



UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



**OCEANS BEYOND
PIRACY**
a project of the One Earth Future Foundation

SOMALI PRISON SURVEY REPORT:

PIRACY MOTIVATIONS & DETERRENTS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN Office of Drugs and Crime and Oceans Beyond Piracy jointly conducted an informal survey of 66 Somali inmates accused of piracy in Hargeisa prison in Somaliland, Bosasso Prison in Puntland and Montagne Posee Prison in the Seychelles. The survey was on prisoner attitudes about piracy and effective deterrents. Surveys were conducted in the prisons by UNODC personnel; OBP designed and analyzed the survey data.

KEY FINDINGS

- Economic motives were commonly cited as a reason for becoming involved in piracy.
- Prisoners reported that poverty was a major driver in joining piracy, and in their opinion if better economic opportunities were not developed then piracy was likely to remain a problem.
- Concern about illegal fishing remains as a justification for piracy. Other than economic concerns, concerns about illegal fishing were the other background factor commonly listed as a reason for the existence of piracy.
- International navies, more than other forms of counter-piracy programs, appear to have been a significant concern of prisoners while they were active pirates. Armed guards were also flagged as a concern, although not as frequently. Prisoners reported concern about international navies while they were at sea, and listed international navies as a major at-sea deterrent. Few pirates reported concern for navies or armed guards as being a primary reason for people leaving piracy, however.
- Family and community pressures appear to be very important to people leaving piracy. For those pirates who knew someone who left piracy, the dominant reason was family or community pressure.
- Prisoners report being very impacted by prison, and a strong desire to avoid future prison time. A concern about future prison sentences was reported as a major reason why they would avoid piracy in the future.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a sharp decline in Somali piracy since its peak in 2008. The reasons for this decline are not conclusively documented, but probable explanations include the successes of international navies in interdicting pirate groups, the increasing use of armed guards by ships transiting the region, and the developing judicial system and prosecution of pirates captured at sea. One potential source of information on the causal drivers of the decline in piracy is the perceptions of pirates themselves. In an attempt to gather some information about the perceptions of pirates about the relative impact of various counter-piracy strategies, UNODC proposed a survey in partnership with Oceans Beyond Piracy of the perceptions of Somalis captured and accused of piracy. This survey was designed as a relatively informal, low-cost initial exploration into the perceptions of inmates about the driving factors that support piracy and the deterrent impact of different programs in place as part of the counter-piracy regime. It also explored inmate concerns about conditions on land and the degree to which instability or policing on-shore were factors of concern for pirates.

SURVEY DESIGN AND COMPLICATIONS IN IMPLEMENTATION

They survey was conducted in an informal setting where inmates were asked a series of questions about their attitudes and experiences concerning Somali piracy. The survey collected the



Prison in Garowe, Somalia - Supported by the UNODC counter-piracy programme.

attitudes of 28 inmates convicted of piracy in Hargeisa Prison in Somaliland, 21 inmates arrested for piracy in Montagne Posse Prison in the Seychelles and 17 inmates convicted of piracy in Bossaso Prison in Puntland for a total of 66 inmates surveyed. The inmates themselves came from a wide range of locations throughout Somalia.

The survey method was designed to be carried out as a one-on-one interview with each inmate. The interviews themselves were to be carried out by a UNODC detention and transfer consultant, with the assistance of a translator. However in the

implementation of the survey the one-on-one method was not always practical. In Hargeisa and in the Seychelles the inmates were reluctant to participate in individual interviews, out of concerns about the perceptions of other inmates. In these prisons, collective focus groups were conducted using the survey as the basis of the discussion.

In the discussion, many inmates declared their innocence and rejected the label of pirate, possibly for fear of influencing their appeal process. Many maintained that they were fishermen who were not guilty of piracy, and refused to participate in any question which suggested that they were pirates. In this case, questions were reworded to avoid asking inmates to refer to themselves as pirates.



Pirates are held in prisons across East Africa, with the largest number outside Somalia held in Shimo La Tewa in Kenya (shown here).

SURVEY RESULTS: MOTIVATION TO GO TO SEA

Prisoners report going to sea out of a mixture of reaction to illegal fishing in Somali waters and economic pressures.

The first question asked participants about why they became pirates. In the case of Seychelles prisoners, they rejected this terminology and instead preferred to answer the question of why they went to sea as fishermen. In Puntland and Hargeisa prisoners were more comfortable identifying as pirates, and responses to this question were evenly split between protecting the Somali coast from illegal fishing and economic pressures. In Hargeisa, the group chose those two questions as equally weighted in reasons for going to sea, while in Puntland 8 out of 17 prisoners chose protecting Somali waters and 8 out of 17 chose needing money as their reasons. Some specific quotes from prisoners include the following:

- *“I was out of money so that I decided to join the pirates in order to get food.”*
- *“My family is poor, so that’s why I joined the pirates.”*
- *“If a person is in poverty, every way he/she can get money they’ll do it”*
- *“I joined the pirates for resentment and anger for the western illegal fishing for the Somali coasts.”*
- *“Illegal fishers caused us to be pirate”*

SURVEY RESULTS: PERCEPTIONS OF ON-SHORE THREATS

Prisoners report fairly high degrees of concern about on-shore threats, primarily Al-Shabaab.

The survey asked prisoners if there was anything they worried about ashore, to assess to what degree shore-based authorities concerned prisoners. In the Seychelles, 7 out of 21 prisoners

indicated they were afraid of armed local groups, and 14 specified al-Shabaab as their greatest concern. In Puntland, 7 out of 17 prisoners indicated no concern about shore-based threats, while 6 out of 17 indicated worry about local armed groups without specifying any specific group. Only one prisoner indicated concern about other pirate gangs. In Hargeisa, prisoners underscored that they were not pirates but fishermen instead, and suggested that if they were pirates then their greatest concerns would be about threats from their own gangs or other pirate gangs. This shows that on-shore governance is still lacking in piracy affected areas and there is little to prevent a resurgence of piracy.

- *“I was only worrying to come back from the sea with empty hands.”*
- *“Al-Shabab and other militia clans.”*

SURVEY RESULTS: PIRACY DETERRENCE

Prisoners report their primary concerns while operating as pirates were international navies, with some pirates reporting fear of imprisonment or armed guards as well.

The survey asked prisoners whether they were afraid of anything while operating at sea. All prisoners in the Seychelles responded that they were not worried about anything, as did several prisoners in Puntland. For those prisoners who did report concerns while at sea, the dominant concern was international navies (7 out of 17 prisoners in Puntland indicated this worry and Hargeisa prisoners reported being concerned about international navies and armed guards equally). Fairly sizeable minorities in the Puntland prison also reported fear of running out of fuel (4/17) and jail (3/17). Prisoners in Hargeisa also reported that while they may not have been concerned about jail while they were a pirate, their experience in prison has had a deterrent effect which could dissuade a return to piracy. Hargeisa prisoners also reported concern about armed guards shooting all boats that came too close, whether pirate boats or not. It should be

noted that responses to these questions focused on fear they felt while operating as pirates or at sea: there is no evidence in these responses specifically that these fears led to changes in behavior, although this finding did arise in later questions.

- *“Prison is the worst place to be in the world.”*

Prisoners report that for pirates who chose to stop being pirates, family and community pressure was a strong motivation. Economic success was also flagged as a reason some pirates stopped.

Prisoners were asked if they knew anyone who had stopped being a pirate. For those who did know someone who had left piracy, family and community pressure were identified as the primary reason: in the Seychelles 20 of 21 prisoners reported this reason for why people left piracy. In Puntland, 5 of the 10 persons identified by inmates as leaving piracy were reported to have left because of family or community pressure, including one prisoner reporting that the former pirate’s family had physically taken the pirate out of the group and put him into a rehab center. In Hargeisa, prisoners reported community and family pressure and economic success as the two reasons why people have left piracy. The Hargeisa interviewer reported that “the communities are losing too many men (young men) to piracy, due to arrests, imprisonment, lost at sea, etc. So families are starting to fear the loss of their kin, and don’t want them to go to sea.”

Prisoners in Puntland identified that 2 out of the 10 former pirates they knew of had quit because they had made enough money from being a pirate. The Hargeisa interviewer noted that “Many of the participants suggested that people turn to piracy because of the money, and once they generate enough income they try to invest the money in something else.”

Other issues identified less frequently by prisoners as why they left piracy include fear of armed guards aboard ships (2 out of 10 in Puntland), the loss of pirate group leadership (1 out of 21 in the Seychelles), and fear of international navies (1 out of 10 in Puntland).

In addition, the Hargeisa interviewer noted that the discussion also suggested that the fear of long-term imprisonment may work as a deterrent, but that this requires an understanding of the impact of incarceration that is only just starting to develop in Somalia.

- *“He said his family had captured him and put him into a rehabilitation center for a few months, he became a normal person.”*
- *“We got powerful governments, and people got other opportunities”*

Prisoners reported international navies and self-defense measures (such as speed and barbed wire) as the most effective at-sea deterrent to piracy, and improved education and job opportunities as the most effective long-term solution to piracy.

Participants were asked to rank a list of four at-sea potential deterrents to piracy and four on-shore potential solutions in terms of which they considered most to least effective. Prisoners in the Seychelles and Puntland ranked these lists. Many prisoners gave equal ranking to several items, resulting in shared rankings of the most effective. Prisoners cited international navies most commonly as an on-sea deterrent to piracy, and self-defense measures by ships such as “speed/maneuvering, barbed wire, etc.” as the second most common deterrent to a successful piracy incident. Arrest and imprisonment were listed as the third most common and armed guards were listed least commonly. The interviewer for the Hargeisa prisoners reported that “they did consider armed guards to be the biggest deterrent followed by arrest and imprisonment. For them arrest and imprisonment includes the navies as they don’t see these processes as done by separate entities. Nobody mentioned self-defense measurements by ships.”

When considering on-shore solutions to piracy, improved education was listed most commonly as the most effective on-shore solution. Better job opportunities were listed the second most common on-shore solution. Better management of maritime natural resources was the third most commonly chosen and better Somali maritime law enforcement was listed as the least.

The interviewer for the Hargeisa prisoners reported that “Many mentioned that it was neither their desire to ‘police’ the waters against illegal fishing, nor help in the fight against piracy. They saw this as the government’s job and responsibility, but that they would take up some of these duties if the government failed to do their work. They would finance these duties by whatever means necessary... The group managed to agree after long discussions on a common point of view that piracy was done more out of necessity and lack of other alternatives. It was stated that if nothing had changed at home while they had been imprisoned, they would continue with piracy. There was no mention about fear of the deterrent factors (navies, armed guards, arrests, jail, etc.). The statement mainly underlined the fact, that if there is nothing done, we will keep trying this.”

SURVEY RESULTS: LIFE AFTER PRISON

No prisoner reported that they would return to piracy. When asked why, the dominant response was fear of prison and a desire to avoid returning to prison.

Unsurprisingly, no prisoner reported that they would return to piracy when they left the prison. In the Seychelles, 20 out of 21 prisoners did report that they would return to sea to continue fishing, while 1 said he would not go back to sea at all out of concern about prison. In Puntland, no prisoner reported that they would return to piracy. The most common reason given was fear of prison or concern about prison (5 of 17), with additional reasons given including a sense that piracy is morally wrong (3 prisoners), the presence of a stable government to protect Somalis that removed the need for piracy (1 prisoner), the hope for other economic opportunities (1 prisoner), having enough money not to go back to piracy (1 prisoner), the overall collapse of

piracy and lack of opportunities (1 prisoner) and the threat posed by international navies (1 prisoner). In Hargeisa, the interviewer noted that prisoners initially said that they would not return to piracy, but “many expressed the points of view that if they were to return to their homes, and there were no opportunities for them to make a living and/or the illegal fishing continues, they probably would go back to do what we define as piracy.”

- *“Now I feel the bitterness of prison, so I won’t go back to piracy.”*
- *“I have enough money to manage myself”*
- *“Now Somalia is recovering and I hope that I will get a better job.”*
- *“I was immature when I joined the piracy but now am mature and I can understand what is right and what is wrong.”*

Prisoners report a variety of plans for what to do when they leave prison, with an emphasis on farming and fishing.

Prisoners all reported having plans for what to do when they were released. In the Seychelles, participants primarily reported that they would look for jobs, and those with specific ideas intended to look at jobs in farming. In Hargeisa, prisoners reported the need for skills training in order to help them identify new opportunities and specific concern that the job training offered in the prison does not correspond to the opportunities available. In Puntland, 5 out of 17 reported they wanted to go back to fishing, and 4 reported plans to go back to farming. Two of these 9 reported plans to go back to both fishing and farming. After these answers, the most common answer was joining the Somali national maritime police (2 prisoners), working as a security guard (2 prisoners), and driver (2 prisoners).

ANALYSIS

The results of this survey contain several inconsistencies and potential internal contradictions. This may reflect comprehension challenges with the survey, or it may reflect prisoners giving different answers depending on what they wanted the interviewer to hear. Given that, the results should be taken with some degree of critical examination. With that caveat, there are some conclusions that can be drawn from these results.

Economic conditions were regularly cited as a reason for becoming a pirate, and long-term solutions to piracy may require addressing this.

One theme across answers about piracy has to do with the lack of economic options available. Many prisoners reported going to sea because of economic pressures, and one reason pirates left piracy was that they had gotten enough money to retire. Prisoners strongly felt that more economic opportunities were key to solving piracy, and also to their future ability to avoid returning to piracy.

Family and community pressures appear to be very important to people leaving piracy, and counter-piracy messaging focusing on encouraging this may be valuable

For those prisoners who knew pirates who quit piracy, the dominant reason for quitting was direct pressure from families and communities. In particular, there was some discussion of the idea that this grew out of concern about the danger of piracy, and the large number of young men not returning to their communities because of imprisonment or deaths at sea. Programs that reinforce this message or allow pathways by which social pressure can be applied by families and communities to pirates may be useful in pulling pirates out of piracy.

Prisoners report being very impacted by prison, and a strong desire to avoid future prison time.

Prisoners reported a strong deterrent effect from being in prison: many prisoners specifically cited fear of future prison time as a reason why they would not go back to sea. This was also reported as a fear while they were previously at sea, although not a common or universal fear. Some caution should be taken with this finding: this is the kind of finding that may be particularly likely to be influenced by the context of the interview. However, quotes from prisoners appear sincere in reporting their unhappiness with prison and desire to avoid future prison terms. This is particularly true when their responses about prison are compared with the frank acknowledgement of prisoners in Hargeisa that if the structural issues that led to piracy were not fixed, it was relatively likely that they may return to piracy.

Concern about illegal fishing remains as a justification for piracy.

Many prisoners pointed to illegal fishing and the protection of the Somali coast as a reason for piracy and suggested that if it remained then piracy may remain. However, prisoners also appeared relatively optimistic about the government and the recovery of Somalia, and suggested that if the government was able to resolve the illegal fishing problem there would be less need for piracy.

International navies, more than other forms of counter-piracy programs, appear to have been a significant concern of prisoners. Armed guards were also flagged as a concern.

International navies consistently were flagged by prisoners as a concern while at sea and part of the deterrence of piracy. Prisoners reported being concerned about international navies and believing that international navies were an important part of deterrence. The same was true for armed guards aboard vessels, although to a lesser degree than international navies. This suggests that a significant draw-down in naval forces may reduce a deterrent factor potentially contributing to the reduction in piracy.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

There are several limitations to this research that should be acknowledged. Because of the nature of the prison population

and the fact that some of the interviews were conducted in group settings by outside staff, prisoners' answers to these surveys should be viewed through the lens of what prisoners want to report to the UNODC rather than being seen as wholly unbiased responses to a neutral survey. There is likely some degree of active shaping of the message being reported here. A second limitation is found in the fact that by definition, this is a survey of inmates who did not voluntarily leave piracy and who also were caught. More effective or lucky pirates, and those who voluntarily left piracy behind are not included in the sample, and may have different perspectives on the dominant deterrence factors.

With those limitations acknowledged, this study remains one of few that have directly interviewed Somalis accused of piracy, and may be a contribution to the ongoing discussion about the cause of the decline in piracy and the identification of lessons-learned for future counter-piracy programs. One major lesson that can be drawn from the specific conclusions of this survey is the importance of a multi-pronged regime complex addressing piracy: no inmate reported any single counter-piracy activity as the solution to piracy. Instead, the multi-element approach that incorporates international navies, robust prisons and judicial systems, and vessel self-protection by ships, appears to be driving collective impact. It may be that the lesson of Somali piracy is less the impact of any single element of this response, so much as the layered impact of all of this intersecting with local community perceptions and economic needs.

APPENDIX: SURVEY TEXT

Instructions

- Interviewer should instruct the participant to answer as briefly as possible, and also tell them that they may choose not to answer any question they would like.
- The interviewer should ask each of the following questions and choose the answer or answers that best describe the participants' response. Use this form to record answers, and also write any notes they would like

1. Why did you become a pirate?

- Protect Somali waters
- Friends encouraged me to
- Family encouraged me to
- Needed money
- Wanted excitement
- Other _____

Interviewer notes: _____

2. When you were a pirate, was there anything you were worried about during attacks?

- Yes – armed guards
- Yes – International navies
- Yes - Jail
- Yes – running out of fuel
- Yes – self-defense mechanisms by vessels
- Yes – Other _____
- No

Interviewer notes: _____

3. When you were a pirate, was there anything you were worried about while ashore?

- Yes – local security forces
- Yes – local non-state armed forces
- Yes – other pirate gangs
- Yes – my own gang
- Yes – other _____
- No

Interviewer notes: _____

4. Do you know anybody who quit being a pirate?

- a. If yes, why did he quit?
- b. Family or community pressure
- c. Fear of armed guards
- d. Fear of navies
- e. Leadership arrested
- f. Pirate arrested
- g. Fear of other group
- h. Made enough money

Interviewer notes: _____

5. Will you go back to piracy when you are out of prison?

- a. If yes, is there anything you are worried about?
- b. Yes – Armed guards
- c. Yes – International navies
- d. Yes - Jail
- e. Yes – Other _____

If no, why not?

6. What do you think you will do for money when you get out of prison?

7. What would be the most effective deterrent to piracy at sea? (Please rank in importance 1 most important- 4 least important)

- _ International navies
- _ Armed guards on vessels
- _ Arrest and imprisonment
- _ Self-defense measures by the ship (speed/maneuvering, barbed wire, etc.)

**8. What in the long term would stop piracy
(Please rank in importance 1 most important- 4 least important)**

- _ Job opportunities
- _ Somali based maritime law enforcement
- _ Better maritime natural resource management
- _ Improved education opportunities

Interviewer notes: _____

***For more information about the Somali Prison Survey Report,
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