BLACK FEMALE OFFENDING IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the phenomenon of black female offending in South Africa by drawing on interviews with a sample of 32 incarcerated black women. The first section provides a literature overview in respect of female criminality internationally and in South Africa. The paper further outlines the methodological approach adopted in the investigation of black female criminality in South Africa. Results of this survey revealed a picture of poverty, deprivation, victimisation and economic marginalisation, as some of the pathways to black female offending in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION
Over the past two decades, South Africa has experienced drastic socio-economic changes due to the transition from a racially divided society towards a non-racial society. In the course of this transformation a number of problems have emerged, one of which has been the disproportionate rise in crime (Neser 2007:1). The increase in crime in society has resulted in a proliferation of research on crime in SA (Harris & Rafaeli 2007:1). The focus of this research has been on the offenders committing the crimes, the causes of crime and the strategies for reducing crime in SA (Snyman 2005:3). Researchers Van der Hoven and Maree (2005:55) have also paid attention to victims of crime, with emphasis placed on profiling the likelihood of one becoming a victim of crime. These researchers depict women as victims of various types of crimes such as murder, rape and domestic violence. However, in essence these studies have resulted in women being singularly seen as victims of crime, while women are being ignored as offenders in their own right (Van der Hoven & Maree 2005:70). Dissel (2005:307) supports this view when she mentions that an ideal victim is often seen as weak, sick or from a vulnerable sector of society, such as women. Dissel (2005:307) further asserts that when victims are perceived as weak, it may lead to difficulty in understanding their contribution to crime. This notion has led scholars to ignore the interchangeability of victim/offender roles. This interchangeability is clearly identified in research studies that have revealed that “individuals who have been victims of violence or abuse may develop aggressive tendencies” (Dodge, Bates & Pettit 1998:1678). This article focuses on the reciprocal nature of victim and offender relationships among black female offenders in SA.

Little is known about the profile, nature and contributing factors and experiences of black female offenders incarcerated in South African correctional centres. This has impeded a comprehensive and an integrated understanding of the subject of black female criminality. Apart from a 2006 survey, conducted in Gauteng (a metropolitan city) which included three female correctional facilities based in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Heidelberg, no other national studies have emerged (Haffejee, Vetten & Greyling 2006b:3).

This study explores the research done; provides the profile, as well as the factors contributing to black female offending in South Africa. Because the current focus in research ignored the issue of the incarcerated female offender in South Africa SA, this study will be strategically directed at highlighting the reality of the black female offender and her criminality associated with unique causality factors. Research and literature on black female offending in South Africa is limited, thus the value of existing literature was deemed invaluable to act as an

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existing frame of reference in order to discern some possible similarities regarding the subject under investigation.

**LITERATURE OVERVIEW**

Changes in the views of the scientific world are clearly evident if one examines historical literature available on female criminality. According to Bunch, Foley and Urbina (1983:66) a proliferation of research attention given to violent behaviour perpetrated by women, resulted in an increase in concern regarding the ideology of female criminal behaviour. Early writers viewed female criminality as a result of individual characteristics. The born female criminal was perceived to have the qualities of a man and the worst characteristics of women. According to Lombroso and Ferrero (1895:43) these characteristics included deceitfulness, cunning and spite, which were not apparent among males. This appeared to indicate that female criminals were genetically more male than female, therefore biologically abnormal. Criminality in men was viewed as a common feature of their natural characteristics, whereas in women, their biologically-determined nature was antithetical to crime. This implied that female social deviants or criminals who did not act according to pre-defined standards were diagnosed as pathological and required treatment (Lombroso & Ferrero, 1895:43).

Other predominant theorists such as Pollack (1950:149) believed criminality was a pathology and socially induced rather than biologically inherited. Pollack (1950:2) further believed that “it is learned behaviour from a very young age that leads girls into a masked character of female criminality, that is, how it was and still is concealed through underreporting and low detection rates of female offenders.” He states that in a male dominated culture, women have always been considered strange, secretive and sometimes dangerous (Pollack 1950:149).

Authors such as Freud and Pollak further suggested that female criminality was related to women’s dissatisfaction with their femininity and their attempts to become more masculine. Other academics viewed this dissatisfaction as a psychosexual deviation, which indicated a form of mental illness (Klein 1973).

More contemporary views have emerged which emphasise the increased freedom of women to function in traditionally male behaviour and occupations as a major factor contributing to female crime. Reckless (1957:3) defined female criminals as women whose roles as homemaker, nurse, wife, shopper or mistress enable them to commit crimes which are screened from view and are difficult to detect. Pollak (1950:231) who had done definitive work on female criminality attributes the disparities to “masked behaviour of women incidental to their roles which in turn are an outcome of social position, psychological components of femaleness and physiological disabilities”. According to Lanyon (1956:33) the term “masked” refers to differences in the types of crimes committed by females as compared to those perpetrated by males. Pollak (1950:232) was of the opinion that women’s crimes more often involved deceit.

Later researchers such as Bond-Maupin (1998:31) and Estep (1982:153) portray female offenders as sexual temptresses or manipulators who use their sexuality both to commit and cover up their crimes. The women take advantage of men’s inability to resist their sexual allure, lulling them into a false sense of security and then killing them. Shapiro (1996:234) described women offenders as the unmarried, working women who are a deviant force which turn their good city into a bad and dangerous place. For example in Paris (France) authorities used the language and imagery of female stereotypes as unnatural, sick and out of control women (Shapiro, 1996:9). Research in SA has not been conducted to understand the
stereotypes or the way in which female offenders are seen by the communities. The results of this study also did not attempt to address this issue. However, one may assume that some of these views may not be relevant in explaining the causality of black female offending. This is largely due to the historical position of black women which was marred by racial inequalities as well as patriarchy which was and is still dominant.

Evidence clearly shows that the number of women worldwide in correctional centres has more than doubled over the last decade (Sheehan, McIvor & Trotter; 2007:xv). However these increases may vary from prison to prison and from country to country. For instance in the United States of America (USA) female offenders represent about seven percent of the general offender population while in the United Kingdom (UK), women offenders account for six percent of the entire prison population (Home Office 2004:25).

The minority status of women in prisons is a universal phenomenon which is not peculiar to SA. According to Vetten and Bhana (2005) and the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (2005), between 1995/6 and 2002/3, the number of women incarcerated in South African correctional centres increased by 68 percent. These statistics reflect and are consistent with international trends in female incarceration. Nonetheless compared to other international countries such as the United States and Canada, the number of women in South African correctional facilities remains small. Information from the Department of Correctional Services (2009) reveals that in July 2009 the number of women incarcerated was 2 606 inclusive of both sentenced and unsentenced offenders, and were made up of 697 Black, 2 488 Coloureds, 326 Whites, and 54 Asian women (Department of Correctional Services, 2009). The breakdown into different racial groups is however not discussed in relation to the offences committed by each group. These increasing numbers of female offenders are taking place within a terrain in which living conditions inside corrections are characterised by overcrowding as well as a lack of facilities and resources that are deteriorating and the specific needs of female offenders may not be adequately catered for (Haffejee et al 2006).

The fact that the statistics on female offending are relatively low in comparison to male offenders, has been cited as one of the main reasons why the subject of female criminality in Africa and in South Africa in particular, has either been almost totally ignored by scholars or not been dealt with either in a systematic or substantial manner (Zimudzi 2004:500). In agreement with the view by Zimudzi, Beukman (2000:52) asserts that it was only during the 19th and early to mid 20th century that academic writings on women and crime emerged. The emergence of these studies may be attributed to the surge in the prosecution of females in the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, which resulted in more female offenders being imprisoned (Gelsthorpe 2004:13). Yet even though this increase has taken place, women’s involvement in crime is still significantly lower than that of males.

A historical examination of women and young girls detained in reformatories in South Africa between 1889 and 1932 reveals that these girls were sent to reformatories and houses of corrections. These reformatories were designed for and created for the rehabilitation of destitute white girls who were neglected by their parents. However, more and more African girls were also sent to these institutions as their criminality increased. Although there was a minority of delinquent girls in the then SA prisons, Chisholm (1990:293) states that white and black girls housed in these reformatories were described as more “fierce and resistant” than delinquent boys. Thus the level of violence by these girls was in contrast to the societal view norms of females being passive in nature. The official reasons attributed to the violent behaviour of these girls were, that such girls are “feebleminded and thus prone to irrational
behaviour and that the absence of punishment encouraged collective resistance which underpinned violence as a source of masturbation and lesbianism” (O’Brien, 1982:141).

Such explanations therefore called for the mental examination of these girls by psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers after which some would be referred to mental institutions or a suitable punishment for them would be recommended. By these means of mental evaluations, poverty as a cause of female criminality was also linked to behavioural traits such as low intelligence. These young girls were also seen to be sexually active and signs of mental defects were more prominent among them. Even though black and white females were housed in the similar reformatories, the majority were black girls. Chisholm (1990:23) points out that these black girls and women were seen as a source of corruption and disease. The use of display of their sexuality through prostitution was viewed as an icon which led them to committing deviant or immoral behaviour. Thus black girls in these reformatories were symbolic of their social order while among white girls offending was attributed to an “abandonment of their allegiance to civilisation”. Indeed white girls were seen as a threat to white dominance that would result in the deterioration of the white race (Chisholm, 1990:23). Hence they were held with their close associates namely black girls, who were deemed out of control.

The statistics on female offending between 1926 and 1934 were considerably lower. Between 1926 and 1934 an average of eight White, one Asian and 77 African (black and coloured girls) were committed to reformatories on a yearly basis (Prisons Department, Annual Reports, 1926-1934). The vast majority of African girls (black and coloured girls) were committed for crimes such as theft, stock theft and housebreaking with intent to steal, poisoning, murder, assault, arson, desertion from employment and trespassing. While white girls, were most likely detained for offences of a sexual nature such as prostitution, theft and interracial sex. Thus, white girls were punished for their deceitfulness of the white community while black girls were punished for the violation of pass laws, (since carrying a pass during the apartheid era was required from black people who were found loitering in urban areas) and property related offences.

During the apartheid era in South Africa, hardly any analysis of female offending took place, as there was only a vague description of the role of women, black women in particular, during the struggle. In this regard, Cherry (2007:300) mentions that the imprecise role of women was portrayed in cases where women were described as victims of apartheid laws, such as the pass laws mentioned above. Strategies that embraced the women as victims or passive victims were introduced and manifested in women, seen as supporting their children during violent conflicts, providing food and health care for their children, to that of women carrying stones and even participating in physical fights (Cherry, 2007:300).

It is interesting to note that the few who did participate in physical fights, adopted the male identity of young warriors. They were teenage girls, often high school students who had not yet begun to identify themselves as “mothers” or in a nurturing or supportive role. Instead they saw themselves as combatants, and were willing to adopt masculine identities and images in order to play an active role in the unfolding struggle. One such young woman was the late Comrade Pamela:

“Pamela, she would dress like a boy, she can identify with boys. If you looked at her face, she was very beautiful, you would know this is a girl, but she would
dress like a boy, wearing a cap, that old jacket of hers and she would look like a boy (Cherry, 2007:308)\textquotedblright.

Not being included in either the armed units like MK (Umkhonto WeSizwe) or the informal military structure of the Amabutho (an African name referring to the gathering of women), these women were prepared to go beyond peaceful picketing, even attacking councillors with rotten tomatoes. When necessary, they were prepared to engage in physical battle in localised feuding. In these fights, older women were reportedly at the front line of the fights as they were armed with big swords to fight against the then apartheid regime (Cherry, 2007:310). There were reported occurrences where young women were involved in the burning of buildings, necklacing (this entailed hanging a tyre over a person who was accused of being a spy, with petrol and setting it alight), as well as burning of homes of women who were suspected of being informers or alleged to have “slept with the enemy”. (Cherry, 2007:123).

Though limited in scope, the involvement of women in crime during the apartheid years, portrays a picture of women who would be involved in public order crimes such as disturbing the peace. Some of the reasons for this limited scope on female offending might be linked to the lack of statistical evidence on female criminality during this era. In this regard, Duvenage (2002:22) points out that even though most prisons were not exclusively for political prisoners, admission records and registers of these offenders are difficult to access. The apartheid government did not distinguish between political and other offenders. Furthermore, the administrative conditions under which prisons filed documents were less than desirable and could not allow for the retrieval of adequate data. Furthermore it is reported that some documents were held “in rooms that allowed for moisture, in light and humid conditions and was extremely disorganised” (Duvenage, 2002:22). Consequently, some of this data was destroyed while some was transferred to various prisons for storage and/or some to the archives.

While the numbers of female offenders remain low in comparison to males, the effect of imprisonment is markedly harsher on women than on men. Research conducted by Sheehan, et al (2007:xv) indicates that the incarceration of women has far reaching consequences for minority ethnic, black and aboriginal women who represent the majority of female prison populations in countries such as Canada, Australia, the UK as well as the USA. The reasons put forward by these researchers are, in the first place, that few programmes are available to address their specific needs and that functionaries are mostly white, and have a limited understanding of the cultural backgrounds of these offenders (Sarri 2007:1). The same should apply to South African female offenders as well, where cultural and ethnic differences should be taken into account.

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research approach was utilised, in order to gain a first-hand, holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Simmons, 2009:131). Research procedures stipulated for exploratory studies which aim at exploring a phenomena that has no guiding framework and to measure its extent was used in this study (Cresswell,2006:76). A purposive sampling technique was used. The sample consisted of 32 black female offenders incarcerated in South African correctional institutions who volunteered to participate in the study. The study was conducted in 2009 and the sample consisted of black female offenders who volunteered to participants in the study. These research participants were selected from two Gauteng correctional centres.
This study used qualitative data analysis procedures identified by Bernard and Ryan (2009:54) as studying transcripts, consolidating field notes taken during the interview and extracting common themes from the data. When thematic categories were applied to all the transcripts, it is necessary to consider the range of perspectives for each theme (De Vos 2005:272). As such, sections of verbatim text were extracted from their original context and regrouped according to themes. The researcher also translated some themes into the research participants’ own language and made use of cross-validation to ensure that the information received from the research participants were correct.

DISCUSSION

This paper explores the nature of the black female offender in South Africa. In particular, it provides information on the demographic profile of black female offenders; the nature of their offences as well as factors contributing to their incarceration. The women’s narratives concerning their criminality and their lives are depicted in the interpretations of their situations. Analysis of these narratives allowed the researcher to discern possible variances and nuances of their own motivations regarding their crimes.

Demographic profile

In general, there is an early onset of incarceration for female offenders (Barry, 2007:23). In Scotland, for example, the onset of female offending is at the age of 16 years followed by roughly two thirds under the age of 30 and a fifth under the age of 21 (McIvor, 2004:147). The current study revealed that 47% research participants fell within the age group under 30, followed by 25% research participants between the ages of 31 to 35. None of the research participants were under 16 years of age. A majority (84%) of these female offenders cited South Africa as their country of birth and origin. This is in contradiction with research conducted by Joseph (2006:17) and Sarri (2007:5) who revealed that most women incarcerated in England and Wales are foreign born nationals. Only 13% of the research participants in the current study came from the neighbouring African countries such as Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Research also reveals that female offenders were likely to have had some schooling and to have completed primary school. However, very few completed their high school education (Haffejee et al 2006:3). Results of this study indicate that eight or (25%) of the research participants had obtained their high school qualification, followed by 16% with a Grade 10 and 16% Grade 8 to 9. Interestingly, 16% of the research participants reported that they had obtained a National Diploma in a wide range of skills from secretarial to business related courses. Furthermore, 4% of the research participants also revealed that they were currently enrolled in an open learning distance education institution in South Africa with the aim to complete a Bachelors Degree. Despite these findings, 9% of the research participants had never been to school while 9% had only completed primary school education. This poor level of education may explain why the majority of female offenders (about 62%) in Haffejee et al’s (2006:np) survey came from deprived economic backgrounds with 50 percent of this number reportedly having had no income before incarceration or having earned less than R500-00 per month.

Research conducted in Haffejee et al’s (2006: np) study revealed that 45 percent of the female offenders included in their survey described themselves as breadwinners in their households prior to their incarceration. These results are in line with the current study, as 63% of the research participants cited that they had been breadwinners before detention. However, 31% of these research participants mentioned that they were unemployed at the time of the arrest. It is not clear whether they provided for their families from the proceeds of
crime. It can be interpreted that for some of these women, crime was a means of an income to provide for their families. Thirty seven percent (37%) of the research participants were self employed (i.e. selling brooms and clothes on the street) or employed as tour guides, entrepreneurs, journalists and hairdressers, while 6% were students.

In addition to the employment status of the female offenders in the current study, 81% of the research participants cited that they were single (never married) prior to their incarceration. Of these research participants, 69% reported that they had children prior to the arrest and detention. These children were being taken care of or looked after by among others, family relatives (25%); sixteen percent (16%) are in the care of grandparents and twelve percent (12%) are reportedly with the guardians who would be the biological mothers of the research participants. Only three percent of the research participants reported that their children were being looked after by the child’s biological father. Twelve percent (12%) of the research participants who had more than one child, ranging from two to five children per female inmate and they indicated that the children were left alone at home, while 6% of the female offenders did not know where their children were residing while they were incarcerated. This could be attributed to the Correctional Services Amendment Act No 25 of 2008 which came into effect on the 1st of October 2009 which stipulated that “that only children who are under the age of two can be allowed to be incarcerated or looked after by the mother during incarceration”. The Act further states that the best interest of the child principle should take precedence and that upon admission of the mother, the Department of Correctional Services as well as the Department of Social Development should facilitate the placement of the child (CSPRI, 2009).

Nature of offences
As stated earlier, female offenders represent only a small proportion of the total inmate population in most counties. In this regard, McIvor (2004:147); McIvor (2007:3) also note that the patterns of female offending differ quite significantly from male offenders. These researchers hold that women are more often convicted of minor offences such as theft from people and shops; failure to pay television licences; common assault as well as fraud. In respect of the current study, shoplifting was the most common offence for which the majority of the women were convicted (25% of the research participants). Nineteen percent (19%) were convicted for theft and twelve percent (12%) were held for fraud. On the contrary, research conducted by Haffejee et al (2006: np) revealed that more than one in three women (38 %) in the three prisons included in their survey, had been convicted for murder or attempted murder making this the most common offence that South African women are found guilty of. Women also seem to have lower rates of involvement in serious; violent and white-collar crime such as embezzlement and corruption. However, in this study, 12% of women were incarcerated for drug trafficking, while only 3% of the research participants were incarcerated for murder and 3% for robbery respectively. Notwithstanding these findings, the statistical representation of women incarcerated in South African correctional centres indicates that more women are imprisoned for property offences. Not surprisingly then, due to the fact that more women in the current study were incarcerated for shoplifting and theft related offences, their sentences were short. Thirty seven percent of the female offenders were serving sentences of less than a year with the average time spent in the correctional centre equaling 6 months. This is in line with international research conducted in countries such as Canada (McCurthen; 2003:245) as well as New Zealand (Lash, 2006:113).

This brief analysis of the nature of crime as well as sentences being served by female offenders seems to suggest that female offending is less serious than male offending. The
following section focuses on some of the reasons cited by research participants for their involvement in offending and subsequent incarceration.

**Contributing factors to incarceration**

The explanation for female offending can be approached by referring to the broad features of women’s structural positions and lifestyles in society. Indeed much attention has been paid to identifying these as well as other factors that may be related to female offending. For example, in the UK, socio-economic factors (such as low social class; low family income; poor housing and a large family size) and child-rearing practices (such as low levels of praise by parents; harsh or erratic discipline; poor parental supervision and absence or lack of a biological father’s interest in the child’s upbringing) were found to be predictors of offending among women (Farrington & Painter 2004:24).

As the current study was exploratory in nature, an understanding of the women’s involvement in crime could be gained from the examination of their educational, employment, economic circumstances as well as their backgrounds of abuse. As much as 87% of the women in the current study cited financial difficulties and they linked “stresses and strains” that go hand in hand with childcare responsibilities as one of the main reasons for committing their offences. As mentioned earlier, most of these female offenders were single, breadwinners and had children before incarceration. An inference that can be drawn here is that financial difficulties are associated with their offending. When research participants were asked to complete the following questions: “I would not be in prison today if I...” the following pattern emerged:

- “was desperate for shoes”
- “had an education and I could work for my child”
- “had a job and was well-paid”
- “to put food for my child on the table”

Research participants were also asked to provide their opinions on “why do women end up in prison”. Their responses were:

- “lack of money and lack of independence”
- “to sort out problems, women suffer as they are breadwinners, even if the father of the children left them, as a mother you have to look after your children”
- “not getting financial assistance from spouses and unemployment”

Despite the various strides for the economic empowerment of women in SA, unemployment together with the consequent financial strains on women seem to contribute to black female offending. A survey examining women and unemployment in South Africa in 2007 revealed that of the 17,566 women interviewed, 75.5% of black women were unemployed, 70.8% were unmarried and 44.6% of black women had either primary or secondary schooling (Mahlwele, 2007:45). A cross reference to the nature of crimes and the female offenders’ employment history in the current study, revealed that women who were unemployed, with less formal education, were largely convicted of shoplifting and theft related offences. The legacy of apartheid where more black women were and are still employed as domestic workers or in less professional jobs could be a justification for this point (Keswell & Poswell, 2002:35). Furthermore, Mahlwele’s (2007:46) also noted how the cultural beliefs, norms and practices among black communities, with an emphasis on the domesticity of women
(women’s role in the kitchen) contributed to higher levels of unemployment among black women.

Women who had obtained more formal and higher qualifications, such as a Grade 12 and/or National Diploma were convicted of fraud as well as drug trafficking. It should also be noted that the women who committed fraud differed significantly from the drug traffickers For example, 9% of the research participants who were convicted for fraud mentioned “greed” as one of the reasons for the commission of crime. Despite these justifications, Mahlwele (2007:46) also noted that even though more and more black women have attained higher qualifications, enrolment at higher institutions of learning reveals that the majority of black women opted for secretarial skills, technical studies instead of enrolment in engineering related fields. Indeed one might refer to these vulnerabilities as indirect pathways towards crime (McIvor 2004:26).

Another recurring theme throughout this research was the fact that many female offenders were both victims and offenders. The survey conducted by Haffejee et al (2006:4) also revealed that women in SA correctional centres had experienced significantly higher rates of childhood rape and violence in their intimate relationships than women in the general population. These researchers however do not elaborate on the history: occurrence or experience of abuse by these female offenders. The results of this study revealed that these women had been the direct victims of physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as a combination of the three forms of abuse. Of the 32 women interviewed, 50% of the women reported that they had been subjected to physical, emotional and psychological abuse during childhood and in adulthood. In response to a question of “why do women end up in prison?”, three research participants mentioned the following:

- “I had been raped by my husband”;
- “I had suffered physical, emotional, financial and poverty at home”
- “My father used to physically beat me and my siblings whenever he was drunk, which was usually around month-end when he had money”.

Most women in the study also reported that various types of victimisation (s) had taken place throughout their lives (as children, teenagers and adults). This abuse usually occurred on a daily basis (16% of the research participants) and on a weekly basis (22% of the research participants).

It is for these reasons that one can argue, that criminal justice practitioners need to focus more on the immediate direct link to the crime of an individual offender. They should consider the psychological processes involved; as well as influences and social circumstances; broad social and individual factors which may contribute to offending and which may put female offenders on a pathway to offending and recidivism. These sources of crime need to be targeted as well as any motivations arising from particular situations such as stress or other reasons. It may also be argued that the need to address these underlying issues is fundamental to any attempts to reduce female offending.

CONCLUSION

To understand the phenomenon of black female criminality in South Africa, the researcher compiled a profile of a small sample of black female offenders and contributed to a limited extent to an understanding of the nature and pathways to black female offending. Recognising the importance of women’s roles as mothers, provides an opportunity for the
criminal justice system, medical and mental health; legal and social service agencies to develop specialised programmes and treatment interventions for women. An understanding of the black female offender’s life experiences in South Africa and the consequences of these experiences may inform and shape appropriate policy and operational as well as programmatic responses to women offenders. This study indicates that black women offenders are non-violent and their crimes are typically less threatening to community safety. These female offenders’ pathways to crime involve survival efforts that result from poverty and economic marginalisation. Future research, with more representative samples is however necessary to understand the phenomena in (SA) South Africa. Such research could identify the risk related to female offending and also their needs in order to align rehabilitation efforts, thus reducing the rate of recidivism.

LIST OF REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY


