The informal prison economy in Ghana: patterns, exchanges, and institutional contradictions

Elijah Tukwariba Yin\textsuperscript{1*} and Nelson Kofie\textsuperscript{2}

\textbf{Abstract:} This study aims to document, describe, and examine how the informal prison economy is mediated. It is argued that, in part, it is the prison's internal microbureaucratic capitalism that gives rise to its informal economy. The data discussion draws on ethnographic observation, interviews with inmates, ex-convicts, and prison officers. The paper also makes use of newspapers and internet-based news articles on prisons in Ghana. The data was analysed based on themes and patterns. The analysed data showed that the informal prison economy was antithetical yet symbiotic with the formal bureaucracy. And that the illicit economy was a product of a poorly managed system that enabled ordinary staff members to engage in corrupt practices without fear of negative sanctions. The role of the informal prison economy in the lives of inmates was enormous—ranging from family sustenance, de-facto health insurance, hiring of legal services to say the least. The paper concludes that the informal economy has become habituated and has taken on a life of its own; to the extent that it has become resistant to administrative control.

\textbf{Subjects:} Criminal Justice; Crime and Crime Prevention; Prisons; Criminology and Law

\textbf{Keywords:} formal economy; informal economy; contraband; institutional contradictions; prison

\textbf{1. Introduction}

Prisons are coercive institutions where prisoners are kept to serve their period of incarceration (Walker, 2015). It is a regimental institution driven by laws and procedures to achieve its mandates of safe custody, welfare, and rehabilitation and reformation of inmates (Yin, 2018). As a regimental...
organisation, it is expected to be characterised solely by a formal economy. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case for most prisons in Ghana, as the informal economy permeates its social structures in varied ways.

The term informal economy, also known as the shadow economy, was first coined by the British anthropologist Keith Hart in 1973 to describe Ghana’s urban markets dominated by migrants. These economic activities were characterised by the independent capacity of generating revenues (Hart, 1985). The discovery of the informal economy and its role in economic progress has attracted a lot of debates from both academics and policymakers. Chen notes that one school of thought views the informal sector as a collection of talented entrepreneurs. Another school views it to be a pool of entrepreneurs with the agenda of undermining regulations and evading taxes. The third school of thought sees it as a livelihood source for poor people (Chen, 2012). All these schools of thought are very significant for understanding the informal economy of the prison.

The formal and informal economies are interrelated but separable for analytical purposes. As a result, we will distinguish between the formal and informal prison economy. Walker (2015, p. 18) describes the formal prison economy to mean “the legitimate methods for prisoners to earn wages and purchase goods”. In Ghana, the prison regulations permit inmates to engage in outside labour after they have served one-third of their prison sentence, and have also shown good conduct, among other conditions. Wages earned and all other monies received by a prisoner from relatives and friends are expected to be entered in the “Prisoners’ Cash Deposit Book—Treasury” (Prison Standing Orders, 1960, p. 5). From these deposits, prisoners are entitled to a specific amount of money within a week to spend on food items sold in the prison commissary. This supplements prisoners’ daily food served by the prison. These economic transactions are done in the open, supervised by authorities, and determined by prison regulations. It is also associated with less danger on the part of officers, and exploitation on the part of inmates.

Walker (2015) has described the informal economy as the illegitimate or unapproved economic activities that take place within the prison. It involves making illicit money and engaging in contraband goods such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, cigarettes, alcohol, tobacco, etc. It also includes an inmate having in possession money beyond a threshold as determined by prison rules. Some other characteristic features of this economy are that it is organised and executed in secrecy, not supervised by authorities, arrangements are verbal, and there are more danger and abuse on the part of officers and inmates respectively (Crewe, 2012).

Prison scholars such as Crewe (2012), Walker (2015), and Trelour et al. (2016) have examined the prison informal economy. Their studies focused on the clandestine doings of the prison inmates, the fungible products used in the transactions and the varied ways the products are accessed. Their contributions have added significantly to the literature on the prison economy. However, their study’s setting suggests a paucity of literature in this arena. Besides, all knowledge and ideas are locations bound, though to different degrees within the social structure and the historical process (Mannheim, 1936). The aforementioned writings are European and North America focused, neglecting the context of Africa. The situation of prisons in Africa needs to be examined due to differential economic statuses in terms of structures and agencies (Yin, 2018). All these suggest a gap in the literature. This study aims to document, describe, and examine how the informal prison economy is mediated. This paper goes one step further by examining the active engagement of prison officers, and the external actors facilitating the supply chain of products that fuel the informal prison economy, and to a large extent the normalization of the illicit trade within the institution by the staff. Trelour, McCredie, and Lloyd (2016) argued that it is the limited supply of contraband against the high demand of it by inmates that creates this economy. However, this paper adds that it is the prison’s internal micro bureaucratic capitalism that gives rise to the informal prison economy. And that this informal economy is sustained by inmates, officers, and some outsiders’ desire to satisfy their pressing needs.
It is noteworthy that prison officers are responsible not merely to enforce the prison laws, but also in various ways, serve as a model for inmates to emulate. It is the case in Ghana that many inmates look up to prison staff as their counselors and advisors. So, the question is, how is law and order to be maintained when the prison officers get compromised by the inmates in the lucrative illicit transactions?

It is easy to mistake the informal economic activities within the prison for a mere examination of the taken-for-granted bureaucratic pathologies. That is, procedural inefficiencies and staff ineptitudes well known to many and documented by prison scholars. This paper shows that there is a conscious effort by both prison staff and inmates to sustain this informal economy. They do this by creating a parallel operating procedure that draws on the power and legitimacy of the bureaucracy to engage in honest services fraud. This is a pseudo-service provided to clients (inmates, relatives) by uniformed officers within the prison facility. This service is not subjected to official accountability, evaluation, and reporting. In short, such illicit practices are off the books. They are, in principle, criminal in the eyes of the law. This paper again shows the contradictions within the prison.

2. Approaches to data collection

The Republic of Ghana is a country located in West Africa. It shares borders with Burkina Faso in the north, Ivory Coast in the west, and Togo in the east, with the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The prison system in Ghana is a colonial inheritance. Presently, there are 43 prisons across 16 regions in Ghana. These prisons are categorized into the following: 14 local prisons, 1 maximum security prison, 1 minimum security prison, 1 special facility, 7 central prisons, 7 female prisons, 1 juvenile facility, and 11 open camp prisons. Some of these prisons formed the study setting.

The methods for data gathering were qualitative. However, some quantitative data were generated during the interviewing phase of the study. This came in the form of prices of items within the informal and formal economic spaces of the prison.

Qualitative approaches are used to study and answer questions on experiences, perspectives, and meanings people give to situations (Hamarberg et al., 2016). This method is good for investigating normative behaviour, understanding people’s condition, event, and analysis of documents and texts. These texts include media articles, government reports, and other internet sources. The data for this paper was gathered through primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were from ethnographic observation, informal (not based on any schedule), and formal (based on a schedule) interviews whilst the secondary data emanated from newspapers and website articles.

The ethnographic approach involved observing inmates in their prison environment. The goal is to produce a narrative account of the informal economic culture of prisoners by paying attention to their socio-economic relations. We are aware that this informal economic culture evolves over time and is also subjected to its own rules.

The principal investigator was the After-Care agent (ACA) of the Ankaful Prisons Complex. This prison complex is composed of Ankaful Main Camp Prison, Ankaful Annex Prison, Communicable Disease Prison, and Maximum Security Prison (Yin, 2018). The selection of these prisons was based on convenience and the strategic position of the ACA. The main role of the ACA was to liaise between the prisoners and the outside society. That is, connecting prisoners to their families as well as facilitate their legal rights within and outside the prison facility. During this period, the ACA had the opportunity to interact with inmates in formal and informal capacities. On a formal basis, inmates with challenges that fell within the purview of the ACA were referred by prison staff to him. The ACA, it seems, won the trust of both inmates and officers. This manifested in terms of how inmates freely shared their private challenges with the ACA. Most of such interactions took
place without the presence of prison guards. This is not a case of negligence by the prisons but was that of trust and collaboration between the ACA and the prisons. Indeed, the functioning of the prisons and the socio-economic relations between inmates, as well as between inmates and officers were not undermined. This gave inmates the confidence to speak when asked about their economic practices—whether formal or informal.

The ACA was a participant observer, not as participating directly in the informal economic practices of inmates or as a member of the prison population, but as a “pure” observer. The ACA was a pure observer because he was present in the prison observing the informal economic engagements of prisoners. It is important to note that these informal economic activities manifested in twofold: 1. Engagement in contraband goods/activities and, 2. Forbidden engagement in economic exchanges associated with non-contraband goods/activities. The latter was visible to the ACA in the prison facility but functioned on the blind side of visitors/outside the ACA observed and took notes of events. For the former, it was cloaked in secrecy. However, such knowledge becomes available when an inmate is arrested for possessing contraband. The ACA witnessed instances where prison officers seized contrabands from inmates as well as how such inmates were subjected to interrogatories. The observed proceedings were documented as well. The ethnographic approach lasted for about three years (2014–2017), and was successful due to the defined role of the ACA in the prison facilities.

Having knowledge of some particular inmates who engaged in contraband goods provided the ACA the opportunity to follow up with informal conversations on the issues. In all, a total of 16 informal discussions were held. Out of the 16, 11 were inmates found in possession of contrabands whilst 5 were inmates who were fortuitously selected and were informally engaged in casual conversational interviews about the informal economic practices within the prisons. This informal approach, to a large extent, created a relaxed environment for these inmates to share their experiences about the informal economic exchanges within the prisons.

Apart from the informal questioning, a formal approach was also used. This process involved the use of an interview guide where inmates, ex-convicts, and prison officers were interviewed. The researchers were given a list of inmates within the prisons. Simple random and systematic sampling procedures were used to select the participants. The essence of using these procedures was to give each inmate on the list an equal opportunity to participate in the study. Using the lottery method, the paper labelled 4 was selected. As a result, the interval of 4 was used to select the next participant on the list until it was observed that the 13th and 14th participants were giving responses similar to previous interviewees. We concluded that a saturation point had been reached. In conducting the formal interviews, a separate office space was provided by the prison authorities. Prison guards were made aware that their presence in the office could influence the views of inmates. As a result, the assigned guard was asked to sit at the entrance of the office. The position of the guard did not allow him to hear or intrude in our discussion. This was very useful as it allowed inmates the space to talk about the informal economic practices. During the interviews, questions related to how contrabands entered into the prison yard, how such economic activities were mediated, the prices of contrabands, how informal economic activities sustained the survival of inmates in prison, etc. were asked. The success of our interviews could be attributed to the good rapport we had with the central regional commander of prisons as well as the various officers in charge.

We were aware that reaching ex-convicts without any good lead could be a difficult task, hence we consulted the reception unit of the prisons to furnish us with the contact details of relatives and friends of former inmates. The ACA also made available some contact details of relatives of former prisoners. We had 22 contact details of which only 18 were reached. Out of the 18, 10 agreed to participate whilst 8 declined participation. Six (6) out of the 10 ex-convicts also led us to additional 8 ex-convicts. The additional 8 ex-convicts who were chain referred served their sentences in the following prisons across the country: Kumasi Central Prison (2), Nsawam Medium Security Prison.
(4), and Sekindi Prison (2). These ex-convicts played a critical role as they brought on board the informal economic experiences of other prisons outside the central regional command. This means that in all 18 ex-convicts e willingly availd themselves to participate in the study. However, after interviewing the 16th person we noticed that we had reached saturation point. All the 8 referred ex-convicts were interviewed. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), data saturation is reached when new participants in a study no longer come out with any unique information. As a form of data validation, 5 prison officers were purposively selected due to their willingness to participate in the study. All participants were males except 2 prison staff. All these data constituted the primary source. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of research participants.

The study also made use of secondary data. According to Kelly (2005), secondary data refers to the type of data collected by someone other than the primary user. Secondary data sources include books, newspapers, websites, government records, etc. This study made use of newspaper and website information associated with contrabands in prison to complement the primary data. It also served a validation purpose to the primary data.

After data gathering, the interview transcripts and other observation notes were typed and saved as word documents. This, together with the secondary data was uploaded on Google Docs. Google Docs allowed for easy access, coding, and theming. After coding, theming was done using the Google Docs word search tool. This simplified the complex aspects of the data as words, terms, phrases or sentences were assigned to categories of the data. This process helped to cut out slightly off-topic conversations. This also made us focus on pertinent texts. The display of data through themes and patterns was followed by analysis and drawing of conclusions. This was done by describing, classifying, and seeing how the concepts were related (Punch, 2005). It is important to state that, as in any qualitative data analysis, some interviews were not utilized in this research. However, the data used adequately addressed the research objective of the study.

This study took into consideration ethical issues. To begin, ethical clearance was sought from the University of Cape Coast’s Institutional Review Board. After which, we officially wrote to the Prison Headquarters in Accra for permission to gain access to the Ankaful Prisons complex. After a review of our proposal, we were granted permission to conduct our study. We were accordingly advised to co-operate with the prison guards, and also not to undermine the security of the facilities. It is important to note that this study was part of a bigger project on prisons in Ghana.

We properly identified ourselves to all the research participants and also explained to them the purpose and importance of the study, and the type of questions they were to answer. A consent form was also read out to them and interpreted in a dialect comprehensible to the interviewees. This was to ensure they had a clear understanding of what they were consenting to. After this, participants signed the informed consent form before data was collected. Participants were also educated on their right to opt-out of the study at any time or not to respond to a question they seemed not comfortable with. This conformed to W. L. Neuman’s (2007, p. 54) position that “a

| Participants                          | Gender | Number |
|---------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Inmates (Informal Interview)          | Males  | 16     |
| Inmates (Formal Interview)            | Males  | 14     |
| Ex-convicts                           | Males  | 16     |
| Prison officers                       | Males  | 3      |
|                                       | Females| 2      |
| Total                                 |        | 47     |
A fundamental ethical principle of social research is never coerce anyone into participating; participation must be voluntary at all times. Permission alone is not enough; people need to know what they are being asked to participate in so that they can make an informed decision. Participants can become aware of their rights and what they are getting involved in when they read and sign a statement giving informed consent". We also assured participants of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. We did not disclose the identity of our participants after the information gathering. Rather, the labels inmate 1, 2, ex-convict 1, 2, officer, 1, 2, etc. were used to represent participants.

Issues of trustworthiness were taken seriously in this study. We paid attention to the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of the research data. On credibility, we triangulated the data sources. It was a combination of ethnographic observation, interviews of inmates, prison officers, ex-convicts, and secondary sources. This allowed for the validation of data to establish its trustworthiness. On transferability, the interviewing of ex-convicts from other prisons apart from the Ankaful Prisons Complex as well as the use of secondary data means that the findings of this study may apply to other prisons in Ghana. For confirmability, whilst it seems to be very difficult in maintaining neutrality in qualitative studies, we did our best by presenting the actual interpretation of the data. We have also detailed our methodology to ensure that subsequent prison researchers can take a cue from it so as to embark on successful prison studies.

We understand that, as stated by D. J. Neuman (1958, p. 127), most prison research considered valid are the ones carried out by a trained outsider “who has no axe to grind on any aspect of correctional structure”. Whilst this position may be valid to an extent, it also has limitations as some inmates may not be willing to release all significant information to the outsider, but will do so for the insider. This implies that, a person considered an insider-outsider will be the best for a study of this nature. The principal investigator was the ACA at the Ankaful Prisons Complex whilst the co-investigator was a total outsider. It was the ethical duty of the ACA to guide, protect and oversee the interests of all the inmates. By default, he was the “Ethicist” in the prison complex.

3. Presentation of results

3.1. Informal prison economy and institutional contradictions

In this study, it was relevant to establish through interviews the presence of contrabands within prisons in Ghana. For most informal prison economies, the goods and services accessible to inmates reflect their availability within the local society. Actors who trade in contrabands do so because of the enormous benefits derived from such engagement. During the interviews, interviewees shared their views on the availability of contrabands as well as on other informal economic activities within the prison;

“...there are many contrabands in prison. These include mobile phones and their accessories, marijuana, cocaine, ‘brown’ and green snuff, alcoholic beverages, and huge sums of money.

(Inmate 1)

This position was corroborated by another inmate;

In this prison, inmates possess cigarettes, marijuana, tramadol, mobile phones, earpiece, and many other things that are not supposed to be here.

Aside from these goods, an ex-convict revealed that;

I wash the clothes of rich inmates at a price. At times they either pay me with physical cash or I exchange services for food. (Ex-convict 1)

An inmate added that;
I wash and iron the dresses of inmates who can afford it. The price I charge depends on the quantity of the clothes. Some inmates only prefer that I wash and not iron their clothes. Others want both services. Whichever services that they demand, I charge them. In sum, if I wash about 15kg of clothes, I get about GHS25 ($5) (Inmate 3)

Other services offered within the informal economy came in the form of sex. Interviewees revealed that;

... I hear there is a place called Hotel Vinkibamba where some inmates go to pay for anal sex. (Inmate 2)

This position was confirmed by an ex-convict who was interviewed on a radio programme called Ghana Te Sen. The ex-convict exposed that;

Some inmates engage in “Kpeeh” (a local prison term for anal sex) for money, food, and comfort.

One would have thought that this ex-convict aims to tarnish the image of the incarcerated, but this was far from that as the issue of inmates trading their bodies for food and bedding space was confirmed by a Public Relation Officer (PRO) of the Ghana Prisons Service. According to the PRO Daniel Machetor;

... affluent ones (inmates), most often than not, use their ‘power’ and status to coerce other inmates in ‘trading their bodies for sleeping space’. ... inmates use money, provisions and the like and in turn, get sexual favours. (www.ghanaweb.com 12/08/2019)

These data confirm that the informal prison economy can be categorised into two; the goods economy and the service economy. These economies complement each other in varied ways, as some inmates offer sexual and washing services in exchange for food and money. The question worthy of an answer is, how do these goods enter into such a regimental setup? Investigations revealed that the means of entry are wide-ranging. These were some narratives;

We (inmates), not all though, smuggled contrabands into the yard when returning from outside labour. (Inmate 5)

... Wraps of weed, mobile phones, and batteries were smuggled through the anus by inmates into the yard. (Ex-convict 3)

An inmate shared that;

These contrabands get into the prison through multiple means. Of which the majority are channelled through prison officers.

The inmate continued;

Some relatives and friends also hid some of these contrabands in food and other items during visits. Inmates ... liaise with other officers to clandestinely smuggle marijuana into the yard during visits (Inmate 7).

A prison officer elucidated that;

Some of the inmates hire the services of some officers, ex-convicts, or other criminal accomplices to throw these contrabands over the prison walls. (Officer 2)

The evidence of relatives and officers’ involvement and the strategies through which such illegal items entered the prison are shared below as reported in a newspaper article by Daily Graphic on 22 September 2016;
Two women visitors to the Ankaful Maximum Security Prisons were arrested Thursday morning with 39 parcels of dried leaves suspected to be marijuana concealed in balls of soap popularly called “Azuma blows”.

Grace Kusi, 60, had 22 parcels of dried leaves, five Samsung mobile phones, 10 mobile phone chargers, two sim cards, and one tiny scissors, while Mary Nyankah, 22 years had 17 of the dried leaves concealed in soap.

… She said she came from Winneba but was given the items by her husband’s friend at Yeji to be delivered to the inmate.

Mary, on the other hand, came in to visit Razak Abubakar who is serving 63 years imprisonment with hard labour.

She told prison officials that her boyfriend who works at the Tema Harbour asked her to deliver the goods. Her boyfriend had accompanied Mary to the prison but did not enter the facility. However, prison officials could not trace the said boyfriend.

A similar report was published by Ghanaweb.com on 30 March 2017;

A 36-year-old unemployed woman has been arrested by prison wardens at Ankaful Maximum Security prison at Cape Coast in her bid to smuggle dried leaves suspected to be Indian hemp into the male section for an inmate.

The suspect one Felicia Asamoah a resident of Kumasi, is reported to have concealed the contraband product in rubber sandals meant for one Kwame Adu who is serving 65 years imprisonment for robbery.

According to prison officials, Felicia on arrival at the checkpoint was mandated to go through screening before whatever she was holding could be handed over to the inmate.

In the process, it was uncovered that the pair of bathroom sandals she was bringing to the inmate had been tampered with. Security officers at the gate cut open the slippers and found quantities of the wrapped substance embedded in them.

Not only relatives and (or) friends of inmates were reported to have been arrested, but officers included. The news portal myjoyonline.com under the heading Prison officer turns prisoner for “wee distribution” on 2 May 2018 reported as follow;

Nankpa (a prison officer) was arrested in August 2017 when he tried to throw cannabis over the prison walls to the prisoners. … Nankpa was shot at the hip by guards at the Ankaful Maximum Security Prison when he was found throwing some items over the prison’s walls.

He was handed over to the police as the items were suspected to be Indian Hemp.

The data reveal a network of operations within the informal economy of the prison bureaucracy. The “cartel” level operations revealed by ex-convicts confirm the informal economy as an organised crime unit. Two ex-convicts stated that;

Mobile phone business … was operated by a cartel, managed by a top senior officer who is always at the receiving end of profit (Money). (Ex-convict 5)

… They (cartel) have a gate operator, search officer, an officer who brings in the items, and an inmate who sells the items. (Ex-convict 8)

This shows that there is some kind of a supply chain of goods and services. This structure within the prison economy is a well-orchestrated system; it seems nothing is given to chance. Whilst the informal prison economy was revealed to be operated by a cartel, an inmate also revealed that some officers operated solo;

Whilst some prison officers operate as a cartel, others also operate solo. Those who operate solo have targeted inmates they offer such services. They don’t share profit with anyone at the top. Such individuals are the ones who are easily arrested. (Inmate 6)
The above narratives seem to show that there were local groupings of highly centralized enterprises run by inmates and officers for profit. The activities of actors involved organized criminal methods that fueled the informal economy.

The participation of prisoners, officers, and relatives in the underground economy is a significant indicator of their vested interest in such business outcomes. The smuggled goods take on added value as well as defined socio-economic networks. For its economic value, a participant stated that;

Some inmates … buy the smuggled phones from officers at a high price and resell them to other inmates for profit. Those who buy the phone either use it personally or rent it out to other inmates at a fee. … even though the prison has an official phone. (Inmate 8)

Through informal interactions with inmates, the prices of phones within the prison were gathered and compared to the original prices outside the prison. Table 2 shows the comparative prices of phones and accessories and the profit margin.

The profit margin shown in Table 1 suggests that within a month a prison cartel could make a profit of GHS14905/$2981 from the sales of these contrabands. This profit is to be shared within the cartel network. Further interactions revealed that the percentage of profit sharing depends on who funded the process. If the process was funded by an inmate, then such an inmate was entitled to the “lion share” and vice versa. The profit margin for the mobile phone business appeared lucrative but not as compared to the sale of marijuana within the yard. This was evident in the narratives of inmates and ex-convicts.

An inmate reiterated that;

… smuggled marijuana is sold to inmates at a high price. It generates more profit than the sale of mobile phones.

The inmate continued that;

One kilogram (kg) of marijuana cost about GHS4000/$800 in the yard. Successful entry of marijuana into the prison is rewrapped into rolls and sold depending on the size. A prisoner can spend GHS300/$60 on the spot smoking. They are addicted to drugs. (Inmate 7)

| Phone type/ Accessories | Price outside of Prison | Price in Prison | Profit Margin |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Samsung Galaxy (Small size) | GHS400/ $80 | GHS 3000/ $600 | GHS2600/ $520 |
| Techno Mobile (Small size) | GHS 400/ $80 | GHS3000/ $600 | GHS2600/ $520 |
| X-TIGI (small size) | GHS 70/ $14 | GHS1400/ $280 | GHS1300/ $266 |
| Samsung Phone Battery | GHS 30/ $6 | GHS800/ $160 | GHS770/ $154 |
| Ear Piece | GHS 15/ $3 | GHS 100/ $20 | GHS85/ $17 |
| Nokia 101/103 | GHS60/ $12 | GHS 1300/ $260 | GHS1240/ $248 |
| LG G2 | GHS1000/ $140 | GHS 3500/ $700 | GHS2800/ $560 |
| Alcatel OT-385 | GHS500/ $100 | GHS 3100/ $620 | GHS2600/ $520 |
| Mobile Phone charger | GHS 20/ $4 | GHS 900/ $180 | GHS880/ $176 |
| Total Profit Margin | | | GHS14905/ $2981 |

Source: Field Survey, July 2019 [US$ exchange rate in 2019]
For trafficked alcoholic beverages, this was said by an inmate;

The inmates with strong economic power get to buy ‘Joy Daddy bitters’, ‘Adonko bitters’, ‘Alomo bitters’ and other local sachet brands of alcohol. A sachet of Joy Daddy bitters that cost about GHS1/$0.2 or GHS2/$0.4 outside the yard is sold for GHS40/$8 in the yard. (Inmate 2)

Aside from the smuggled goods, the formal economy of the prison which ensured inmates had access to some basic food items became a source of fuel for the informal economy. The goods for the formal economy were supplied from two sources; first from the prison itself, and second from relatives/friends of inmates. It was not surprising for an inmate to say;

The food items come in two-fold. The prison takes delivery of foodstuffs to feed inmates whilst relatives or friends of inmates also visit with food items. The prison delivery is mostly uncooked foods to be cooked in the kitchen for inmate’s daily feed. Some of the items are also taken to the prison store to be sold to inmates for profit. The prison has also negotiated with private persons to supply inmates with cooked food and fish at a price. An inmate leader gives the list of names of interested prisoners to officers who then communicate with the suppliers. This is not formal but it is normal.

The inmate added that;

The goods from relatives and friends of inmates are locally cooked foods e.g., fufu and soup, banku, boiled yam, rice, etc. Some relatives also added fresh vegetables, fresh fruits like pineapple, banana, oranges, and pawpaw. Fruit juice is a common thing in prison. These food items are heavily packed in bags and other disposable containers. Look! Some inmates repack these items supplied to them by relatives and then sell them to other inmates. (Inmate 4)

Even though it was observed that the supply chain of the prison was from a wholesale point, inmates revealed that the prices of items within the prison store were quite higher than the prices of the same items sold outside the yard. This implies the prison administration or a sub-unit is aware of the inmates’ collective economic power, and the prison’s intention to exploit inmates “money power”.

Table 3 below compares the prices of items within the prison store and the outside market.

Whilst the prison was cashing in on inmates, other inmates also took advantage of the formal economy to boost their informal economic activities. They bought items in bulk and resold them to other inmates when the prison store closed for the day. An inmate stated that;

The rich inmates buy large quantities of food items from the prison store and resell them to other inmates at high prices when the prison store is closed. (Inmate 10)

| Table 3. Prices of items in the prison store and outside |
|---------------------------------------------------------|
| **Item**                                           | **In AMSP (Price in GHC)** | **Outside AMSP (Price in GHC)** |
|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Plastic Bottle Coca Cola                              | GHC2.00/ $0.4               | GHC1.50/ $0.3                   |
| Yoghurt (Hollanda)                                    | GHC 3.50/ $0.7              | GHC 3.00/ $0.6                  |
| Bread                                                  | GHC1.50/ $0.3               | GHC1.00/ $0.2                   |
| Guardian Soap                                         | GHC1.20/ $0.24              | GHC1.00/ $0.2                   |
| Slippers                                               | GHC6.00/ $1.2               | GHC 5.00/ $1                    |
| Milk short cake (65 g. net)                            | GHC1.20/ $0.24              | 90 pesewas/ $0.18               |
| Toothpaste (65 g)                                     | GHC2.50/ $0.5               | GHC2.00/ $0.4                   |
| Geisha Soap (250 g)                                   | GHC 4.00/ $0.8              | GHC 3.00/ $0.6                  |

Source: Field Survey, July 2019
Though not open to visitors, it was observed that inmates sold different items in their respective blocks. The items were arranged on the floor to attract customers (inmates). The seller sat behind the items waiting to sell to interested inmates. The interviews revealed a prisoner could make about GHS400/$80 in a day as sales. Informal interaction revealed that some prisoners sold the items on behalf of other inmates. In such cases, the seller rendered accounts to the business owner who then pays him. This shows how the informal economy is integrated and routinized within the prison bureaucracy.

The supply chain of the formal prison bureaucracy fueled and sustained the informal economy in many ways. Inmates turned the legitimate economic transactions with the prison into illegitimate ones with other inmates. Items bought from the prison store by inmates were expected to be consumed by the buyer and not for further economic transactions. Unfortunately, that was the case in some prisons in Ghana as revealed by an ex-convict who had experiences from three prisons in Ghana;

I served time at Kumasi Central Prison, Nsawam Medium Security Prison, and Ankaful Maximum Security Prison. Buying and selling in the prison is a common thing.

It is one thing to think that inmates, relatives, and officers smuggled contrabands into the prison, and it is another thing to know that inmates produced contrabands within the prison using legitimate items supplied to them by relatives and the prison infirmary. It was gathered as stated by an inmate;

Inmates at times brewed their own alcohol through pineapple juice and kenkey. The extracted pineapple juice is placed under the sun to facilitate fermentation. After that, inmates grind ‘sleeping tablets’ and mix them with the juice. The producer of this mixture sells it to interested inmates at ridiculous prices. (Inmate 9)

According to an ex-convict;

The ‘sleeping tablet’ is supplied by the prison infirmary to aid inmates who are unable to get good sleep. Unfortunately, our friends (inmates) have found an alternate use for it to boost their income. (Ex-convict 1)

These narratives show how inmates innovate illegitimately to survive within an otherwise a regimental bureaucracy expected to be characterised by a formal economy.

Accounting for how money was made to engage in the informal economy, an officer and an inmate had these to say;

Relatives and friends who visit their inmates do deposit money on their behalf at the prison reception. (Officer 3)

Inmates who are sent out of the prison to work are entitled to a percentage of the money paid. They withdraw the money when deposited to buy whatever items they want whether it is a contraband item or not. (Inmate 9)

Having money on prison records either through relatives or outside labour was legitimate, but using the money to engage in contraband goods made it illegitimate. It is this and many other internal micro bureaucratic capitalism that give rise to the prison informal economy. Thinking that all inmates made money legitimately was far from absolute, as a number of them engaged in fraudulent activities to survive in the underground economy. An ex-convict stated that;

Most Inmates engage in fraud within the prison using their phones. Some inmates are on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. They have nice photos of people who are occupying good positions in Ghana or outside of Ghana. They portray as very
rich on such platforms. They communicate mostly with women. They promise them marriage upon their return from Europe or America. These women become committed to their relationship. With time, such inmates tell their supposed partner that they have a relative in prison so she should go visit him with food items and also deposit some money for him. And that upon his return from Abroad, the supposed girlfriend will be reimbursed and married. Some women are duped to the tune of about GHS40000/$8000. (Ex-convict 6)

Several cases of this nature were witnessed at the Ankaful Maximum Security Prison where young ladies in their early thirties came to the facility to report a prisoner who had defrauded them. It was surprising that not only civilians reported such cases but also women police officers. In an interview with prison officers, it was stated as thus;

About 98% of the defrauded cases were reported by women. (Officer 4)

Another officer reiterated;

... for some strange reason, most of the culprits are women. (Officer 5)

It was observed that when cases like these were reported, a committee was instituted to investigate. There were instances where the prison was able to trace the culprits but whether the monies were retrieved for the victims was another story.

Aside from the described approach used by inmates, other inmates said;

Some inmates call innocent people and pretend to have mistakenly transferred some amount of money into their mobile money wallet and so should be transferred back. Some are successful others are not. (Inmate 12)

Another inmate also exposed that;

Some inmates pretend to their to-be victims as a spiritualist. ... that someone has brought them to their shrine to be killed. And to avert their death they (victims) should transfer a specific amount of money into their mobile wallet for cleansing. (Inmate 8)

It was added by an ex-convict that;

... some inmates had over GHS30000/$6000 in their prison account. (Ex-convict 5)

These defrauded monies were reinvested into the informal economy to yield profit. From the basic economic principle of demand and supply, one can assume that supply will exceed demand considering the profit margin and how some inmates and officers appear rooted in the business. Nonetheless, that was not the case due to the “artificial” scarcity created by cartel officers. For how the “artificial” scarcity was created and the informal economy sustained, an ex-convict narrated;

Cartel officers give tip-offs about the day and time of operation. ... inmates hid their mobile phones and other contrabands before the operation. (Ex-convict 7)

An ex-convict pointed out that;

In case the demand for phones or any other contraband is down, officers deliberately create scarcity by doing a random search without informing inmates. They seize contrabands and keep them either for a month or more. The seized contrabands are later resold to other inmates or the original owners. They (officers) burn or destroy the already damaged
contrabands to create the impression that they are ‘fighting’ inmates engaged in contra-
bands (E-convict 6).

Some kind of a formal “banking” system, namely the “Prisoners’ Cash Deposit Book—Treasury”,
was operated within the prison facilities. This was setup in order to regulate and to calibrate the
flow of cash in the prison at any juncture, yet it was observed that there was also an informal/
illegitimate cash deposit system that runs parallel with the formal system. The illegitimate
financial system was largely observed to be operated by some officers working within the recep-
tion units. These officers collected deposits from interested inmates. Whilst inmates were officially
toiled to GHS40/$8 in a week from their official deposit, inmates who kept their monies with the
unofficial system could withdraw as much as they want and at any time they wish. Through
informal conversation with an inmate, it was revealed that such officers took 10% of any with-
drawal made. Inmates who engaged in this financial illegitimacy were not bothered about the
withdrawal “tax” because of the profit margin they stood to get from their intended business
venture. An inmate stated that;

I really do not care about the 10% the officers take from the amount I withdraw. The official
prison cash system will not give me the amount of money that I want at a time. The ceiling
amount is GHS40/$8 within a week, but I can withdraw GHS5000/ $1000 at a time and more
than twice within a week when I save with the illegal cash deposit system. GHS40/$8 is not
enough for my informal business activities. So the ones operated by the officers are useful to
me even though it is illegal.

The inmate added that;

The profit I get from the business is huge enough to cover the 10% deduction. (Inmate 8)

The informal cash deposit system and the profit margin accrued by inmates and officers give
a good image of the underground business venture, nonetheless, there were times such busi-
nesses went bad. Three inmates revealed through interviews that;

I heard of an officer who stole an inmate’s money through mobile money and was reported.
(Inmate 11)

There was a time an officer borrowed money from an inmate but refused to pay. When
one of their transactions went wrong the inmate went to report the issue to the Officer-in-
Charge (O.I.C.). The inmate was rather locked up and the officer later transferred. (Inmate 6)

There was a time an officer cheated an inmate in one of their transactions. The officer
smuggled in packs of cigarette which was sold by the said inmate. The inmate returned the
proceeds as agreed but the greedy officer did not respect his part of the obligation. This
angered inmate gave a tip-off to some officers. The officer was arrested at the gate when
she attempted to traffic in another pack of cigarettes. The officer was transferred to another
prison. (Inmate 13)

This type of business altercation within the informal economy was not only between officers but
also between inmates and relatives/friends. An ex-convict revealed that;

Just recently, that is between July and the latter part of September 2019, a relative of an
inmate who conspired to defraud a female police officer up to an amount of GHS60000/
$12000 later reported the inmate to the police officer after he felt cheated by the inmate.
The inmate was greedy and the relative was also greedy. (Ex-convict 9)

The underground economy was transactional, yet relational for its survival. Though illegal, yet it
required some level of trustworthiness and transparency. It proved useful to many inmates in
varied forms.
Inmates said their survival within the prison was due to their informal economic engagements. That, the informal economy was critical to their overall wellbeing—ranging from their health, legal, and family issues. The transcripts of interviews reveal as such, as reported by participants:

I am in confinement, but I pay school fees, house rent, and provide housekeeping money for my family outside. I am not the only person doing this. Some of the commercial cars you see driven outside are owned by inmates. They bought the cars from these illegal activities. (Inmate 5)

Inmates with money use part of it to pay for their transportation to the hospital when sick. (Ex-convict 1)

When I am sick I buy my pharmaceuticals when prescribed by the physician or the nurse in charge of the prison infirmary. (Inmate 12)

It is part of this money that some of these inmates use to file an appeal and bribe some officers to facilitate their transportation to court. (Ex-convict 5)

Inmates also use the money to hire lawyers . . . . (Ex-convict 6)

It is the mandate of the Ghana Prison Service to provide for the welfare of inmates, yet the data suggest the failure of the prison system in dispensing these responsibilities. Explicitly and implicitly, it is this informal economy that is sustaining and maintaining the prison bureaucracy.

4. Data discussion

This study has recorded the use of drugs (marijuana, cocaine, etc.) and other illegitimate items such as mobile phones, huge sums of money beyond the threshold for inmates, etc. in the prison informal economy. According to Wu (2010), marijuana is the most common drug in the world. Its common place in the prison is therefore not surprising. However, like any illegal material it takes on added value when it gets to its destination. The use of drugs in prison is not common to only Ghana as similar studies have also documented illegal drug usage among prisoners. Kinyanjui and Atwoli (2013) and the Uganda Prisons Service (2009) have both established the usage of prohibited drug use in prisons in Kenya and Uganda respectively. Apart from drug use, the “selling of body” for food and sleeping space augments the informal economy. The data implies that, it is for the lack of some basic needs that some inmates are initiated into homosexuality. Like the findings of Sagarin (1976), inmates were initiated into homosexuality after some period of incarceration. However, Sagarin’s (ibid) work did not premise this initiation on the lack of inmates’ basic needs.

The availability and use of prohibited items such as cannabis in prison have also been established by Cope (2003) and Parimah et al. (2020). Cope (ibid) found that young prison inmates used cannabis to control and manipulate the passing of their sentences.

The characteristics of the informal prison economy generally reflect the furtive illicit practices of the political state. The informal prison economy is not a practice that is necessarily observable to external investigators. It is a clandestine activity (Crewe, 2012; Walker, 2015). Due to the illegitimacy of the informal economy, inmates, officers, and outsiders use unlawful means (concealing items in bulk of soap and in rubber sandals, inserting some of such items through the anus, throwing over prison walls, etc.) to smuggle such items into the prison. This finding is not dissimilar to that of Walker (2015), that inmates use illegitimate ways to obtain prohibited items in prison.

The insights from the data reveal some guiding principles of the informal prison economy. Among such principles is the absence of written contracts between the inmates and staff or between inmates because of the illegal nature of the deal. Any written contract could be used to indict participants. Verbal understanding is the operating procedure.

The analysed data establishes some relationships between officers and prisoners. This falls in line with Liebling and Price (2001) that at the heart of many prison organisations is the relationship between prisoners and officers. However, our findings divulge that the relationships are crosscutting in power relations due to the illicit economic transactions. Who has power and influence in any specific instance is contingent upon who controls damaging information and resources, and which party stands to jeopardize his/her position. In this case, inmates wield more power over prison staff since
they have no respected official position to jeopardise. Prison officers become subjected to the “invisible” authority of inmates. The informal prison economy undermines the traditionally structured power relations between inmates and officers. Once inmates compromise officers, the relationship shifts from dominant-subordinate to collaborator/co-equal/accomplice power relations. The situation is even worse for officers who become indebted to inmates for borrowing money. Under such inverted power relations, officers are beholden to blackmail and exposure should they fail to do as instructed by the inmates. These findings contradict the work of Crewe (2012) that penal power is controlled by prison staff. Whilst it may outwardly appear so, the power relations between inmates and officers as found in this study prove otherwise. In furtherance, as it appears inmates control more damaging information. It implies that some relationships between inmates and officers are characterised by fear. This finding concurs with the work of Sim (2007) that the relationships between inmates and officers in England and Wales were characterised largely by fear.

It is also evident that in most cases, the work atmosphere of the informal economy is congested, unhygienic and even dangerous. There is always a potential and heightened danger associated with the transactions due to the possibility of misunderstanding and dissatisfaction with the outcome of the deal by the operatives. There is limited room to air grievances when parties are dissatisfied with the outcomes of the illicit transactions. The consequences might be violence, endangerment, and retaliation as the data revealed. These characteristics are similar to what was described by Crewe (2012) in the study of an English prison.

Due to the covert nature of the transactions, knowledge about the practices is limited to the participants. If and when an illicit transaction is made public, it is because one party felt cheated or that the goods and/or services were not delivered as promised, or the quality and quantity of the deliverables were not up to expectation, or that expected payment was not forthcoming. It is also in this context that recriminations expose the otherwise clandestine illicit practices in the bureaucracy.

Participants are fully aware of the law and protocol of the bureaucracy but they have decided to purposefully circumvent it in pursuit of their mutual but divergent interests. From the analysis, it was revealed that certain conditions engender the prison economy. These factors include prison banking: the formal storage of inmates’ money in the prison for safekeeping which makes both staff and other inmates aware of the cash flow in the prison. Inmates are entitled to up to GHS40/ $8 per week. This amount is not enough to meet their needs, as a result, inmates engage in illicit parallel financial operations to meet their discretionary expenditure.

The data implicitly disclose that inmates desire to create a semblance of the normalcy of their civilian lives in prison. That is, having personal cell phones, a savings account, buying and selling, and smoking and drinking. It is for this reason that they brew their own alcohol from using legitimate ingredients accessible in the prison.

The informal economy reveals the entrepreneurial spirit of inmates. The varied opportunities for profit-making: inmates renting mobile phones, or selling cigarettes, condiments, and other foodstuffs for profit-making. This constitutes an informal way of profiteering which is consistent with the findings of Walker (2015) that inmates used informal ways to make money in Amazonia prisons. Characterized by power inequality, predatory/predation, scarcity, and cost-benefit analysis, the corrupt practices are a risk worth taking because in most cases the worse punishment for an officer is no more than a transfer to another facility where similar practices are the norm. The organization’s corrupt ethic is highly guarded by insiders. The rule and regulations (protocol) have been subverted. Staff operate and manage parallel administrative processes (off the books) alongside the formal ones (on the books). All these reveal that the illicit economy is a product of a poorly managed system that enables some ordinary staff members to engage in unapproved practices without fear of negative sanctions. This divulges the pervasiveness of staff misuse and abuse of power.
The informal economy sows its seeds of discord and antagonism among prison officers. On one side, there are those enforcing the formal rules and regulations. On the other are those subverting them to facilitate their pursuit of profiting from the informal economy. At any point in time, there is more fiscal cash held by inmates than is officially recorded in the prison ledger. Given that external and impromptu audits are rarely conducted in the prison, no one is certain of the volume of cash being exchanged in a host of transactions in the prison on any given day.

It is a time-honoured ritual to destroy an already defective mobile phone in the prison yard. However, there is no clear accounting of the number of phones or the amount of illicit drug confiscation that gets destroyed. The symbolic destroying/burning of the contrabands is not lost on the prisoners; it is a ruse. Some of the very officers overseeing the burning of contrabands are the very same officers who facilitate the smuggling of contrabands into the prison.

The narratives above point that the informal economy within the prison bureaucracy is antithetical yet symbiotic with the formal bureaucracy. Antithetical because it is a complete violation of the bureaucratic staff code of conduct and the organizational operating standard. Symbiotic because the very deplorable conditions of the prison make it a fertile arena for both inmates and officers to mutually collaborate, institute, normalize and engage in corrupt practices.

That said, the role of the informal prison economy in the lives of inmates is enormous. Ranging from family sustenance, de-facto health insurance, and affording legal services to say the least. Based on the testimonies of inmates, the informal economy has become the apron string to the lives of most inmates. This finding is not pole apart from Yin (2018, 2020), that inmates depended on their own financial pool to access health care and legal services.

Drawing critically from Chamblass (1993) model of structural contradiction, the situation of the prison economy and its inner-workings can be made even clearer. The observations of the patterned: a) “doings” (behaviors) of the inmate, officers, and outsiders, b) the institutional processes—formal and informal rules and regulations, and c) data: experiential accounts of inmates, ex-convicts, and officers. Obvious is the fact that the prison bureaucratic process both enables and constrains officers, inmates, and visitors, yet some contradictions emanate from the formal operations of the prison. For example, inmates are allowed GhS40/$8 per week, but inmates can store more cash on the books and in their cells. Food is provided by the prison, but prepared food from the outside is more palatable at a price. Prison phone is accessible to inmates under the supervision of an officer, but illegal cellphone ownership is possible at a price.

Alcohol and illicit drugs are forbidden, but the ingredients to make them are readily accessible within the prison walls; selling alcohol and/or the ingredients generates revenue. Officers are restricted from bringing in items for inmates but the opportunities to earn extra income for engaging in illicit courier operations have been normalized by some corrupt officers.

The pattern in the data reveals that with time the illicit informal economy sows its seeds of decay in the prison. The plausible question is, how? When internal corruption gets out of hand, disorder sets in within the prison. The bases of the decay are that, both inmates and officers seek to extort or exploit each other, more contrabands enter the prison, more currency exchange hands than is allowed, and unpaid debts by inmates or by officers engender open hostility.

All these constitute institutional contradictions; antithetical operations of the prison; systemic corrupt practices borne out of the complicity of agents: a) desperate inmates, b) opportunistic prison officers, and c) profiteer outsiders. Over time, the prison attempts to find a solution to these contradictions by a) Scapegoating of selected officers; premature transfers to other prisons, b) Random searches and confiscation of illegal possession of assets, and c) Punishment of inmates; solitary confinement for a specified duration.
After a lull, the conditions for the antithetical (symbiotic) relations between the formal and informal economic relations begin all over again. This is so because the underlying economic conditions go unaddressed by the respective prison commanders. The rational-legal rules and regulations are given tepid enforcement; effective administrative record-keeping is hardly maintained and reinforced to serve as lessons for institutional learning and professional development.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to document, describe, and examine how the informal prison economy is mediated. It has shown that, in part, it is the internal micro bureaucratic capitalism that gives rise to the informal prison economy. And that there is a conscious effort by both prison staff and inmates to sustain this economy. The data analysis drew from ethnographic observation, informal and formal interviews, newspapers, and internet based news articles. Based on the discussion we conclude as follows: It is obvious that the informal prison economy can be summarized as a transaction engaged in by people with the potential breaches of the norms guiding their relationship. It is a high stake and intensive transaction that is dependent on mutual trust under a veil of secrecy.

The formal prison economy has become one of the main sources of goods and services for the informal economy. The legitimate products delivered by the prison to inmates are converted into contrabands for economic transactions and gains. This internal capitalism, in part, perpetuates this underground economy.

The illicit practices in prison are merely an extension of what is taking place in mainstream society. Newly deployed officers and incoming inmates are already predisposed to bribery and corruption in daily life. Looking at the culture of the informal prison economy, there is an insidious push-pull of people to conform to the pre-existing culture of illicit practices. In many prison settings, as it appears, personal integrity to do the right thing is even much more deviantised due to the benefits actors derive from such illicit practices. This explains why there is a conscious effort by some stakeholders to sustain the prison informal economy.

The informal economy has become habituated as it has taken on a life of its own; it appears to have become resistant to administrative control. It persists in varied forms in tandem with the formal bureaucracy. Being a clandestine operation, the collective tacit approval of the officers also sustains the illicit practices. Altogether, the fungible items are the lynchpin of the informal economy.

It is clear from the data that the prison informal economy, like any juridical and (or) social field is structured around a body of assumptions (e.g., the making of supernormal profit), internal protocols (e.g., everyone is involved), and self-sustaining corruptible values held by desperate inmates, opportunistic prison officers, and profiteer outsiders: all culminating into an insidious prison legal culture that keeps the operatives of the informal prison economy insulated from any external investigative body. The short-comings of the prison bureaucracy all combine to sow the seeds of structural contradictions that remain entrenched in perpetuating the underground prison economy.

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Author details
Elijah Tukwariba Yin1
E-mail: elijah.yin@ucc.edu.gh
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2757-092X
Nelson Kofie2
E-mail: nkofie@nvcc.edu

1 University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.
2 Northern Virginia Community College, Loudoun.

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