

A Descriptive Profile of Selected Brunei Convicts: Viewpoint

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Abstract

The case study (N = 54) described the participants using biographical attributes (age, type of offenses committed, education, marriage, employment, marital status of parents, repeat offenses, and district of residence) about criminality. Theft and drug-related offenses were first and second top crimes. Youths aged 18-29 were more involved in stealing and rape than older peers. Half of the theft convicts were employed and the other half unemployed before incarceration suggesting common underlying causes for stealing such as low education and low income (or poverty) among participants. Elderly convicts (aged 30-40) were most engaged in drug offenses, incest, and adultery compared to younger counterparts. First and repeat crimes were equally high across the participants' educational level, marital status, and parents' marital status. Most of the crimes were committed in the Brunei-Muara district. The findings call for mental health testing and appropriate interventions for crime perpetrators. Further mixed methods research was recommended.

Keywords: convicts, crimes, re-offending, reintegration, Brunei

1. Introduction

The World Prison Population List (2011) showed that the number of convicts in the whole world was increasing costing governments a lot of money. In the south-central Asian countries, the survey showed that the median rate of imprisonment was 42 while in the rest of Asian countries it was 155.5. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC

(2008), described the percentage of convicts with drug problems ranging from 40% to 80%. Theft cases stood at the highest peak in the whole world with 17.7 million people aged 16 and above being involved in stealing. Although Shariah law (with heavy punishments for stealing, drug trafficking and sex offending) was introduced in Brunei in 2013, crime continues to be a source of concern. The prison population in Brunei is still under-researched and rarely reported or published in major journals. It is hoped that the present study will shed insights on this population.

Conceptual Framework

In this section, the author explains why some concepts are avoided throughout the text of the present study while others are used frequently. Both of these decisions are based on research (Miethe & Meier, 1994; Garofalo, 1986). This was done to effectively capture and enhance the message disseminated in the article. For instance, the term “offender(s)” as used in its present tense was not used because it implied that the person(s) referred to was (were) still offending or committing crimes. Another terminology that was avoided in the current study is “inmates” as it suggested that the people or participants were held against their will. Examples of people held against their will would include persons in a mental health facility or psychiatric ward of a hospital who lack functional ability for self-care. The participants in the present study were tried, prosecuted and convicted criminals by courts of law and found guilty. In view of this, the article refers to participants in the study as convicts rather than “prisoners” or “detainees”. A detainee is a person who is arrested and held in police custody while awaiting trial and prosecution. On the other hand, the terms “prison” and “prisoners” were also avoided for different reasons. Societies and communities negatively view prisons as places of punishment rather than rehabilitation to prepare convicts for re-integration. Based on such negative perceptions, ex-prisoners carry a stigma that hinders effective re-integration. The term “felony” was also not used since it refers to a serious crime that stays permanently on a person’s records. Despite these cautions in terminology, the words “offense” and “crime” are used interchangeably in the present article. None of the participants in the present study was assessed or treated for mental health problems. Hence the term mental health was not used in reference to the group.

Theft, drug and substance use crimes

Stealing was the biggest crime in the world. The Bureau of Justice Statistics Survey (2014) showed that 7% (about 17.6 million persons aged 16 and above in the US) were victims of at least an incident of theft. The transportation hubs were the main places where the robbers were most active. The same report (Bureau of Justice Statistics Survey, 2014) also mentions drug and substance use as the second most prevalent offense in America.

Post-release reentry and reintegration programs

Ex-convicts face a litany of problems including stigma and discrimination due to criminal records. They face rejections from the community, families and some even lose their parental rights (all factors that lead to repeat offending or recidivism). Given this, different post-release reentry and reintegration programs have been tried to help out (see Travis et al, 2001; Rakis, 2005). Visher (2006) argues that there is no consensus as to whether this support program for the ex-convicts is effective in implementing reintegration and curbing

the recidivism rate. Although it was difficult to measure the impact of specific interventions facilitating the convicts' reintegration, there was a need to increase emphasis on promoting an effective aftercare treatment for prisoners. The Intensive After Care Program, IAP (Altschulers, Amrstong, and MacKenzie, 1999) was one of the programs designed to help reintegrate high-risk young offenders after release. However, Weibush et al. (2005) found that the recidivism rate in the 12 months follow-up period did not differ significantly between the IAP treatment and control groups of youths. The serious and violent offender reentry initiative was another example of an intervention program that was tried. According to Lattimore (2007), this collaborative and multiagency project enabled the juveniles and adults to go back to the society. It outlined the needs of the ex-convicts concerning employment, housing, health, education, and self-sufficiency. The effectiveness of this program has not yet been determined.

Previous criminological research on Brunei

Past research of a psychological nature on Brunei had addressed mainly a number of problems such as various disabilities (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2005; Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006; Tait & Mundia, 2012a, b; Haq & Mundia, 2012; Mundia, 2006; Yusuf & Mundia, 2014; Tait & Mundia, 2014; Tait, Mundia, & Fung, 2014; Tait, Mundia, Fung, & Wong, (2014). Besides disability, previous research also examined the mental health concerns of students in the education system (Mundia 2010a; Mundia, 2010b; Mundia 2012a, b; Mundia, 2013; Mundia, 2015). Most of the teaching and learning research on Brunei has focused on a wide range of school subjects including mathematics and Japanese language (Mundia, 1998; Mundia, 2010c; Mundia, 2010d; Mundia, 2007; Mundia, 2009; Mundia, 2011a; Mundia, 2012c; Keaney & Mundia, 2014; Mundia & Metussin, 2019). The training of teachers was also accorded priority by research (e.g. Mundia, 2012d, e; Tait & Mundia, 2012b; Tait & Mundia, 2014). Problems associated with conducting research using Brunei student samples were investigated by two studies (see Mundia & Bakar, 2010; Mundia, 2011b). Issues related to common methods bias in research using Brunei samples were reported in two studies (Mundia, 2019a; Mundia, 2019b). The scarcity of and need for research on crimes in Brunei provided the rationale and justification to conduct the current study.

Objectives of the study

The case study was carried out to describe the participants in the study using selected demographic variables found in their prison records. This information is necessary to provide baseline data for a future large-scale study.

2. Methods

The design, participants, instruments, procedures, and data analysis components of the current study are briefly and separately explained below.

Design

The descriptive case study design was preferred and used because the research involved a small sample (N = 54) from only one of the three prisons in the country. Because of this, the results were only generalized to the participants in the study.

Sample

One of the three prisons in Brunei was randomly selected for participation in the study. All the 200 convicts (sampling frame) in this facility were numbered serially from 1 to 200. Using a table of random numbers, 54 convicts (27%) who had the required demographic details were selected, included in the research, and voluntarily participated in the case study with full consent. Of these, six were females. All of the participants were Bruneian by nationality. Research on Brunei convicts is still scant and it is hoped this small-scale study will shed light on this under-researched population (though in a small and limited way).

Instruments

An 8-item demographic checklist constructed by the researcher was used by a trained prison official to collect biodata from the prison records about each convict's gender, age, educational level, type of crime they committed, marital status, employment background before incarceration, repeat offending, and marital status of the convict's parents. To ensure the reliability of the data, the prison official interviewed the convict to clarify the record whenever and wherever the prison document did not have clear required information on the participant. This involved only one case and no researcher-bias in reporting was observed or detected. In addition, the collection of secondary demographic data from the convicts' prison records did not cause any respondent apprehension. Furthermore, all the data were collected within the prison premises to maximize the study's ecological validity.

Procedures

The present study was supported by the Centre for Advanced Research (CARE) at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Grant No. UBD/PNC2/RG/1(232). The Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah Institute of Education (SHBIE) Research Ethics Committee and the Universiti Brunei Darussalam Ethics Committee approved the study while the Prisons Department in the Government of Brunei Darussalam granted permission to collect the data on the convicts. All the participants signed a consent form.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by simple descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) using the cross-tabulation function in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS Version 22.

3. Results

The five major categories of broad crimes committed by the participants emerged and are presented in Table 1, followed by separate explanations of each type of offense.

Table 1. Offenses committed by age (N = 54)

Group and age		Offenses					Total
		Stealing	Drugs	Sex	Violence	Deception	
Youth aged 18-23	n	10	0	2	1	0	13
	% of Total	18.5%	0.0%	3.7%	1.9%	0.0%	24.1%
Youth aged 24-29	n	10	2	0	3	1	16
	% of Total	18.5%	3.7%	0.0%	5.6%	1.9%	29.6%
Adults aged 30-35	n	5	2	0	2	1	10
	% of Total	9.3%	3.7%	0.0%	3.7%	1.9%	18.5%
Adults aged 36-40	Count	6	3	3	0	3	15
	% of Total	11.1%	5.6%	5.6%	0.0%	5.6%	27.8%
Total	n	31	7	5	6	5	54
	% of Total	57.4%	13.0%	9.3%	11.1%	9.3%	100.0%

Stealing crimes

Theft, burglary and defrauding were the major offenses committed by the participants in the stealing category that accounted for 57.4% (n = 31) of all the crimes in the present study. As the biggest crime, stealing was prevalent across all the four age-groups with younger inmates (aged 18-29) being more engaged in it than their older counterparts (aged 30-40). Due to a lack of research, the preventative effects on stealing and other crimes of the Brunei Shariah law introduced in 2013 are not yet known. This needs to be investigated in future research.

Drug crimes

Drug and substance abuse stood out as the second-largest committed crime by the participants (13%, n = 7) despite the existence and enforcement of the death penalty law in Brunei for those found involved with drugs. The growth of drug plants and drug trafficking were the key drug crimes in the current study most predominant in the highest age-group (36-40, 5%, n = 5).

Violence crimes

Violence in the present study was characterized by aggression, fighting, and arson. Approximated at 11.1% (n = 6) of the total offenses, it was the third most committed crime after stealing and drug and substance abuse. Youths aged 18-23 were less involved in violence at 1.9% (n = 1) of total convicts. In Brunei, punishments for violent behavior (except murder) are not as brutal as those of drugs, stealing, and sex crimes.

Sex crimes

Sex offenses (fourth-largest crime among the participants) included rape, incest, and adultery and accounted for 9.3% (n = 5) of the total number of crimes. Youth convicts aged 18-23 (n = 2) contributed 3.7% of the sex-related offenses, mainly rape. However, adult convicts aged 36-40 (n = 3) had the highest number of sex offenses (5.6%), mostly incest and adultery.

Deception crimes

Deceptive offenses included conning, forgery, corrupt practices, scamming, and gambling and were at 9.3% (n =5) of prevalence in the study's sample. Adults aged 36-40 were most involved in deception at 5.6% (n = 3). In Brunei, heavy punishments are imposed on those found involved in corrupt practices.

Repeat crimes

In the present study, recidivism referred to repeat offending. The details in the prison documents consulted for this study did not specify whether the convict perpetrated the same offense multiple times or not and no interviews were conducted in the current study to probe this issue. As indicated in Table 2, there was, overall, nearly an equal number of repeaters (25, 46.3%) and non-repeaters (29, 53.7%).

This pattern was exemplified at each age-group. The younger convicts aged 18-29 were more likely to re-offend than older inmates aged 30-40 according to the obtained data from the participants' records.

Table 2. Participants' repeat offenses (N = 54)

Group and age		Recidivism		Total
		Repeaters	Non-repeaters	
Youth aged 18-23	n	8	5	13
	% of Total	14.8%	9.3%	24.1%
Youth aged 24-29	n	7	9	16
	% of Total	13.0%	16.7%	29.6%
Adults aged 30-35	n	4	6	10
	% of Total	7.4%	11.1%	18.5%
Adults aged 36-40	n	6	9	15
	% of Total	11.1%	16.7%	27.8%
Total	n	25	29	54
	% of Total	46.3%	53.7%	100.0%

Employment status before imprisonment

Table 3 shows that more convicts (49, 90.7%) were employed before incarceration compared to those who were unemployed (5, 9.3%). This finding suggested that unemployment may not have been a direct contributing factor to theft in this sample. The possible causes of stealing were probably low salaries or incomes and the need to support a large family. Future research needs to investigate these two plausible factors.

Table 3. Inmates' employment status prior to imprisonment (N = 54)

Group and age		Employment		
		Employed	Unemployed	Total
Youth aged 18-23	n	13	0	13
	% of Total	24.1%	0.0%	24.1%
Youth aged 24-29	n	13	3	16
	% of Total	24.1%	5.6%	29.6%
Adults aged 30-35	n	10	0	10
	% of Total	18.5%	0.0%	18.5%
Adults aged 36-40	n	13	2	15
	% of Total	24.1%	3.7%	27.8%
Total	n	49	5	54
	% of Total	90.7%	9.3%	100.0%

Marital status of the convicts' parents

In this study, the marital status of the offenders' parents was classified into two categories namely, married and non-married. The later category included the divorced, windowed, and separated parents. Like elsewhere in the world, people in Brunei generally believe that offenders and convicts come mainly from family backgrounds that are not firmly intact. However, findings from the present study displayed in Table 4 appear to have dispelled this notion and showed that nearly an equal number of convicts with married parents (28, 51.9%) and those without married parents (26 or 48.1%) offended and were convicted. This implied that what mattered much with regard to offending was not the marital status of parents but possibly the effectiveness of the parenting style. This matter can be clarified by further qualitative research using interviews with probes.

Table 4. Marital status of the offenders' parents (N = 54)

Group and age		Parents		
		Married	Non-married	Total
Youth aged 18-23	n	9	4	13
	% of Total	16.7%	7.4%	24.1%
Youth aged 24-29	n	6	10	16
	% of Total	11.1%	18.5%	29.6%
Adults aged 30-35	n	5	5	10
	% of Total	9.3%	9.3%	18.5%
Adults aged 36-40	n	8	7	15
	% of Total	14.8%	13.0%	27.8%
Total	n	28	26	54
	% of Total	51.9%	48.1%	100.0%

Convicts' marital status

Taken and considered as a whole sample, single convicts (30 or 55.6%) slightly outnumbered

their married peers (24, 44.4%) as reported in Table 5. The singles were also overrepresented in the 24-29 age-group. It appears that marriage was not a strong deterrent to offending. Since the biggest offense was theft, married offenders probably stole to support the family. This possibility needs to be investigated in future research using either open-ended questionnaires or in-depth individual interviews with probes.

Table 5. Marital status of the convicts (N = 54)

Group and age		Convicts		
		Married	Un-married	Total
Youth aged 18-23	n	6	7	13
	% of Total	11.1%	13.0%	24.1%
Youth aged 24-29	n	5	11	16
	% of Total	9.3%	20.4%	29.6%
Adults aged 30-35	n	5	5	10
	% of Total	9.3%	9.3%	18.5%
Adults aged 36-40	n	8	7	15
	% of Total	14.8%	13.0%	27.8%
Total	n	24	30	54
	% of Total	44.4%	55.6%	100.0%

Educational level

According to Table 6, most of the convicts in this study had secondary education (79.2%; n =42) while those who had primary education only were 20.8% (n =11). Although most of the convicts in both educational groups were employed, they possibly lacked better high paid jobs due to low education. Low education may have contributed to inadequate income which, in turn, gave rise to an increase in the number of stealing, drug trafficking, gambling, and spamming offenses in this sample. A large-scale mixed-methods study needs to be conducted to confirm or disconfirm the widely held public opinion that offending was done mainly by the poor with low education.

Table 6. Offenders by educational level (N = 53)

Group and age		Education		
		Primary	Secondary	Total
Youth aged 18-23	n	3	10	13
	% of Total	5.7%	18.9%	24.5%
Youth aged 24-29	n	4	11	15
	% of Total	7.5%	20.8%	28.3%
Adults aged 30-35	n	1	9	10
	% of Total	1.9%	17.0%	18.9%
Adults aged 36-40	n	3	12	15
	% of Total	5.7%	22.6%	28.3%
Total	n	11	42	53
	% of Total	20.8%	79.2%	100.0%

District of residence

The present study was conducted in Brunei-Muara district (which includes Bandar Seri Begawan, the biggest town and capital city of Brunei Darussalam). This district has more people than any of the other three districts in the country. Being a cosmopolitan district with the highest population, Table 7 revealed that Brunei-Muara district contributed the highest number of convicts in the current study (35 or 64.8%). Temburong, the fourth district, was not represented.

Table 7. Crimes by district where the convict committed the offense (N = 54)

Group and age		Districts			Total
		Brunei-Muara	Tutong	Kuala Belait	
Youth aged 18-23	n	11	1	1	13
	% of Total	20.4%	1.9%	1.9%	24.1%
Youth aged 24-29	n	8	5	3	16
	% of Total	14.8%	9.3%	5.6%	29.6%
Adults aged 30-35	n	6	1	3	10
	% of Total	11.1%	1.9%	5.6%	18.5%
Adults aged 36-40	n	10	3	2	15
	% of Total	18.5%	5.6%	3.7%	27.8%
Total	n	35	10	9	54
	% of Total	64.8%	18.5%	16.7%	100.0%

4. Discussion

In the present case study, the biggest crime in Brunei was stealing. Brunei needs to highlight this problem and advocate for strong proactive prevention measures to contain it. Youths were more prone to stealing than adults as found and evidenced in the present study. For jobless youths who steal, this could be a result of unemployment since Brunei faces a small 2.6% unemployment rate according to The World Fact Book (2018). This unemployment may be artificial as it may be caused by possession of low education and lack of training (Sinfield, 1981). According to Koo (2013), among the unemployed locals in any country, the majority are those with secondary and primary qualifications. People who endure long-term unemployment often become alienated and eventually stop trying to find a job (Petersilia, 2004). With this state of mindset, youths become prone to be involved in stealing or theft activities. According to Bostyn and Wight (1987), financial difficulties, as a result of being jobless due to lacking the required employment qualifications, lead to a rise in antisocial issues and problems. On the other hand, most of the participants in the current study were employed before imprisonment. This could be related to low jobs and incomes which in turn may be attributed to low education. Employee theft is the most common form of crime in business and most of this theft is a result of job dissatisfaction as stated by Hollinger and Clark (1983). Dissatisfaction may also be due to low-income status in which the employee steals to reduce what she/he erroneously perceives as debt from the employer (Greenberg, 1997).

Repeat offending was a big problem among Brunei participants in the present study. The high rate of repeat offending in this sample cast doubts on the effectiveness of the counseling efforts during incarceration and after release. According to Lane et al (2005), there were high recidivism rates in prison samples of other countries too. In Brunei, reintegration programs need to be improved to be effective. Provision of appropriate training and jobs would contribute significantly to the credibility of the programs (Harrison & Schehr, 2004)

In the present study, the marital status of the convicts, as well as that of their parents, were both found to have no preventative effects on criminal behavior. Developmental psychologists (such as McCord, Widom & Crowell, 2001) are of the view that disruptive behaviors, which start early in life, often lead to serious crimes during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood stages. Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein (2003) suggest that this big bond and linkage needs to be prevented or broken early.

5. Conclusion

The case study described convicts in terms of selected demographic variables such as age, education, marriage, employment, marital status of parents, type of offenses committed, repeat offenses, and district of residence. To reduce crimes in the country, Brunei ought to adopt multiple preventative and intervention approaches that are realistic and in combination. Out-of-prison intervention programs in Brunei need to effectively address problems associated with stigma. Many ex-convicts are often rejected due to the stigma they carry. The programs will need adequate government support to ensure they are effective and credible. Further mixed method research is called for to inform policy decisions and intervention efforts. In particular, findings on drug use, repeat offending, violence, and incest suggest the need for mental health screening of convicts concerned. Mental health issues need to be investigated in future large-scale mixed-methods research that includes interview probes.

6. Limitations

The present study faced one main limitation. It was largely a qualitative review, analysis, and description of demographic data recorded in existing prison documents. In-depth individual interviews with convicts would have yielded more information and detailed findings. However, this case study may act and serve as sensitizing material for more research on Brunei convicts.

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