has a harsh stigmatizing shaming culture, as opposed to an integrative shaming culture, when it comes to people convicted of crimes. In a stigmatizing shaming culture, ex-offenders often experience discrimination and ostracisation. This drives them away from

mainstream culture and its values and towards criminal subcultures. The US has a similar culture.

In an integrative shaming culture, ex-offenders are encouraged to reintegrate into society. They are provided with employment and other opportunities to ease their transition into mainstream society. China and Japan are examples of this.

This approach is also widespread in African cultures, such as those found in Mali, Kenya and even Nigeria. The reason for this? In most African countries with a history of colonialism, [a connection](#) has been established between imprisonment and slavery.

Significantly, the leading Australian comparative criminologist John [Braithwaite](#) has argued that stigma is "counter-productive" and fuels reoffending.

Though recidivism (reoffending) is a significant problem in criminology, there are no easy answers on how to fix it. The problem is both complex and nuanced.

Alternative approaches

In a [recent paper](#), I looked at alternatives.

For example, Finland has a hybrid culture. It has a stigmatizing shaming culture that is heavily influenced by integrative shaming features. A well-known Chinese proverb proclaims that nuance is everything. These characteristics are evident in the Finnish prison setting as well as the post-incarceration environment.

Strenuous efforts are made to provide ex-offenders with employment opportunities or financial assistance after their release from prison.

And offenders' concerns are attended to during incarceration. [Prison protests](#), such as hunger strikes, are unheard of in Finnish prisons. In South Africa they are common.

But the most glaring characteristic of the Finnish system is an admirable rate of recidivism of about 31% (with deincarceration at 53 individuals imprisoned per 100,000 in the national general population).

Deincarceration is the result of efforts to limit recourse to imprisonment as much as possible. In [South Africa](#) the rate of recidivism (reoffending) is between 86% and 94%.

So, even though South Africa's rate of incarceration (the number of convicted criminals who go to prison) is almost five times higher than that of Finland, Finland has only one third of South Africa's reoffending rate. The question is why, since both these countries exhibit stigmatizing shaming cultures.

In my research I identified specific features within the Finnish system that makes it a good model for the South African Department of Correctional Services to follow. These include:

- Punishment as a mere loss of liberty. Other features of incarceration, such as [torture](#), forfeiture of privileges (such as family visits), degrading or insulting treatment and solitary confinement are not evident in the Finnish system. All of these are evident in South Africa.
- Reintegration into society. Offenders are provided, as far as possible, with employment opportunities and other measures to help them return to mainstream society. This helps them survive in a harsh stigmatizing shaming [culture](#).
- Promotion of normal humane conditions in the prison environment. Prisons in Finland are not surrounded by barbed wire, and prison wardens are dressed in normal civilian clothing.

Everything possible is done to normalize the [prison](#) environment.

- Just and respectful treatment of prisoners, upholding their human dignity. Research [has shown](#) that treating offenders in humiliating ways damages their sense of self and complicates their integration into society.
- Responsiveness to offenders' concerns. Understanding their problems allows them to feel they are part of the system and breaks down their resistance to cooperation with authorities.

What lessons can be learned

My research shows that South Africa could benefit from Finland's approach.

South African academic [Gavin Bradshaw](#), an expert on deep-rooted societal conflict as well as [social cohesion](#), say, "Most recent research work on negotiation also supports the fact that integrative approaches are usually far more effective {than power bargaining}."

Recognition of the formerly incarcerated's basic human needs, as Bradshaw indicates, is bound to have a significant impact on South Africa's rates of recidivism.

I found that Finland's great achievement is a result of recognizing the basic human needs of offenders and ex-offenders, thereby eliminating this primary source of human conflict. Those needs include employment, where possible, basic accommodation, dignity, and responsiveness to their concerns.

In a country where 9 out of every 10 offenders reoffend, it is perhaps time to reevaluate [the rehabilitation paradigm](#). Finland's experience shows the value of applying sensible conflict transformation perspectives in the management of crime.

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