

APPLYING RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY-BASED REHABILITATION: THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Namibia, implementation of the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy, principally founded on the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model, has resulted in remarkable differences in offender behaviour during confinement, in turn positively impacting the delivery of programming and other correctional services to offenders. The primary goal of the strategy is to gear offenders towards successful reintegration following release, ultimately promoting public safety. However, the implementation of scientific and evidence-based approaches presents various challenges, particularly to resource-deficient nations like Namibia, where various social factors impinge on efforts to rehabilitate offenders. The paper shares the Namibian experience in introducing its correctional strategy in its correctional facilities, highlighting the contextual challenges experienced and the strategies implemented to mitigate them. The paper also highlights the benefits noted with implementing its risk-and-need-based correctional strategy.

II. BACKGROUND

Recognizing that the provision of scientific and evidence-based rehabilitation of offenders is key to desistance and ensuring public safety, the Namibian Correctional Service, being the custodian of both institutionalized and community-based offenders in the country and having the responsibility to ensure their rehabilitation and successful reintegration, in 2012 officially inaugurated its Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy.

The Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy guides all operations relating to offender management, control, rehabilitation and reintegration, promoting a safe and conducive correctional environment and ensuring the reduction of recidivism. Essentially, it recognizes the individuality of each offender in terms of the factors that may have precipitated their offending, the risks they may present for future offending, the needs they may have to address their criminogenic factors, and in terms of their motivation to address their needs and work towards changing their lifestyles.

With that ideology, the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy aims to identify the individual risk factors of offenders in order to manage them more effectively according to their individual risk profiles.

The Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy is brought to life by multiple components, which mutually interact towards effective offender rehabilitation and

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reintegration:

A. Objective Risk/Needs Assessment and Security Classification of Offenders

Risks/needs assessment is the foundation for implementing the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy.

Starting soon after admission, identifying the factors that were/are most involved in the criminal behaviour of an offender is embarked on through objective risk/needs assessment. The process necessitates assessment instruments that can identify the right factors leading to a comprehensive criminal profile of an offender that documents the precipitating factors to the offence (e.g., emotional state and attitudes at the time, influences from others, contribution of alcohol or drug use, problems with anger, low ability for problem-solving, impulsivity, etc.).

A properly completed criminal profile provides direction on repeated patterns of behaviour that the individual offender may have learned, and needs to unlearn. Together with a more general and systematic risk/needs assessment of the offender, a picture is painted of what the offender can work on in attempting to change their behaviour during their period in custody. Assessment is continued throughout the offender's period of incarceration and enables gradual changing of the offender's security status from one level of security to another.

B. Correctional Treatment Planning

The understanding generated of the offender's risks/needs informs a plan of action where the correctional service can assist the offender to address their needs. This plan of action is a detailed outline of the steps the offender can take, both in the shorter-term and in the longer-term to begin to address their areas of difficulty and improve their chances of successful reintegration. It is specific in outlining who will do what, with what aims, over what time frame, and with what other supports. Progress in pursuing the plan is monitored throughout the sentence, with attention paid to evidence of success in achieving the set objectives.

C. Case Management

Case Management is the process that takes place to help offenders execute their individualized correctional treatment plan.

Primary responsibility to help support and guide the offender in this respect rests with an individual correctional officer, assigned the role of Case Management Officer, though other correctional staff also assist with their observation and analysis of the offender's behaviour on an on-going basis.

Through regular interaction and the provision of supportive and directive counselling, the Case Management Officer gets to know the offender, and their style, habits and patterns of behaviour. More than just being someone who responds to complaints, the Case Management Officer plays the role of being a mentor to the offender, someone who consistently directs and redirects the offender towards ways of achieving their life goals, changing their attitudes and benefiting most from the experience of incarceration.

D. Effective Programme Development and Delivery

The efficacy of the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy hinges, in the end, on the availability and quality of programmes and services to assist offenders.

In line with the responsivity principle, the Namibian Correctional Service ensures that its programmes respond to the characteristics and needs of its offender population, taking the prevailing risk factors and the personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the offenders into account.

Programmes are tailor-made to, and respond to, the Namibian population, realities and environment. Where programmes that are developed elsewhere are used, they are subjected to a rigorous process of adaptation and domestication.

E. Unit Management

Unit Management is a generally accepted model in modern correctional practice that aims to cluster offenders into smaller, more manageable groupings within a larger correctional setting (usually groups of about 80 to 120 offenders) so that there can be more effective deployment of active, dynamic security as an alternative to only passive, static security.

The notion is that offender rehabilitation is better achieved through an environment that facilitates interaction between correctional officers and offenders wherein there is direct supervision on a human-to-human level rather than simply the guarding and disciplining of offenders.

The Unit Management model enables professional relationship-building between correctional staff members and offenders and works more effectively within an ideal architectural and physical structure designed to accommodate it and also works more effectively when there is an appropriate compliment of trained and qualified officers performing various roles.

III. APPLICATION OF THE RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY MODEL THROUGH THE OFFENDER RISK MANAGEMENT CORRECTIONAL STRATEGY

Predominantly based on the risk-need-responsivity model, the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy is premised on the firm belief that offenders are capable of changing. However, it is believed that this change is more likely to happen when programming is based on scientific and evidence-based practices.

In line with the risk principle, programme interventions are provided based on individual offender needs since different factors underlie the offending of different individuals. Correspondingly, offenders undergo thorough assessments to reliably differentiate low-risk from high-risk offenders, and high-risk offenders are then prioritized in accessing the most intensive rehabilitation programmes.

Furthermore, in its appreciation of the reality that there are many factors that can be used to explain offending behaviour, the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy recognizes the need for a multitude of interventions covering a range of offender needs such as substance use management, education, vocational training, psycho-education, etc.

Thus, the Namibian Correctional Service essentially provides an assortment of rehabilitation programmes and activities to offenders on the basis of their needs, prioritizing the most intensive cognitive-behavioural-based programmes for offenders who are assessed as posing a significant risk of (violent) reoffending. This is in line with the risk principle that states that the intensity of services given to offenders must be calibrated to the amount of risk that they pose.

Where programmes are based on the cognitive-behavioural model, their aim is to help offenders detach from their antisocial tendencies by providing them with extensive opportunity to practice, rehearse and pattern more prosocial behaviour.

The Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy responds to the inference drawn from the responsivity principle that treatment interventions are to consider personal strengths and weaknesses such as the motivation and individual learning styles of offenders, as well as various other barriers to meaningful programme participation.

Thus, offenders who may not be in a position to gainfully participate in intensive cognitive-behavioural-model-based rehabilitation programmes, due to factors such as low motivation, are encouraged to participate in less intensive support cognitive-behavioural-based rehabilitation activities prior to participation in the core cognitive-behavioural-based programmes. Furthermore, as expounded on further in this document, when grouping offenders into these programmes, due consideration is paid to their personalities, cognitive styles, language and literacy abilities and other personal characteristics. Programme Officer qualities are also attended to as a means to enhance responsivity to the programmes.

IV. THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCE IN APPLYING THE RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY PARADIGM

Since embarking on basing its rehabilitation strategy on modern correctional models (risk-need-responsivity) over a decade ago, the Namibian Correctional Service has learned that transforming to evidence-based correctional practice is a mammoth undertaking requiring substantial resources, both human and non-human, in order to attain set standards.

For example, most of Namibia's correctional facilities are old structures inherited from the colonial era, and the infrastructure was largely custody oriented and was established to serve the specific needs of the colonial and apartheid ideology. Although some of its correctional facilities were constructed after the country's independence, they did not conform to the design and structural requirements of the Unit Management principle.

It, therefore, follows that significant modifications to the infrastructure had to be undertaken to accommodate the Unit Management concept. However, getting all the targeted facilities to the required standard has been a taxing endeavour owing to resource constraints. Work still needs to be done on a number of facilities to get them to meet the correct specifications, whereas plans exist to replace some correctional facilities with newly constructed ones.

The partitioning of facilities into smaller functional segments in place of the large sections that previously accommodated an average of 500 offenders means that correctional facilities now have smaller units of different security classifications accommodating the

sentenced offenders. This has resulted in notable rehabilitative and security benefits as correctional officers are now better able to monitor and interact with offenders, which, in turn, allows them to more effectively address the needs of offenders and also easily detect and swiftly react to potential risks posed by offenders.

Furthermore, implementation of the Risk-Need-Responsivity-based approach brought to light the necessity of comprehensive and accurate documentation of offender behaviour and occurrences as well as quality information about their backgrounds and criminal histories, the nature and circumstances of their offending, their needs and problems, strengths and potential, etc., all of which feed into a proper analysis of risk.

The Namibian Correctional Service has learned that without comprehensive information on an offender's criminal and social history, or on the particulars of their offence, it becomes very challenging to conduct a proper analysis of risk. This has a bearing on the identification of the offender's needs for rehabilitation. Lack of quality data also has a bearing on the correct identification of offender requirements for successful reintegration as well the accurate analysis of outstanding risks at the time of release into society. Furthermore, lack of data makes it impossible to measure growth and successes of the rehabilitation efforts.

This has been resolved by the implementation of a comprehensive electronic offender information management system in 2015, which is used to record, monitor and evaluate offender data. The system is undergoing constant improvement, with a module to track security incidences committed by offenders having been added in 2016 and other modifications still ongoing. However, critical ICT equipment shortages are a major setback to the full utilization of the information system and the timely recording of offender data.

Additionally, the experience of the Namibian Correctional Service in implementing its risk-need-responsivity-based correctional strategy is that its efficacy is further impacted by the quality of its workforce. Implementation of the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy has made the Namibian Correctional Service aware that the quality of its risk assessment and related processes was being adversely affected by a lack of suitably qualified and skilled officers. It recognized that a proper Risk-Need-Responsivity Model requires professional staff with good interviewing skills, and the requisite critical analysis and judgment for managing offenders who deny criminal responsibility.

Over the years the Namibian Correctional Service has made significant progress in attaining the appropriately diversified and skilled workforce required to make its offender management strategy work. However, it still has fairly large ground to cover before it has the required levels of staff to make the desired impact, both quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

V. ADAPTATION OF THE RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY MODEL TO THE NAMIBIAN CONTEXT

The socio-economic characteristics of the Namibian population present some challenges that necessitated the correctional service to become creative to ensure that when delivering rehabilitation programmes, the Risk-Need-Responsibility principles are applied in a manner that is sensitive to those complications.

Specifically concerning the delivery of its Cognitive-Behavioural-Therapy-based programme interventions, measures needed to be put in place to ensure they are delivered in a style and manner that best befits the characteristics of its offender population.

Although some challenges are experienced at some correctional facilities to identify sufficient numbers of offenders that meet the criteria for participation in programmes based on their risk factors, this is not a general concern. On the other hand, it is a constant challenge to find offenders who not only qualify for participation in certain rehabilitation programmes by virtue of possessing high risks/needs but are also able to optimally benefit from participation in those programmes based on their language and literacy capabilities.

Despite English being the official language in the country, Namibia is home to a wide diversity of languages, with the native languages being the most widely spoken and understood. While only 1.5 per cent of the country's population have never had formal education,¹ a grave picture is painted within the correctional setting. In November 2020 the country's most populous correctional facility, the Windhoek Correctional Facility, recorded a total of 100 offenders that never had any formal education out of a population of 639 offenders that were assessed. This represents 15.6 per cent of that population.

Expectedly, a considerable number of offenders are unable to gainfully participate in cognitive-behavioural based interventions, because they are unable to comprehend the primary language of delivery of those programmes (English) and are also not able to read or participate in any written group work. Literacy skills are particularly important to be able to benefit from the cognitive-behavioural-based interventions as written assignments are a critical aspect of those programmes.

To allow the programmes to be available to as many offenders as possible, the Namibian Correctional Service decided to include offenders presenting with only one of the barriers (language/illiteracy) in cognitive-behavioural-based programme participation although such offenders would require the Programme Officers to conjointly address the problem of literacy and language while attending to their risk factors.

As a way to promote responsiveness, the cognitive-behavioural-based programmes are delivered in a manner that is mindful of the above-mentioned challenges. For example, since programmes are delivered in English, key concepts are translated into local languages. This approach is supplemented by pairing Programme Officers in a manner that at least one of them is able to communicate in a different local language.

Where comprehension of English is a problem, offenders who speak the same vernacular language are also placed in the same group to make it easier for Programme Officers to translate programme content to them. Offenders who are unable to complete written tasks in English are further encouraged to do so in their vernaculars.

Where difficulties exist to serve an offender due to language barriers, even after the above efforts have been made, such offender can be transferred to another correctional facility that has Programme Officers that are able to communicate with the offender in their vernacular to enable programme participation.

¹ Namibia Statistics Agency. (2011). *Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census Main Report*: Republic of Namibia. <<https://cms.my.na/assets/documents/p19dmn58guram30ttun89rdrp1.pdf>>.

Thus, with thoughtful and attentive delivery, offenders with language or literacy barriers are still able to have their risks and needs addressed through cognitive-behavioural-based programme participation.²

Another aspect of programme delivery introduced in Namibia, which is quite resource intensive, but essential, is that every offender in the group is periodically seen individually by a Programme Officer for a review and support session. These one-to-one sessions have been reported by the Programme Officers to have been very useful and productive, especially for those offenders with English proficiency problems and those experiencing the content of the programmes as cognitively challenging.

As a durable solution to the literacy and language problem, the correctional service has over the last decade redoubled its efforts in revamping and strengthening its educational activities in appreciation of the full importance and relevance of offender education to the success of the delivery of its core rehabilitation programmes.

However, the concentration of efforts on addressing the basic educational needs of offenders is not only done to enable them to benefit from the cognitive-behavioural-based programmes, but also as a rehabilitation effort on its own to address education and employability as risk factors.

In the past, literacy and educational upgrading was provided to offenders mostly based on their expressed interest. However, offenders' literacy and educational levels are now recorded upon admission to correctional facilities, and educational services are now provided more based on need, not just on interest.

VI. EFFICACY OF INTRODUCING THE RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY-MODEL-BASED REHABILITATION STRATEGY IN NAMIBIA

The management of offenders according to their risk profiles has significantly helped the correctional service mitigate the challenge of resource constraints by enabling it to concentrate its scarce resources where they would have the most impact.

As a case in point, the eight correctional facilities that have implemented the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy are classified according to the following security levels: Maximum, Medium, Low-Medium and Minimum. With the focus and intensity of security work (both static and dynamic) varying by level of security, the ratio of the number of offenders and the total number of correctional officers providing security duties in the different units reflect this difference.

For example, fewer officers are deployed in lower security living units, allowing for a larger concentration of staff in the units requiring stricter security. Where one correctional officer (security) is required for every six offenders in a maximum living unit, one correctional officer (security) is required for every ten offenders in a minimum living unit.

² Offenders that present with both literacy and language barriers are not able to participate in cognitive-behavioural-based interventions as they pose double challenges, rendering their responsivity to programming low. Such offenders are first referred to the literacy programme to develop literacy and English competencies, following which they can become eligible to participate in the cognitive-behavioural-based programmes.

Furthermore, fewer infrastructural requirements exist for lower than for higher security level living units. For example, one of the security features of a maximum security unit is that its courtyard needs to be roofed by diamond mesh. On the other hand, no roofed courtyard is required for a minimum security unit. This saves on infrastructure costs that can then be used to tighten up security at higher security units.

In terms of the outcomes of implementing the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy, it is still premature to properly gain appreciation of its efficacy, both in terms of its ability to reduce security incidents within correctional facilities as well as in terms of being an effective approach to reduce recidivism.

Although the implementation of the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy at the Windhoek, Elizabeth Nepemba and Evaristus Shikongo correctional facilities already took place in 2010, 2011 and 2014, respectively, rolling out the strategy to the Windhoek Female, Divundu, Walvis Bay, Hardap and Oluno correctional facilities only took place in 2019. Furthermore, this was done with scant resources, particularly relating to human resources, and with some facilities missing some crucial components of the strategy such as infrastructure conforming to the Unit Management philosophy.

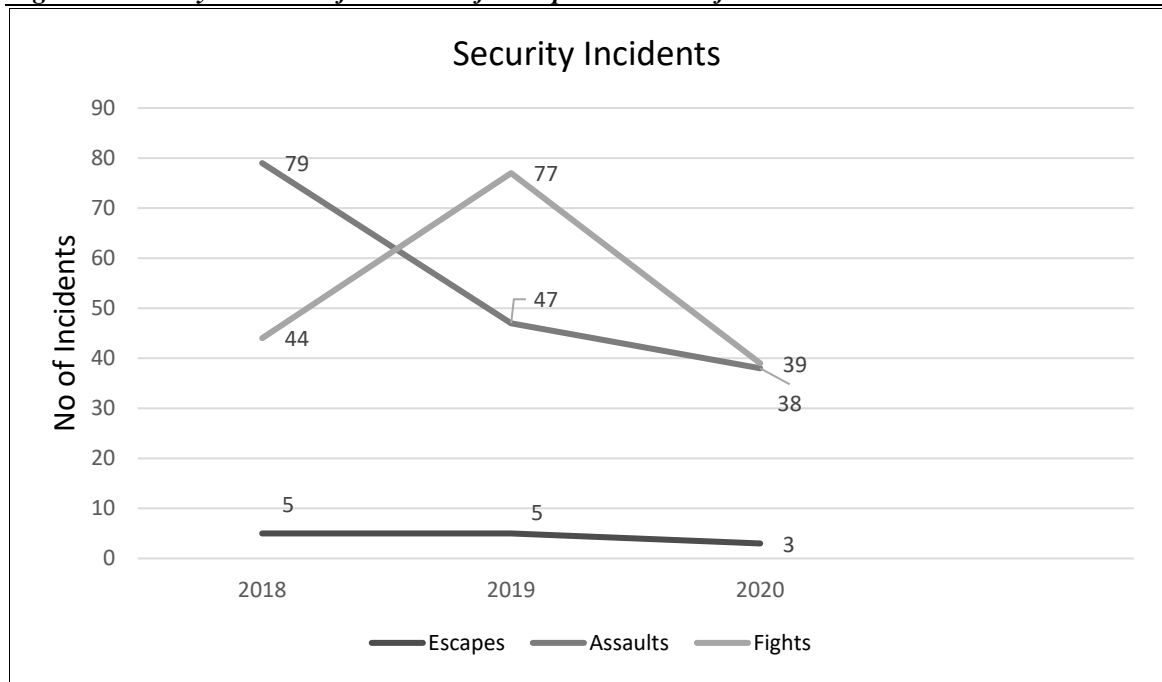
The ability to gain proper perspective of the efficacy of Risk-Need-Responsivity-based rehabilitation in Namibia is compounded by the fact that it is a challenge to find proper data on offender behaviour before the implementation of the electronic offender information management system in 2015/2016. Preliminary data, however, shows some indication that adoption of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model might be promising in so far as its ability to positively influence offender behaviour goes.

Analysis was conducted on the incident trends (escapes, assaults & fights) of the latest four facilities to have implemented the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy to determine if any changes in the frequency of security incidents occurred since their adoption of the strategy. As only a year had passed from the introduction of the strategy to the time of the analysis, comparison could only be made between incidents that had occurred during the year following introduction of the strategy and those that had transpired in the year immediately before as well as the year of implementation of the strategy.³

Figure 1 shows a notable reduction in the occurrence of assaults committed by offenders at the four facilities to have last implemented the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy since its implementation. Although escapes were generally low at those facilities even before introduction of the strategy, a reduction was observed since its implementation. A sharp increase in the occurrence of fights was, however, observed during the year the strategy was implemented and a sharp decline again thereafter. As a result, a pattern between the occurrence of fights and the implementation of the strategy cannot as yet clearly be established at the four correctional facilities.

³ Only the Divundu, Hardap, Walvis Bay and Oluno Correctional Facilities are included in this analysis, because they are the most recent facilities to have implemented the strategy and the incident records of those facilities before their implementation of the strategy were available at the time of this report. In contrast, data on the incidents at the Windhoek, Evaristus Shikongo and Elizabeth Nepemba Correctional Facilities before their implementation of the strategy were not comprehensive, making comparative analyses of the incidents at those facilities before and after implementation of the strategy challenging. Furthermore, although the strategy has been rolled out to eight facilities in total, statistics for the Windhoek Female Correctional facility are usually recorded under those of the Windhoek Correctional Facility.

Figure 1: Security Incidents of Facilities after Implementation of the ORMCS



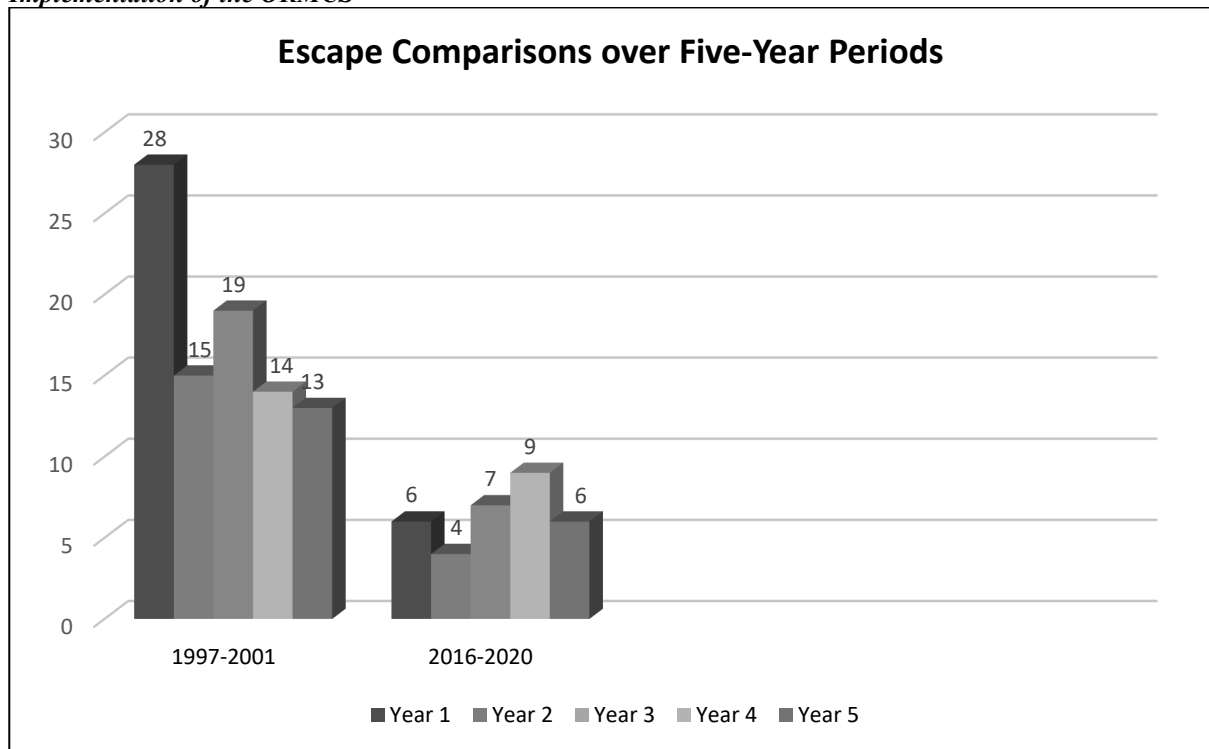
As per *Figure: 2*, offenders in Namibia across all correctional facilities, including those that have not implemented the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy, escaped significantly more before the adoption of the strategy.⁴

In total, 89 escapes occurred from 1997 to 2001,⁵ whereas only about a third of that figure (32) were experienced from 2016 to 2020. Additionally, the highest frequency of escapes experienced in a year over the period 2016-2020 was 9. On the other hand, the highest number of escapes over the period 1997-2001 was 28, with 13 being the lowest number of escapes recorded in a year during that period.

⁴ Separate data focusing only on the facilities that have implemented the strategy is not available. Including correctional facilities that have not implemented the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy in the analysis is possibly likely to undershoot the influence of the strategy on the frequency of escapes.

⁵ The period 1997-2001 was randomly selected to compare with simply due to convenience as comprehensive escape records were available for that period, whereas the data accessible for other years was fragmented. Inconsistencies in reporting formats also made it difficult to compare data between certain periods.

Figure 2: Escapes by Offenders under Custody of the Namibian Correctional Service before and after Implementation of the ORMCS



In December 2016 the Namibian Correctional Service implemented a new Community Supervision framework for the supervision of offenders released conditionally on Full Parole or Remission of Sentence that is aligned to the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy. Since then (December 2016 to December 2020), 7,717 offenders, were released into Community Supervision, of which 223 ended up getting reconvicted of new offences, representing a mere 2.9 per cent of the population.

Although, this aspect relates to the management of offenders outside of confinement, the reality that all offenders released into Community Supervision in Namibia are now being supervised in terms of their individual risk profiles and corresponding needs across the country provides support for the usefulness of Risk-Need-Responsivity-based offender management in reducing reoffending.

Although more research needs to be conducted for conclusive deductions to be drawn regarding the impact of the introduction of the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy on the regulation of offender behaviour during incarceration and, ultimately, on reducing recidivism, the above findings suggest that there are some indications that implementing of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model has shown itself to be effective in managing offender risk in Namibia.

It is recognized that there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that all targeted correctional facilities fully implement all components of the Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy and fully apply it as intended for its benefits of the to be fully realized.

VII. CONCLUSION

Although this paper focused on the approach of the Namibian Correctional Service to manage offender behaviour and reduce recidivism through its application of a Risk-Need-Responsivity Model, the country's strategy to rehabilitate offenders is not limited to the addressing of criminogenic needs.

The Offender Risk Management Correctional Strategy implemented by the Namibian Correctional Service recognizes that offenders have various other needs and concerns that, if not attended to, can also interfere with their desistance from crime.

It, therefore, follows that a range of support programmes and services are also in place to attend to offenders' personal problems and reintegration concerns.

Furthermore, the benefits witnessed so far from implementing the Risk-Need-Responsivity-based model are attributable to the immense material, human resource and financial investments made by the Namibian Correctional Service to ensure the effective implementation of the model, in addition to the development of new policies and the continuous reviewing of old ones to ensure they are aligned to the effective implementation of the model. This is in recognition that all correctional practices, and the correctional climate as a whole, have a bearing on the effective implementation of its strategy, and on the ultimate reduction of recidivism.

Overall, albeit with lots of dedication and innovation, the Namibian experience demonstrates that the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model is an encouraging approach for reducing recidivism, and that it shows itself to be implementable in any context with the right mix of ingredients.