

# Demographic Characteristics and Institutional Reform Dynamics: Evidence from the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the associations between demographic characteristics and key factors influencing reformative change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS). Drawing on chi-square association analysis and Kruskal-Wallis H (KWH) tests, the study examines how variables including gender, age, rank, province, and years of service shape perceptions of leadership capacity, employee engagement, stakeholder engagement, training and development, resistance to change, political will, and technology adoption. The findings reveal that demographic characteristics do not exert uniform effects across reform dimensions; instead, they selectively influence specific aspects of the change management process. Province and years of service emerge as the most influential demographic variables, while gender and age play more targeted roles. The study concludes that an effective reform strategy for ZPCS must be differentiated, context-sensitive, and inclusive, accounting for the structural, hierarchical, and geographic factors that mediate reform experiences across the organisation.

**Keywords:** Change Management, Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, Demographic Characteristics, Leadership Capacity, Employee Engagement, Technology Adoption, Resistance to Change, Organizational Reform.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reformative change within public sector organisations, particularly correctional services, is a complex and multi-layered process that is shaped not only by policy design and institutional mandate but also by the demographic composition of the workforce. In contexts such as the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS), where organisational culture is deeply embedded in hierarchical structures and historical traditions, understanding how demographic factors interact with reform drivers is essential for designing effective change strategies.

This paper presents the eighth in a series of empirical analyses exploring the drivers and dynamics of reformative change in ZPCS. Specifically, it examines the statistical associations between selected demographic characteristics: gender, age, rank, province, and years of service and key reform-related variables, including leadership capacity, employee engagement, stakeholder engagement, training and development, resistance to change, political will, technology, and overall reformative change. The analysis employs chi-square tests for association and Kruskal-Wallis H tests for perceptual differences across demographic groups.

The overarching aim is to inform the development of a strategic framework for reformative change that is both empirically grounded and sensitive to the diverse needs and experiences of ZPCS personnel.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is founded on the premise that reformative change within correctional institutions is not experienced uniformly across organisational members. Rather, perceptions of reform are shaped by demographic characteristics that influence access to information, participation in decision-making processes, exposure to training opportunities, institutional experiences, and interactions with leadership structures. Demographic variables, therefore, serve as important contextual factors that influence how organisational change initiatives are interpreted, accepted, or resisted within correctional environments.

The conceptual foundation of this study positions demographic characteristics, namely gender, age, rank, province, and years of service, as the independent variables influencing key reform-related constructs within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS). These reform-related constructs include leadership capacity, employee engagement, stakeholder engagement, training and development, resistance to change, political will, technology adoption, and reformative change. The framework assumes that demographic differences create variations in organisational experiences, which in turn influence perceptions and responses to institutional reform initiatives.

The analytical framework is informed by Institutional Theory, Leadership Theory, and Contemporary Change Management Theory. Institutional Theory explains how organisational structures, norms, and routines shape employee perceptions and behaviours across demographic groups.

Leadership Theory provides insight into how positional authority and organisational hierarchy influence access to information, participation, and reform ownership. Change Management Theory explains how individual and group characteristics affect receptiveness to organisational transformation.

The framework further assumes that demographic characteristics do not directly determine reform outcomes but rather influence the conditions under which reform initiatives are implemented and experienced. Consequently, understanding demographic variation is essential for designing inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable reform strategies capable of accommodating the diverse realities of personnel across the ZPCS.

### 3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite growing recognition of the need to transform ZPCS from a punitive to a rehabilitative institution, reform efforts have been characterised by inconsistency, uneven implementation, and limited stakeholder ownership. A critical but underexplored dimension of this challenge is the extent to which demographic diversity within the ZPCS workforce mediates the reform experience. Without understanding these demographic dynamics, reform initiatives risk being designed as uniform, one-size-fits-all interventions that fail to account for the varied ways in which personnel at different ranks, provinces, and experience levels engage with change.

Existing research on public sector reform, while robust in addressing structural and policy dimensions, has given insufficient attention to the role of workforce demographics in sub-Saharan African correctional settings in shaping reform trajectories. This gap limits the capacity of ZPCS leadership to design targeted and effective reform strategies that resonate across the entire organisation.

### 4. RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

This paper is guided by the following central research question: To what extent do demographic characteristics: gender, age, rank, province, and years of service, associate with and influence perceptions of reformative change within ZPCS?

The study operates under the following hypotheses:

H1: There are statistically significant associations between demographic characteristics and reform-related variables in ZPCS.

H2: Perceptions of reformative change differ significantly across demographic groups within ZPCS.

### 5. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL ANCHORS

The relationship between workforce demographics and organisational change has been extensively studied in management and public administration literature. Gender influences leadership styles and decision-making, although its impact on organisational performance outcomes is less consistent [3,4]. Age-related differences in workplace behaviour have been linked to generational work values, with younger employees exhibiting greater openness to innovation [5,6,13,2].

Institutional theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how formal organisational systems standardise experiences across demographic groups, while hierarchical structures introduce differential access to information and decision-making [11,12].

Leadership theory supports the notion that perception of leadership varies with positional authority, consistent with the rank-based findings of this study [17].

In the context of correctional reform, tenure has been identified as a predictor of resistance to change, particularly in highly structured organisations [8]. Decentralised governance structures in correctional systems frequently result in uneven reform implementation across regions, a finding directly relevant to the provincial disparities identified in this study [14]. Contemporary public sector reform models emphasise adaptive, inclusive, and context-driven approaches to organisational transformation, which are consistent with the implications of this analysis [9].

### 6. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design, utilising primary data collected from ZPCS personnel across multiple provinces. Two main statistical techniques are applied:

Chi-Square Tests of Association were used to examine relationships between demographic variables and reform-related constructs. This technique is appropriate for categorical data and was applied to assess whether statistically significant associations exist between demographic groups and key reform variables at the 5% significance level ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Kruskal-Wallis H (KWH) Tests were employed to assess differences in perceptions across demographic groups. As a non-parametric alternative to one-way ANOVA, the KWH test is appropriate for ordinal data and for samples that violate the assumption of normality. The analysis focused on the following demographic variables: gender, age, rank (designation), province (location), and years of service. The dependent variables assessed include: leadership capacity, stakeholder engagement, training and development, resistance to change, political will, reformative change, technology, and employee engagement.

### 7. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis proceeds in two stages. The first stage examines chi-square associations between demographic characteristics and reform-related variables, providing an overview of which demographic factors are significantly associated with which dimensions of change. The second stage applies the Kruskal-Wallis H (KWH) test to explore whether perceptual differences across demographic groups are statistically significant for each reform variable.

#### 7.1 Chi-Square Association Analysis

The chi-square analysis reveals a nuanced and differentiated pattern of associations. Gender shows a statistically significant relationship with leadership capacity ( $p = .004$ ) but lacks significant associations with most other variables, including reformative change, resistance to change, and stakeholder engagement. This suggests that gender is not a primary determinant of reform outcomes but plays a targeted role in leadership dynamics.

Age exhibits a significant relationship only with employee engagement ( $p = .018$ ), indicating that generational differences are most manifest in how staff interact with and respond to reform processes. Rank presents an interesting pattern where no strong chi-square associations are observed, yet significant linear trends emerge across several variables, including leadership, reformative change, and training.

Years of service demonstrate significant relationships with reformative change ( $p = .030$ ), resistance to change ( $p = .007$ ), and training and development ( $p = .003$ ), making it one of the most influential demographic variables. Province emerges as the most significant demographic factor, with statistically significant relationships across multiple variables: leadership capacity ( $p = .035$ ), reformative change ( $p = .020$ ), employee engagement ( $p = .045$ ), and training and development ( $p = .001$ ).

## 7.2 Kruskal-Wallis H Test Analysis

### 7.2.1 Gender

The KWH test results indicate that gender significantly influences perceptions of leadership ( $p = 0.017$ ) and employee engagement ( $p = 0.018$ ), as well as reformative change itself ( $p = 0.019$ ). Gender does not significantly affect perceptions of stakeholder engagement ( $p = 0.507$ ), training and development ( $p = 0.087$ ), resistance to change ( $p = 0.871$ ), political will ( $p = 0.062$ ), or technology ( $p = 0.055$ ). These findings suggest that gender shapes how relational and people-centred aspects of reformative change are perceived, while structural variables remain largely uniform across gender lines.

### 7.2.2 Age

Age does not significantly influence most variables, with the exception of employee engagement ( $p = 0.037$ ). Variables such as leadership ( $p = 0.201$ ), stakeholder engagement ( $p = 0.671$ ), training and development ( $p = 0.167$ ), resistance to change ( $p = 0.064$ ), political will ( $p = 0.650$ ), reformative change ( $p = 0.791$ ), and technology ( $p = 0.178$ ) all yield non-significant results. This pattern indicates a relatively cohesive organisational culture within ZPCS, where institutional norms override generational differences in most reform perceptions.

### 7.2.3 Rank (Designation)

Rank significantly influences perceptions of leadership ( $p = 0.005$ ), stakeholder engagement ( $p = 0.037$ ), training and development ( $p = 0.002$ ), political will ( $p = 0.024$ ), and employee engagement ( $p = 0.001$ ). It does not significantly affect perceptions of resistance to change ( $p = 0.196$ ), reformative change overall ( $p = 0.095$ ), or technology ( $p = 0.206$ ). The significance of rank across multiple variables reflects the hierarchical nature of ZPCS, where positional authority shapes access to information, decision-making, and development opportunities.

### 7.2.4 Province (Location)

Province is the most comprehensively significant demographic variable, with significant effects observed for leadership ( $p = 0.000$ ), resistance to change ( $p = 0.021$ ), political will ( $p = 0.000$ ), reformative change ( $p = 0.000$ ), technology ( $p = 0.017$ ), and employee engagement ( $p = 0.000$ ). Stakeholder engagement ( $p = 0.005$ ) and training and development ( $p = 0.000$ ) also yield significant results. These findings highlight the presence of spatial inequalities in reform experience and implementation across ZPCS provinces.

### 7.2.5 Years of Service

Years of service significantly influence perceptions of leadership ( $p = 0.038$ ), training and development ( $p = 0.000$ ), political will ( $p = 0.025$ ), technology ( $p = 0.036$ ), and employee engagement ( $p = 0.003$ ). Stakeholder engagement ( $p = 0.270$ ), resistance to change ( $p = 0.072$ ), and overall reformative change ( $p = 0.053$ ) do not yield significant differences.

These findings suggest that organisational tenure functions as an experience-based interpretive filter through which reform initiatives are evaluated.

## 8. FINDINGS

The analysis yields several key findings regarding the role of demographic characteristics in shaping reformative change within ZPCS:

First, demographic characteristics do not exert uniform effects across reform dimensions but instead shape specific aspects of change management in distinct ways. No single demographic variable is associated with all reform dimensions, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of reform dynamics.

Second, province and years of service are the most influential demographic variables. The province is associated with nearly all reform dimensions, reflecting the significance of geographical context, resource disparities, and regional leadership quality. Years of service strongly influence resistance to change, training, and technology perceptions, indicating that institutional tenure is a critical moderating factor.

Third, rank is a major determinant of perception, particularly regarding leadership, stakeholder engagement, and employee engagement. This reflects the hierarchical power structures that govern reform access and participation within ZPCS.

Fourth, gender and age play more targeted roles. Gender significantly influences leadership and employee engagement perceptions, areas associated with interpersonal and relational dimensions of reform, while age primarily affects employee engagement, reflecting generational differences in work values.

Fifth, employee engagement emerges as a cross-cutting variable that is significantly influenced by all five demographic characteristics, positioning it as a central mechanism for reform facilitation or constraint.

## 9. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study carry important implications for understanding how demographic diversity shapes reform dynamics within ZPCS. The limited influence of gender on structural reform variables, consistent with institutional theory [12], suggests that formal organisational systems within ZPCS effectively standardise experiences across gender lines. However, the significant influence of gender on leadership and employee engagement points to the persistence of gendered interpersonal dynamics that reform policies must address. This aligns with research on gender differences in leadership communication and inclusivity [4].

The minimal effect of age on most variables, with employee engagement as the exception, suggests a relatively homogeneous organisational culture within ZPCS that transcends generational differences in most reform dimensions. This finding is consistent with observations that highly structured organisations reduce generational variability in perceptions [15]. However, the significant generational variation in employee engagement, reflecting younger employees' preferences for participation and flexibility versus older employees' emphasis on stability, underscores the need for age-differentiated engagement strategies.

The strong influence of rank on multiple reform variables confirms that ZPCS operates as a deeply hierarchical institution where positional authority mediates access to reform processes. Senior officers are more likely to be active participants in reform design, while junior officers are predominantly recipients of reform outcomes.

This asymmetry, supported by leadership theory [17], risks creating misalignment between reform intentions and ground-level implementation. Research on unequal access to training in hierarchical institutions further supports the observed disparities in training and development perceptions across ranks [7].

The pervasive influence of the province across virtually all reform dimensions is perhaps the most significant finding of this study. It reflects the reality that ZPCS operates across diverse regional contexts characterised by varying levels of infrastructure, resource allocation, and leadership capacity. This spatial heterogeneity, documented in comparative studies of correctional systems and decentralisation literature [14,1], underscores the need for context-sensitive, decentralised reform strategies. The differential technology perceptions across provinces further highlight the digital infrastructure gap that exists in developing country public sector contexts [16].

The influence of years of service on multiple reform variables reflects the role of institutional memory and accumulated experience in shaping reform receptivity. Long-serving employees, shaped by prior reform experiences, including unsuccessful ones, are likely to approach new reform initiatives with scepticism. This finding resonates with research identifying tenure as a predictor of resistance to change [8]. Conversely, newer employees' greater openness to innovation [6] suggests that a generational transition within ZPCS could be leveraged to accelerate reform adoption if appropriately managed.

## 10. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following policy recommendations are advanced for ZPCS leadership and reform architects:

**1. Adopt a Differentiated Reform Strategy:** ZPCS should abandon one-size-fits-all reform approaches in favour of differentiated strategies that account for demographic diversity. Reform programmes must be tailored to address the specific needs, perceptions, and motivational drivers of different genders, ages, ranks, provinces, and experience groups.

**2. Prioritise Decentralised and Context-Sensitive Implementation:** Given the pervasive influence of provinces on reform perceptions, ZPCS should adopt a decentralised reform architecture that allows provincial units flexibility in adapting national reform strategies to local conditions. Equitable resource distribution across provinces must be a reform prerequisite.

**3. Address Hierarchical Asymmetry in Reform Participation:** Reform initiatives must actively include junior officers and non-commissioned ranks as participants rather than mere recipients. Structured feedback mechanisms, consultative forums, and inclusive decision-making processes should be institutionalised to reduce hierarchical barriers to reform ownership.

**4. Implement Experience-Sensitive Change Management:** ZPCS should develop targeted interventions for long-serving staff, including retraining programmes, mentoring schemes, and cultural reorientation initiatives that acknowledge and address past reform experiences. Trust-building measures are essential to overcome scepticism rooted in institutional memory.

**5. Develop Age and Gender-Responsive Engagement Strategies:** Employee engagement strategies should be differentiated by age and gender. Younger employees should be offered participatory platforms and recognition mechanisms, while older employees should receive assurance of stability and continuity. Gender-sensitive leadership development programmes should be prioritised to address relational dynamics that influence engagement.

**6. Invest in Digital Infrastructure Equity:** The significant provincial variation in technology perceptions signals a need for targeted investment in digital infrastructure across underserved provinces. Technology-enabled reform tools should not be deployed uniformly without first ensuring equitable access and digital literacy across all ZPCS locations.

**7. Elevate Employee Engagement as a Strategic Priority:** Given that employee engagement is significantly influenced by all five demographic variables and constitutes a central mechanism for reform facilitation, ZPCS leadership should treat engagement not as an outcome but as a strategic driver of reform. Institutionalised engagement frameworks should be embedded within all reform programmes.

## 11. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study provides important insights into the relationship between demographic characteristics and reformative change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, several opportunities exist for further research. First, future studies should explore the causal mechanisms through which demographic variables influence reform perceptions. The current study establishes associations and perceptual differences but does not fully explain the underlying processes through which these relationships emerge.

Second, future research should examine the interaction effects among demographic variables. For example, the combined influence of rank and years of service, or province and gender, may provide a deeper understanding of how multiple demographic factors shape reform experiences within correctional institutions.

Third, longitudinal studies are required to assess how demographic influences evolve over time as reform initiatives mature. Organisational transformation is a dynamic process, and perceptions of reform may change as employees gain experience with new policies, technologies, and organisational practices.

Fourth, comparative studies involving correctional services from other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries would provide valuable insights into regional similarities and differences in demographic influences on institutional reform. Such studies could contribute to the development of contextually relevant correctional reform models for the region.

Fifth, future research should investigate the perspectives of offenders, former offenders, community partners, and external stakeholders regarding reform implementation. Expanding the scope beyond correctional personnel would provide a more comprehensive understanding of reform effectiveness and institutional transformation.

Finally, future studies should examine emerging issues such as digital transformation, workforce diversity management, institutional resilience, employee well-being, and the role of

innovation in supporting reformative correctional systems. These areas are increasingly important as correctional institutions adapt to changing societal expectations and evolving approaches to offender rehabilitation and reintegration.

## 12. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has demonstrated that demographic characteristics play a critical and differentiated role in shaping reformative change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service. Through chi-square association analysis and Kruskal-Wallis H tests, the study has established that province and years of service are the most influential demographic variables, while rank, gender, and age exert more targeted effects. Employee engagement has been identified as a cross-cutting mechanism through which reform is either facilitated or constrained across all demographic groups.

The overarching conclusion is that reformative change in ZPCS is a multidimensional, context-dependent process that cannot be effectively managed through uniform policy interventions. Effective reform requires a holistic, adaptive approach that goes beyond structural policy design to engage the diverse human fabric of the organisation, acknowledging the varied histories, positions, locations, and generational experiences that shape how reform is perceived, received, and ultimately enacted.

These findings provide a robust empirical foundation for developing a strategic reform framework that is both inclusive and sustainable, thereby supporting the fundamental transformation of ZPCS from a punitive institution to a rehabilitative and correctional service that reflects international standards of human rights and correctional best practice.

### Disclaimer

*The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the research team and do not necessarily represent the views of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, the Government of Zimbabwe, or any affiliated institutions. The data and analyses presented herein are intended solely for academic and policy research purposes. All statistical results have been reported in good faith based on the primary data collected. The research team has taken all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy and integrity in the analysis and reporting of findings. Any errors or omissions are unintentional.*

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