



# Education and crime engagement in South Africa: A national and provincial perspective



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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between crime and education were explored within the South African context from a national and provincial perspective. Drawing from 2001 census data, the inmate and the general population were compared to determine predictors of criminal engagement. With the second dataset on maximum security prisoners in the province of Free State, we explored whether education can predict the type of crime. While education does not delineate crime types in the Free State province, the completion of Grade 12 decrease the likelihood of being incarcerated. Thus, pointing at the potential effect of education in reducing crime.

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## 1. Introduction

South Africa's apartheid history created a polarized society, which has not been adequately addressed in the post-apartheid period as the country experienced a deepening of inequality and poverty (Callinicos, 1996). The doctrine of apartheid was reflected in South African schools, where its effect was particularly pernicious as the Bantu Education Act (No. 47) of 1953 widened the fissures in educational opportunities, by enforcing sub-standard education for dissimilar racial groups (Du Plooy et al., 2014). As a result, the disparity in education between white and other racial clusters widened (Biko, 2013). The pupil-teacher ratio in white primary schools, for example, was close to 1:18 compared to 1:39 in black schools where less than 15 percent of teachers were certified (Byrnes, 1996). Another phenomenon which became obvious after the fall of the apartheid government, and the apparently peaceful transition to a democratic regime, was the rise

of crime and violence that have been plaguing South African communities for many years (Louw, 1997). Crime rates appears to be a gauge of the dichotomized South African society and its high levels of social exclusion and marginalization (Palmary, 2001). As such, crime tends to increase during periods of political transition coupled with instability and violence (Schönteich and Louw, 2001). Breetzke et al. (2014) claimed that the post-apartheid surge in crime is a natural occurrence in transitional societies and has been observed in the collapse of the socialist system in Central and Eastern Europe and throughout Latin America as well as the former Soviet Union.

As such, Seedat et al. (2009) indicated that violence and related injuries were the second primary cause of death in South Africa. The main reasons for the widespread violence are economic in nature and related to poverty – primarily attributed to unemployment – and income inequality (Fajnzylber et al., 2002). Other explanatory factors include the patriarchal system encouraging violent and perilous behaviors such as the abuse of alcohol and relatively free access to firearms, but also weak parenting which was widespread during the apartheid era as male labor migration was the rule and many children did not grow up in the same household as their fathers (Richter et al., 2010). Beyond the sheer numbers of robberies, violated properties, injured, traumatized,

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and deceased inhabitants, the socio-economic costs of crime have been taking their toll on the country. In the 2013 financial year R108.9 billion<sup>1</sup> were spent on public order and safety which included R73.4 billion on police services, R18.7 billion on correctional services and R16.8 billion on the criminal justice systems, i.e., law courts (National Treasury, 2013). Many governmental interventions have been targeting strict law enforcement which underscores reforms of the criminal justice system (Rauch, 2002). However, the prevention of crime has been lacking the cross-sectorial approach (Seedat et al., 2009) that would be needed. Some researchers such as Brown (2001) have been emphasizing the absence of education, as a clear determinant of crime, in the crime prevention action plan (Department of Safety and Security, 1996). The action plan is premised on the 1996 National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) and the 1998 White Paper on Safety and Security (Rauch, 2002). Four pillars of crime prevention were identified, namely, re-engineering the criminal justice system, reducing crime through environmental design, community values and education and trans-national crime (Newham, 2005). However, the education pillar does not involve formal education but refers to harnessing community participation in crime prevention.

Pursuant to crime prevention is the question of why crime occurs in the first place. Newham (2005) noted that crime is linked to social, economic and demographic dynamics. Waller and Sansfacon (2000) indicated that crime is influenced by a large number of factors relating to poverty and inadequate housing, insufficient parental/guardian supervision, limited social or cognitive abilities, family violence, a paucity of employment opportunities, economic exclusion and exclusion from the formal education system. A growing body of literature assumes that criminal engagement is related to educational disengagement (i.e., exiting the education system without obtaining a formal qualification). To this end Lochner (2004) contends that educational attainment in conjunction with skills development fosters not only formal labor market proficiency, but also increases employability and income as well as it socializes individuals so that they prefer not to engage in crime. Studying the relationship between education and crime, Machin and Meghir (2004) indicated that the prevalence of crime increases in conjunction with unemployment rates and decreases with wage increases. Dixon (2008) points to lack of income which is correlated to education and access to employment. Jumani et al. (2011), establishing a link between criminal engagement and poverty, argue that individuals engage in crime to generate income needed to satisfy their basic needs. Likewise Lewis (2006) hypothesized that crime is more prevalent within the lower socio-economic strata and that many engage in crime due to insufficient economic means mostly caused by low levels of education. Blanco and Villa (2008) found that for Mexico wage inequality and labor force participation had an important impact on crime prevalence.

Groot and Van den Brink (2010) investigating the effects of education on crime in the Netherlands concluded that the probability to commit theft and violent crimes decreased with years of education, although what increases with years of education is the probability to commit white-collar crimes. Additionally, criminality tends to be higher in areas with a more elevated density of less educated individuals (Groot and Van den Brink, 2010). To this end, Breetzke (2012) indicated that the apartheid policy instigated socio-spatial redesign that not only racialized South African cities, but also led to the concentration of the majority black citizens in segregated geographical areas. According to Breetzke (2012) these macro-social policies can be

used to explain the magnitude and extent of crime in the post-apartheid era.

The racial disparity in income, unemployment trends, or intergenerational transmission of inequality cannot be explained as such without taking the role of education into consideration (Anderson et al., 2001). Education is the most important determinant of human capital formation (Conrad, 2011), in conjunction with health and training. Nussbaum (2011) identifies education among the central functional human capabilities that can lead to individual well-being. By the same token, Gough (2003) recognizes that education contributes to personal autonomy and constitutes the most basic human need that is to be satisfied before the achievement of other valued goals. Hence, the expansion of access to formal education has been among the primary goals of many developing economies, including South Africa, which is characterized by skills scarcity (Yabuuchi and Chaudhuri, 2009) and disparity.

Anderson et al. (2001) confirm that in the South African context education lies at the foundation of many societal ills. During the apartheid era (which was based on the “Verwoerd Model of Segregated Institutions” that underscored separate development), access to services delivery and education were divided along racial and gender lines (Elliott, 2005). Not only were the majority of black South Africans denied the right to education but they were also excluded from participating in the labor market (Calderhead, 2011). The socio-political changes as result of the abolishment of the apartheid regime have been accompanied by considerable changes in the South African education system (Elliott, 2005). The most noteworthy changes subsume the desegregation of the school system, the development of a National Qualification Framework, the promulgation of new language policies for education and the implementation of outcome-based curricula (Vandeyar and Killen, 2007). Although, these changes have been driven by the then newly elected governments’ desire to “redress past injustice in educational provision” (Department of Education, 1996: 1), it has not necessarily resulted in noticeable changes at classroom level (Vandeyar and Killen, 2003).

Despite the importance of education and the declared aim of expanding access to formal education in South Africa, the 2011 census (Statistics South Africa, 2012) indicated that 51% of the 20–24 year olds had not completed the 12th grade of formal education (or had dropped out of secondary education without matriculation). Additionally, 27% of individuals aged 5–24 years were not attending any formal educational institution any more in 2013. The main reasons given for exiting the formal education system without obtaining a qualification by the general household survey were lack of monetary provision (25%), poor school performance (17%), and 12% indicated that they discontinued school as a result of family responsibilities. It should also be noted that 16% of individuals in South Africa can be categorized as functionally illiterate, referring to individuals who either received no formal schooling at all or did not complete grade 7 (Statistics South Africa, 2014).

Notwithstanding the importance of education, the violent nature of South Africa, and its rampant crime rates, there is a paucity of research investigating the influence of education on crime in the South African context. A possible reason for the aforementioned might be as a result of the empirical challenges when studying the effect of education on criminal activity which relates to the unobserved characteristics affecting schooling decisions which are likely to be correlated to unobserved mediator variables influencing the decision to engage in criminality (Lochner and Moretti, 2004).

In light of the previous discussion the contention of this study is that the exclusion of almost two-thirds of the South African population from the labor market has resulted in chronic poverty

<sup>1</sup> Equivalent to approximately 8 billion USD (based on the exchange rate on September 8, 2014).

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