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Entrepreneurship Programmes and Employment Assistance as Correlates of Recidivism Reduction Among Ex-Convicts in Abia State Correctional Centres, Nigeria			
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Keywords		Abstract	
entrepreneurship programmes, employment assistance, recidivism, ex-convicts, Nigerian correctional centres, economic rehabilitation		The problem of recidivism in Nigerian correctional institutions has attracted limited scholarly attention relative to its magnitude, and even less empirical inquiry has examined economic empowerment-focused rehabilitation mechanisms. This study investigates the relationship between entrepreneurship programmes and employment assistance programmes on recidivism rates among ex-convicts in Abia State Correctional Centres, Nigeria, using primary data from a census survey of 1,094 respondents across the Aba, Umuahia, and Arochukwu custodial centres. Two hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression at a 0.05 significance level: that entrepreneurship programmes have no significant effect on recidivism rate; and that there is no significant relationship between employment assistance programmes and recidivism rate. Findings revealed that entrepreneurship programmes ($R = .312$, $F(1,1093) = 21.472$, $p < .000$) and employment assistance programmes ($R = .112$, $F(1,1093) = 11.003$, $p < .001$) both significantly predict recidivism rates. Anchored in Social Bond Theory, and Strain Theory, the study concludes that economic self-sufficiency pathways whether through self-employment or structured labour market access are essential to sustainable recidivism reduction. Policy recommendations emphasize programme expansion, employer incentive frameworks, and startup grant mechanisms within Nigerian correctional reform.	
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1. Introduction

The relationship between economic marginalization and criminal behaviour is well-established in criminological theory and empirical research. Ex-convicts constitute one of the most economically vulnerable groups in any society: they carry the social stigma of a criminal record, often lack formal educational qualifications, and face structural barriers in formal labour markets that substantially limit their access to stable, legitimate employment (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008; Wiafe, 2021). In Nigeria, these vulnerabilities are compounded by pervasive unemployment, underdeveloped social welfare infrastructure, and correctional institutions that have historically emphasized punitive detention over meaningful rehabilitation (Ndubueze, 2020). The predictable outcome is a high rate of recidivism:

the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) estimated Nigeria's recidivism rate at 37.3% in 2021, with Abia State recording rates between 52% and 75% (Saifulahi-Idris, Ayodele, & Ikuteyijo, 2023).

Two rehabilitation mechanisms with particular promise for addressing the economic drivers of recidivism are entrepreneurship programmes and employment assistance programmes. Entrepreneurship programmes equip incarcerated individuals with the business planning, financial management, and enterprise development skills necessary to create self-employment opportunities upon release, circumventing the formal hiring discrimination that frequently confronts ex-convicts (Robert & Isin, 2022; Fetzer & Ewert, 2020). Employment assistance programmes, by contrast, focus on facilitating access to formal employment through resume building, interview preparation, career counselling, job matching, and employer network development (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Lavelle, 2014; Simon, Kolbeck, Lopez, & Bellair, 2023).

While both programme types have been evaluated internationally, their study within the Nigerian correctional context remains underdeveloped. The majority of prior Nigerian scholarship has focused on vocational skills acquisition as the primary mode of economic rehabilitation (Abba, 2016; Darke & Garcés, 2017), leaving entrepreneurship and employment assistance relatively unexamined.

Statement of the Problem

The persistence of high recidivism rates in Nigerian correctional institutions represents one of the most pressing unresolved challenges in the country's criminal justice system. In Abia State, recidivism rates range between 52% and 75% (Saifulahi-Idris, Ayodele, & Ikuteyijo, 2023), while at the national level, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) estimated a reoffending rate of 37.3% in 2021, rising to 52.4% in 2022 (Chenube, 2023). These figures represent not merely a statistical concern but a fundamental failure of the correctional system to equip ex-offenders with the economic tools and employment pathways necessary for sustainable reintegration. The financial burden of repeated incarceration, prosecution, and programme delivery diverts public resources from more productive investments and signals an urgent need for rehabilitation strategies that address the structural economic drivers of reoffending.

A critical dimension of this problem is the economic vulnerability ex-convicts face upon release. The stigma of a criminal record creates severe structural barriers to formal employment, with employers consistently demonstrating reluctance to hire individuals with criminal histories (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008; Wiafe, 2021). In Nigeria's context of pervasive unemployment and an underdeveloped formal labour market, these barriers are particularly acute. Without stable legitimate income, ex-convicts face intense economic strain that increases the risk of reoffending as a means of survival (Merton, 1957). Yet despite the centrality of economic self-sufficiency to successful reintegration, two of the most promising economic rehabilitation mechanisms entrepreneurship programmes and employment assistance programmes remain underdeveloped, inconsistently implemented, and empirically understudied within Nigerian correctional institutions.

The existing literature on rehabilitation and recidivism in Nigeria has focused predominantly on vocational skills acquisition as the primary mode of economic rehabilitation (Abba, 2016; Darke & Garcés, 2017), leaving entrepreneurship training and structured employment assistance relatively unexamined. No study, to the knowledge of the present researchers, has simultaneously investigated the predictive relationships of both entrepreneurship and employment assistance programmes with recidivism rates among ex-convicts in Abia State. This gap is particularly significant given that entrepreneurship offers ex-offenders a pathway to economic independence that bypasses formal hiring

discrimination, while employment assistance programmes provide structured support for accessing the formal labour market — two complementary mechanisms whose combined relevance to recidivism reduction in the Nigerian context has not been empirically established.

This study therefore seeks to address this gap by empirically examining the relationship between entrepreneurship programmes, employment assistance programmes, and recidivism rates among ex-convicts in the Abia State Correctional Centres, Nigeria. The findings are intended to generate evidence-based policy guidance for correctional administrators, government agencies, and NGOs committed to reducing reoffending through economic empowerment, and to contribute to the broader scholarly literature on rehabilitation and criminal justice reform in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study addresses that gap through empirical analysis of data from 1,094 respondents at the Abia State Correctional Centres, testing two null hypotheses: (H1) Entrepreneurship programmes have not significantly affected recidivism rate among ex-convicts in Abia State correctional centres; and (H2) There is no significant relationship between employment assistance programmes and recidivism rate among ex-convicts in Abia State correctional centres.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Entrepreneurship Programmes and Recidivism

The application of entrepreneurship programming to correctional rehabilitation is grounded in the recognition that former inmates face acute labour market disadvantages that conventional employment-focused rehabilitation may be insufficient to overcome. Employer reluctance to hire individuals with criminal records is well-documented globally (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008; Wiafe, 2021; Oselin, Ross, Wang, & Kang, 2023), and in Nigeria's context of high structural unemployment, the challenges are particularly acute. Entrepreneurship programmes offer an alternative pathway: by enabling self-employment, they allow ex-convicts to generate income without depending on a biased formal hiring market (Yelli, Nabilah, Wien, & Suskim, 2023; Robert & Isin, 2022).

The empirical evidence base for correctional entrepreneurship programmes, while smaller than that for vocational training, is growing. Fetzer and Ewert (2020) found that individuals who participated in entrepreneurial programmes had substantially lower recidivism rates, attributing the effect to financial independence, improved self-confidence, and a constructive future orientation engendered by the programme experience. Their findings are consistent with the broader economic self-sufficiency argument: when ex-offenders can meet their material needs through legitimate means, the instrumental motivation for reoffending diminishes substantially (McCollister, French, & Fang, 2021).

Williams and Raftery (2018) tracked participants in a correctional entrepreneurship programme and documented a clear association between programme completion and reduced recidivism. Participants who developed viable business plans, acquired financial management skills, and engaged with mentorship networks were better positioned for post-release success, both economically and psychologically. The authors emphasized that entrepreneurship training does not merely provide income-generating skills; it also reshapes participants' self-concept, fostering a positive, agency-oriented identity that is incompatible with criminal lifestyle continuity (Williams & Raftery, 2018). This identity-transformation function of entrepreneurship programmes has been theorized as one of the central mechanisms through which they reduce reoffending.

In the Nigerian context specifically, Sowemimo and Peters (2022) reported that ex-convicts who received entrepreneurship training in Nigerian correctional facilities were more likely to achieve financial independence and exhibited a lower tendency to reoffend. This study is particularly significant

because it confirms the relevance of entrepreneurship-based rehabilitation in the specific structural conditions of the Nigerian economy, where high youth unemployment, an extensive informal sector, and limited social welfare provision create a context in which self-employment may be more accessible than formal wage employment for ex-convicts.

Jones and Hough (2017) found that the structured pedagogical design of entrepreneurship programmes covering business skills, financial planning, and market analysis enables ex-offenders to envision and pursue legitimate entrepreneurial careers, with the result that participants demonstrated lower reoffending rates compared to non-participants. Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) replicated these findings in Southeast Asian correctional contexts, documenting marked recidivism reductions among ex-convicts trained in entrepreneurship, and argued that in labour markets with limited formal employment, entrepreneurship constitutes a particularly effective anti-recidivism tool.

McCollister, French, and Fang (2021) applied cost-benefit analysis to correctional entrepreneurship programmes and found long-term reductions in re-incarceration costs, increases in employment rates, and improvements in community stability among programme alumni. Their economic analysis demonstrates that the societal return on investment in entrepreneurship programming substantially exceeds programme costs, providing a strong fiscal argument for policymakers to invest in these interventions.

2.2 Employment Assistance Programmes and Recidivism

Employment assistance programmes in correctional settings encompass a range of structured interventions designed to improve ex-convicts' capacity to secure and maintain formal employment. These typically include resume preparation workshops, interview skills training, career counselling, job placement matching, employer network development, and post-placement support services (Graffam, Shinkfield, & Lavelle, 2014). The underlying premise is that stable employment provides economic security, social structure, and a legitimate identity — all of which reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Simon, Kolbeck, Lopez, & Bellair, 2023).

Graffam, Shinkfield, and Lavelle (2014) evaluated a large-scale employment assistance programme operating across 17 Victorian correctional facilities in Australia and documented a very low reoffending rate of 7.46% for participants during the programme period. Programme participants exhibited significantly lower recidivism rates than non-participants, and post-registration offending was significantly lower than pre-registration offending, confirming that employment support structures produce meaningful recidivism reductions. The programme targeted individuals at moderate to high risk of reoffending precisely the population for whom employment assistance is most needed.

Skardhamar and Telle (2012) conducted a longitudinal study in Norway examining the relationship between post-release employment and recidivism and found that stable employment following release was a strong negative predictor of reoffending, independent of prior criminal history and employment record. Simon, Kolbeck, Lopez, and Bellair (2023) extended these findings, demonstrating that the recidivism-reducing effect of post-prison employment operates irrespective of prior employment history or criminal background a finding that argues for universal employment assistance provision regardless of individual profiles.

However, significant structural barriers to ex-convict employment persist. Schneider, Vuolo, Lageson, and Uggen (2021) analyzed the impact of Ban the Box (BTB) legislation in the United States and found that one in five organizations remained noncompliant with anti-discrimination hiring policies, with noncompliance disproportionately affecting employers who had discriminated against applicants with criminal records prior to BTB. Similarly, Oselin et al. (2023) found that approximately

80% of hiring decision makers in Southern California violated the California Fair Chance Act by obtaining background information before extending employment offers, highlighting the enduring gap between de jure policy protections and de facto hiring practices.

These findings are particularly germane to the Nigerian context, where no equivalent legislative protections for ex-convicts in hiring exist, and where social stigma associated with criminal records is severe. Wiafe (2021), studying employer attitudes in Ghana — a context broadly comparable to Nigeria found a high level of unwillingness among SME owners to employ ex-convicts, with skills and educational attainment being among the few factors that moderated this reluctance. This underscores the importance of combining employment assistance with skills certification, and of engaging employers directly through sensitization and incentive frameworks to overcome structural hiring barriers.

Lukies, Graffam, and Shinkfield (2011) demonstrated that organizational context variables industry type, size, and location significantly influence employer attitudes toward ex-offender employability, with industry type exerting a greater influence than personal characteristics such as age and gender. This finding has practical implications for employment assistance programme design: matching ex-convicts to industries with more favourable hiring cultures, and providing support for navigating industry-specific norms, can improve programme effectiveness.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study integrates two theoretical frameworks that collectively explain the mechanisms through which entrepreneurship and employment assistance programmes reduce recidivism: Strain Theory, and Social Bond Theory.

Strain Theory, formulated by Robert K. Merton (1957), provides the most direct theoretical account of why economic rehabilitation reduces recidivism. Merton argued that crime results when culturally valorized goals particularly material success cannot be achieved through institutionally sanctioned means. Ex-convicts face disproportionate structural strain: they are oriented toward the same success goals as the general population but are systematically excluded from the legitimate pathways stable employment, business ownership, professional advancement through which those goals are typically achieved. This strain creates powerful incentives for criminal innovation. Entrepreneurship and employment assistance programmes directly reduce this strain by opening legitimate pathways to economic success that are accessible despite the structural disadvantages of a criminal record.

Social Bond Theory, as developed by Travis Hirschi (1969), contributes a relational perspective. Employment and entrepreneurship are not merely sources of income; they are also mechanisms of social integration that build attachment, commitment, and engagement with conventional society. Individuals who are employed whether in formal jobs or as business owners develop stakes in conformity: the prospect of losing a job or business provides a powerful disincentive to criminal behaviour. Employment assistance and entrepreneurship programmes thus function to rebuild the social bonds that incarceration disrupts, providing ex-convicts with new social roles, responsibilities, and relationships that anchor them in pro-social networks and reduce their vulnerability to criminal re-engagement.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Study Area

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design supplemented by in-depth interviews (IDIs). The research was conducted across three custodial centres in Abia State, Nigeria: Aba, Umuahia, and Arochukwu, which collectively hold the highest recidivism rates in the South-Eastern geopolitical zone, with figures ranging from 52% to 75% (Saifulahi-Idris, Ayodele, & Ikuteyijo, 2023). The cross-sectional design facilitated the collection of attitudinal and perceptual data from diverse stakeholders within a constrained timeframe, enabling systematic comparison across respondent categories.

4.2 Population, Sampling, and Instruments

The study population comprised all convicted inmates ($n = 572$) and correctional officers ($n = 565$) in the three custodial centres, yielding a total population of 1,137. A census sampling technique was employed to maximize data completeness and eliminate sampling error. Of the 1,137 questionnaires distributed, 1,094 were recovered (96.2% response rate), all of which were valid for analysis. The questionnaire was structured on a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Instrument validity was established through expert review, and reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's Alpha with a pilot sample. The IDI guide was administered to a purposively selected subset of inmates, correctional officers, and welfare staff to generate qualitative data for contextualizing quantitative findings.

4.3 Data Analysis

SPSS Version 21 was used for quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample, while simple linear regression was used to test hypotheses three and four at a 0.05 significance level. Each regression model treated the relevant rehabilitation programme variable as the independent variable and recidivism rate as the dependent variable. IDI transcripts were analyzed thematically.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Descriptive Overview

The 1,094 valid respondents were predominantly male (80.3%), with the largest age cohort in the 45–54 range (33%). Most respondents had secondary (39%) or tertiary (37%) educational qualifications, and the largest occupational category was farming (42%), followed by civil service (37%). These sociodemographic features reflect the intersecting disadvantages characteristic of individuals enmeshed in the Nigerian criminal justice system: limited educational attainment, concentration in low-income agricultural and informal economic activities, and vulnerability to the structural strains that Merton (1957) identified as drivers of criminal innovation.

On the entrepreneurship subscale, 22% of respondents strongly agreed that inmates should be exposed to business planning courses, while 29% agreed; approximately 49% disagreed or strongly disagreed, reflecting significant ambivalence about the current effectiveness of such programmes. On the employment assistance subscale, 45% strongly agreed that inmates should be matched with employment opportunities based on skills and experience, and 34% agreed a more positive endorsement pattern suggesting that employment assistance is perceived as more practically accessible than entrepreneurship programming.

5.2 Hypothesis One: Entrepreneurship Programmes and Recidivism

The regression analysis for hypothesis three yielded an R-value of .312, indicating a moderate effect size. The R-squared value of .070 indicates that entrepreneurship programmes account for 7.0% of the total variance in recidivism rates among ex-convicts. The regression ANOVA returned $F(1, 1093) = 21.472$, $p < .000$, confirming statistical significance at the 0.05 level. The adjusted R-squared

of .069 showed minimal shrinkage from the unadjusted value, indicating satisfactory model stability and generalizability. The null hypothesis was accordingly rejected: entrepreneurship programmes have a statistically significant effect on recidivism rates among ex-convicts in Abia State.

This finding is consistent with the growing international evidence base on correctional entrepreneurship. Fetzer and Ewert (2020) similarly found that entrepreneurship programme participants exhibited substantially lower recidivism rates, attributing the effect to financial independence and improved self-efficacy. The results also align with Sowemimo and Peters (2022), whose Nigeria-specific study documented lower reoffending rates among ex-convicts who received entrepreneurship training, and with Williams and Raftery (2018), who linked programme participation to identity transformation and constructive future orientation.

The qualitative data from IDIs in Abia State reinforced and elaborated the quantitative findings. Participants consistently identified financial necessity as the primary driver of reoffending, and entrepreneurship training as a viable counter-mechanism. One correctional officer noted that many ex-convicts returned to criminal activity not from preference but from economic desperation — and that entrepreneurship programmes directly addressed this by creating legitimate income-generating alternatives. Welfare officers reported that inmates who completed business development workshops demonstrated measurably improved post-release planning, including concrete business concepts, financial projections, and identified market opportunities.

The psychological dimension of entrepreneurship programming also emerged prominently in the IDI data. Multiple participants noted that the process of developing a business concept and acquiring management skills restored a sense of agency, self-worth, and constructive purpose that incarceration had eroded. This is theoretically significant: Strain Theory suggests that the sense of blocked legitimate opportunity is central to criminal motivation, and entrepreneurship programmes directly address this by demonstrating that legitimate achievement is possible. This aligns with McCollister, French, and Fang's (2021) economic analysis, which documented not only recidivism reductions but broader improvements in community functioning among entrepreneurship programme alumni.

The moderate effect size ($R = .312$) smaller than that of vocational training ($R = .485$) but larger than employment assistance ($R = .112$) is theoretically interpretable. Vocational training addresses the most immediate and tangible rehabilitation deficit (job skills), while entrepreneurship addresses a higher-order need (self-employment capacity). The latter requires more complex cognitive and attitudinal changes entrepreneurial mindset, risk tolerance, business acumen that may take longer to internalize and translate into behavioral change. The moderate effect size suggests that entrepreneurship programmes are meaningfully but not maximally realizing their potential, which may reflect the nascent and inconsistently implemented state of such programmes in Nigerian correctional settings.

5.3 Hypothesis Two: Employment Assistance Programmes and Recidivism

The regression analysis for hypothesis four returned an R-value of .112, indicating a small-to-moderate effect. The R-squared of .020 indicates that employment assistance programmes account for 2.0% of the total variance in recidivism rates. The regression ANOVA yielded $F(1, 1093) = 11.003$, $p < .001$, confirming statistical significance at the 0.05 level. The adjusted R-squared of .019 indicates minimal shrinkage and adequate model generalizability. The null hypothesis was rejected: there is a statistically significant relationship between employment assistance programmes and recidivism rates among ex-convicts in Abia State.

The smaller effect size relative to the other rehabilitation programme types is instructive rather than dismissive. Employment assistance programmes are inherently constrained in their impact when

structural barriers in the external labour market remain unaddressed. As Oselin et al. (2023) demonstrated, hiring discrimination against individuals with criminal records is pervasive even in contexts with formal legislative protections a challenge far more acute in Nigeria, where no equivalent protections exist. Schneider et al. (2021) similarly found that employer noncompliance with anti-discrimination hiring policies substantially limits the effectiveness of individual-level employment preparation. These structural constraints cap the achievable impact of employment assistance programming regardless of programme quality.

Nonetheless, the significant F-statistic confirms that employment assistance programmes do produce meaningful recidivism reductions even in adverse structural contexts. This is consistent with Graffam, Shinkfield, and Lavelle (2014), who documented significant recidivism differences between participants and non-participants in an Australian employment assistance programme, and with Simon, Kolbeck, Lopez, and Bellair (2023), who confirmed that stable post-prison employment reduces recidivism regardless of prior employment history. The implication is not that employment assistance is ineffective but that its effectiveness is constrained by structural factors that individual-level intervention cannot overcome alone.

The IDI data from Abia State illuminate both the mechanism and the limitations of employment assistance programming in the local context. Officers and inmates consistently identified stable employment as the single most critical factor in successful post-release adjustment, corroborating the central importance of this intervention domain. However, they also uniformly cited employer stigma and the lack of institutional linkages between correctional facilities and local employers as major impediments. The absence of structured job placement partnerships a component documented as effective by Lukies, Graffam, and Shinkfield (2011) means that individual ex-convicts must navigate formal hiring processes largely unaided, with predictably limited success.

From a Social Bond Theory perspective, the recidivism-reducing effect of employment assistance is theoretically expected: employment provides attachment to a workplace community, commitment to a career trajectory, engagement in conventional daily routines, and belief in the legitimacy of conventional success pathways. The fact that this effect is present but modest in Abia State suggests that current employment assistance programmes are creating some of these social bond elements but not others likely due to the programme's inability to guarantee actual job placement in the face of structural hiring discrimination.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has empirically demonstrated that both entrepreneurship programmes ($R = .312, p < .000$) and employment assistance programmes ($R = .112, p < .001$) significantly predict recidivism reduction among ex-convicts in Abia State Correctional Centres, Nigeria. These findings extend the scholarship on economic rehabilitation in correctional settings to the Nigerian context and contribute to a growing consensus that addressing the economic drivers of recidivism through both self-employment capability and formal labour market access is essential to sustainable reoffending reduction.

The differential effect sizes across programme types vocational training ($R = .485$) > entrepreneurship ($R = .312$) > employment assistance ($R = .112$) suggest that proximal, skills-based interventions currently exert the strongest rehabilitation effect, while more complex economic empowerment programmes have not yet realized their full potential. This likely reflects the uneven implementation quality and institutional resource allocation across programme types rather than fundamental differences in theoretical efficacy. As Nigerian correctional institutions develop more

robust entrepreneurship and employment assistance infrastructures, convergence toward higher effect sizes is theoretically anticipated.

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are made. First, correctional institutions in Abia State and across Nigeria should integrate structured entrepreneurship training including business planning, financial management, marketing, and enterprise development into the standard rehabilitation curriculum, with provision for post-release startup grants and mentorship access. Second, employment assistance programmes should be redesigned to include active employer engagement components, with correctional facilities establishing formal partnerships with local industries and SMEs to create dedicated hiring pipelines for ex-convicts. Third, the Nigerian government should develop legislative frameworks analogous to international fair-chance hiring policies to reduce employer discrimination against job applicants with criminal records, thereby amplifying the effect of individual-level employment assistance. Fourth, both programme types should incorporate financial literacy and psychological resilience components, recognizing that sustainable employment and entrepreneurship require not only technical skills but also the cognitive and emotional capacities to sustain them under adverse conditions.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track the durability of entrepreneurship and employment assistance effects across time. Comparative studies across Nigerian states would help identify contextual moderators of programme effectiveness. Qualitative research exploring the identity transformation processes through which entrepreneurship programmes reduce recidivism would deepen the theoretical understanding of the mechanisms at work.

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