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ASSESSING TYPES OF STRESSORS AMONG INCARCERATED WOMEN IN MALAYSIAN PRISON

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 1 Sept 2024 Revised: 5 Oct 2024 Accepted: 25 Oct 2024 Published: 15 Nov 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Stress Stressors Incarcerated Women Inmates Prison</p> <p>OPEN  ACCESS</p>	<p>Imprisonment has negative psychological effects on inmates, most often leading to psychological deterioration. An abundance of research had revealed that these effects include emotional withdrawal, depression, suicidal thoughts or actions, and increasing levels of hostility. This study assessed the types of stressors experienced by inmates during incarceration in one of the prisons located in Malaysia's Southern Region. One hundred twenty-three female inmates (N = 123) have participated in the survey. Data were collected using Prison Stresses (PS Scale) and the results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings of this study revealed that missing family or friends, concerns about the future, regrets about the past and missing freedom as most stressful types of stressors experience in prison. Findings from this research could provide crucial information towards improving psychological well-being of the inmates and assisting the Prison Department of Malaysia and counselors specifically to develop appropriate intervention and treatment plan in rectify this particular issue.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers agree that imprisonment has negative psychological and physical effects on inmates, most often leading to psychological deterioration (Picken, 2012). An abundance of research had revealed that these effects include emotional withdrawal, depression, suicidal thoughts or actions, and increasing levels of hostility (Picken, 2012). Various prison-related studies have demonstrated that the feelings of stress and depression are quite widespread and common among prison inmates (Marcus, Hamlin & Lyons, 2001). According to Pollock-Byrne (1990), all the hardship experienced by inmates, which includes their freedom being withheld from them, the inadequate emotional support, feeling isolated and surrounded by people that do not care about them, prison violence, and limited interaction with their children, could be the reason for their distress. Thus, this study would provide the researcher with useful information regarding female inmates' resilience in living a life in prison.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section includes the review of the past literature related to the types of stressors among inmates.

Stressors Among Inmates

Quite a number of works have been written about stress, but each has its own respective definition. More often than not, stress is defined as a condition of mental or emotional pressure or strain which is caused by adverse or demanding situations. Stress can also mean "a chronically high level of mental arousal and bodily tension that exceed a person's capacity to cope that results in distress, disease, or an increased capacity to cope" (Neidhardt, Weinstein, & Conry, 1990, p. 2). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984, cited in Berjot & Gillet, 2011), stress has the ability to threaten a person's well-being due to the link between the person and his/her environment, one that is demanding or forcing the person beyond his/her capabilities. Besides, stress can be caused when a person is put in a position or situation that is incongruent with his/her background and past experiences.

There are many sources that can cause an inmate to face stress, such as a high risk of exposure to violence, lack of freedom, limited number of facilities and programmes, conflicts with other inmates or prison staff, overcrowding, and lack of privacy. Not to mention that they also have to deal with other trivial issues such as boredom, excessive noise, and being isolated from the outside world (Paulus & Dzindolet, 1993; Negy, Woods, & Carlson, 1997, in Partyka, 2001). Stress also increases when inmates are closer to their release time as they can feel anxious about or alienated from the outside world, which they have been isolated from for a certain period of time and may no longer feel as if they belong to a particular community (Rivlin, Hawton, Marzano & Fazel, 2010). Other sources of stress generally include coping with prison rules, expectations of prison staff and other inmates, and physical and sexual intimidation by other inmates (Sultan, Long, Kiefer, Schrum, Selby, & Calhoun, 1984, in Partyka, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

The study was quantitative investigation about types of stressors experienced by inmates during incarceration in prison. In order to achieve the objective of this study, a descriptive research was design and utilized. One of the types of descriptive methods that were employed in this research was survey methods (Jackson, 2009). Questionnaires were distributed to the selected sample as representative for the population at that particular prison institutions as means for data collection. All the data gained from the questionnaires were interpreted quantitatively.

Sample

In this research, the researcher has adopted purposive sampling method in selecting 123 respondents as to represent the population of the research. The respondents in this study were of different race/ ethnic groups, educational background, imprisonment period respectively and aged between 17 to 57 years old. The limited access to collect a larger target sample size was due to the restricted capacity in selecting respondents in the prison because of security reasons enforced by the prison department.

Instrument

This scale of Prison Stresses (PS Scale) was originally developed by Maitland and Sluder (1998) and it consists of 11 items which encompasses numerous issues being faced by inmates that may lead to the feeling of stress. The reliability of this scale was reported as $\alpha = .78$. In addition, another 8 items have been added later by Rocheleau (2011) and the new reliability index for all 19 items was $\alpha = .83$, thus it clearly indicates that this scale was reliable and can be accepted as an instruments for this research.

This scale have 19 questions in which each question carry different type of stresses. Among the items in the scale is “missing family or friends”. In this section, the 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not hard at all, 2 = not hard, 3 = neutral, 4 = hard and 5 = very hard will be used as an option for the respondents to choose. The higher score indicates the higher level of stress being experienced by the inmates.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis (e.g. mean, frequency, percentage, standard deviation and percentage) were used to analyze the information gained; types of stressor.

RESEARCH FINDING

Table 1 shown below indicates the mean and standard deviation of the items to measure types of stressors experienced by female inmates. There were 19 items in this PS Scale. Nevertheless, descriptive results of 12 items were presented in this section to highlight some interesting findings. Basically, mean scores were obtained by adding up the total scores of each measures and divided with the number of items in its respected scale.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviation of Types of Stressors

No.	Items	Responses					Overall Stress Index	
		Not hard at all (%)	Not hard (%)	Neutral (%)	Hard (%)	Very hard (%)	Mean	SD
							3.34	.49
1.	Missing family or friends.	4 (3.3)	9 (7.3)	16 (13.0)	25 (20.3)	69 (56.1)	4.18	1.11
5.	Concerns about the future.	2 (1.6)	7 (5.7)	24 (19.5)	31 (25.2)	59 (48.0)	4.12	1.02
4.	Regrets about the past.	2 (1.6)	7 (5.7)	29 (23.6)	36 (29.3)	49 (39.8)	4.00	1.00
11.	Missing freedom.	2 (1.6)	13 (10.6)	36 (29.3)	32 (26.0)	40 (32.5)	3.77	1.06
13.	Not being able to make my own decisions.	7 (5.7)	15 (12.2)	39 (31.7)	39 (31.7)	23 (18.7)	3.45	1.10
9.	Excessive noise.	7 (5.7)	17 (13.8)	53 (43.1)	24 (19.5)	22 (17.9)	3.30	1.09
10.	Quality of medical care.	12 (9.8)	16 (13.0)	50 (40.7)	28 (22.8)	17 (13.8)	3.17	1.13
19.	Concerns about my safety.	11 (8.9)	21 (17.1)	49 (39.8)	23 (18.7)	19 (15.4)	3.14	1.15
17.	Following prison rules.	23 (18.7)	23 (18.7)	34 (27.6)	31 (25.2)	12 (9.8)	2.88	1.25

15.	Environment where we eat.	14	19	66	16	8 (6.5)	2.87	.99
3.	Conflicts with prisoners.	20	20	53	21	9 (7.3)	2.82	1.12
12.	Conflicts with staff.	24	21	51	16	11 (8.9)	2.74	1.17

The results of this study revealed that in general the female inmates experienced moderately high level of stress ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .49$). From the analysis conducted, the four items that indicate most stressful stressors experience were 'missing family or friends' ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.11$), followed by 'concerns about the future' ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.02$), 'regrets about the past' ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$) and 'missing freedom' ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.06$). Apart from that, the respondents also reported to have moderately high level of stress, that they were not being able to make their own decisions ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.10$), hearing excessive noise ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.09$), the quality of medical care provided ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.13$) and they were also concern about their safety while in prison ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.15$). However, the inmates reported that they were least stressful in four situations which were following prison rules ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.25$), environment where they eat ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .99$), having conflicts with other prisoners ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.12$) and conflicts with the prison staff ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.17$).

DISCUSSION

Missing family or friends has been regarded as one of the most difficult hardships to deal with in prison. It is not easy for inmates to endure with the pain of being separated from their family; especially for those married inmates where they have to say goodbye for their spouse and children. Most of the times, female inmates are often to feel pressure, anxiety and worry due to their concern regarding their inability to interact with their loved ones such as their parents, husbands and children (Omar, 2000).

In addition, Spielberger (1995) revealed that inmates are more likely to suffer from the feeling of depression, anxiety and angry. This finding was supported by Zamble and Porporino (1988) where most of the inmates have the tendency to suffer from the feeling of anxiety when they concern a lot about their future, nonetheless those inmates who fixated on the past were reported to suffer from both feelings; anxious and angry. This statement could be associated with the second and third most stressful experience in prisons where majority of the inmates reported 'concerns about the future' and 'regrets about the past' as one of the stressors. Moreover, the excessive noise issue in prison has been regard by the inmates as moderately high level of stress, and it has been supported by study conducted by Negy, Woods, & Carlson (1997), in Rhea (2001). In this study, the least stressful experience reported by the inmates and also reached similar findings with Zamble and Porporino (1988) were 'following prison rules', 'concerns about my safety', 'conflicts with prisoners' and 'conflict with staff'.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The feeling of stress and other emotional disturbances experiences by the inmates should be solved immediately by the authority as it may affect not only their behavior but their psychological well-being, values and ability would also be jeopardized (Ramli Hassan, 1990, in Mohamed Sharif & Norahidah, 2012). In response to that, study has predicted that the likelihood of suicidal attempts were higher for those inmates who experience total loss of freedom, lack of ability to control routine in prison as well as not being exposed to any form of rehabilitation programs (McNulty & Huey, 2005). The Prison Department also has to ensure that all inmates were be given assistance throughout their imprisonment period especially during the initial stage as the new inmates who anticipate to serve prison in longer period are reported to experience greater stress (MacKenzie & Goodstein, 1985, in Picken 2012).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this publication declare there is no conflict of interest.

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