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Life Behind Bars: A Study of the Psychological, Social, and Emotional Conditions of Prison Inmates in Pakistan

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Abstract: *Imprisonment serves as a complex multi-faceted societal system that profoundly impacts an individual's social, emotional, and psychological development. This study examined the social, emotional and psychological well-being of 250 male prisoners in Pakistan, using a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive study design. A questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was employed to collect the data; SPSS was then used to analyze the collected data using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regressions. As a result of the study, approximately 87.2% of the inmates indicated they perceived the crowding at the institution as a serious problem. Additionally, a substantial number of inmates reported the length of their imprisonment had negatively impacted their mental and emotional well-being (approximately 82.8%). It was also found that a substantial number of the inmates expressed high levels of sadness (approximately 90.4%), and anxiety regarding their future (approximately 82.8%). Regression analysis revealed the primary predictors of psychological distress were the living conditions in the prison ($\beta=-.38$, $p=.001$), and the length of time incarcerated ($\beta= .30$, $p=.005$). However, 78.4% of the inmates indicated they were able to adaptively cope with their confinement through various means (e.g., through praying, reading, or receiving support from fellow inmates). Overall, the study indicates that the structure of the institutions have a negative impact on the inmate's overall well-being while social support, and rehabilitation programs have the potential to mitigate this effect. The study recommends that providing adequate mental health counseling and vocational training will aid in successful reentry into society.*

Introduction

Prisons are not just about punishing people who commit crimes; they are about changing people's lives socially and psychologically. In order to understand how prisons affect people we have to see them as a type of social organization. Social organizations are defined by the relationships between members, and

the rules that govern them. As such, all prisons are social institutions. They are characterized by strict rules, no freedom to make your own choices, constant supervision, and separating you from your family and friends. In the last few years sociologists have been paying attention to how prisons cause people more problems than punishment alone. Specifically, scholars have pointed out that prisons cause many prisoners severe social isolation and emotional distress, and most people have difficulty readjusting back into society once they leave prison (Quandt & Jones, 2021). Therefore, prisons serve two purposes: one is to punish, and the second is to increase inequality, isolate people further, and create a space where some people are more vulnerable than others.

Research has shown over and over again that the prison environment causes significant problems for people's mental health. This is because prisoners have very little opportunity to interact with others, are usually housed in very crowded facilities, and do not get much meaningful mental stimulation. Studies have shown that being confined to a small area for an extended period of time, combined with having little to no social interaction can lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, frustration, and overall emotional instability for people who are imprisoned (Influence of environmental factors on mental health within prisons, 2019; The relationship of social contacts with prisoners' mental health, 2024). The loss of social relationships while someone is in jail weakens their ability to cope with stress and helps them lose their identity, which ultimately makes them even more emotionally unstable and increases their chance of having behavioral problems while they are in jail and after they are released.

The issues that exist for prisoners in developing countries like Pakistan are even worse than what exists in developed countries. This is due to the fact that prisons in these countries are almost always severely underfunded, extremely overcrowded, and offer little to no professional mental health assistance (Sage Journals, 2024). As such, the primary focus of prisons in Pakistan is punishment rather than rehabilitation, and there is little to no institutional support offered for prisoner mental health treatment and social reintegration (Sage Journals, 2024). Research has shown that the majority of people in jail in Pakistan have high levels of emotional instability, stigma surrounding mental illness, and low rates of seeking help for mental illness, especially for those from lower income families (Khaliq et al., 2023). Furthermore, women, and other marginalized groups, experience additional forms of vulnerability due to the stigma associated with gender, social isolation, and institutional neglect (Legal and Psychological Challenges of Female Prisoners in Pakistan, 2023).

There is a large amount of international research on the effects of incarceration on mental health; however, there is relatively little research that specifically focuses on the social and psychological impact of being in jail in Pakistan. Most research conducted in Pakistan tends to examine either the legal structure of prisons or the likelihood of recidivism, and as a result does not examine the day-to-day social realities of prison life or the structural barriers that prevent prisoners from getting the mental health support they need (Sage Journals, 2024). It is imperative to fill this gap because viewing imprisonment as a form of social experience rather than simply a legal consequence will allow for a deeper understanding of how the practices of jails and prisons, social isolation, and systematic inequalities overlap within the prison systems of Pakistan. This study aims to address the need to add to the body of knowledge by looking at how incarceration as a social experience impacts the mental health of prisoners and the way that prisoners perceive themselves and their place in society, in Pakistan.

Problem Statement

Prisoners commonly suffer from considerable psychological trauma, emotional disturbance, and social isolation as a result of the harsh prison environments, as well as the lengthy periods of incarceration, which prevent prisoners' ability to develop through behavior modification or rehabilitation. To date,

however, no substantial body of research has examined these elements collectively (social, emotional, psychological) within a single theoretical framework in the local context.

Objectives of the Study

i. To delve into the psychological repercussions of incarceration on inmates, concentrating on feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety.

ii. To investigate the ways in which prisoners adapt socially and the nature of their peer interactions within the prison setting.

iii. To analyze the emotional state of inmates and the success of the coping strategies they utilize.

Research Hypotheses

- H1: Inadequate living conditions in prisons severely affect the mental well-being of inmates.

- H2: Prolonged incarceration leads to heightened emotional distress and challenges in social integration for prisoners.

- H3: Inmates who engage in rehabilitation and support initiatives demonstrate greater emotional and psychological resilience than those without such opportunities.

Literature Review

Evidence has demonstrated the effects of incarceration on the deteriorations of mental health and emotional well-being through a variety of empirical studies. However, while imprisonment can be viewed as an opportunity for correctional treatment, it often also serves as a source of long-term and chronic stress, which may include loss of autonomy, social isolation, continuous surveillance and lack of knowledge or control over one's future. Consequently, a significant body of evidence has established higher prevalence levels of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and poor emotional regulation among incarcerated populations, during their time in custody and after their release (Sugie & Turney, 2023; Quandt & Jones, 2021). The aforementioned psychological results do not exist simply as individualized psychological disorders; they result from institutional and societal conditions of prison life.

Further research indicates that the prison environment will exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, especially those who are economically and socially disadvantaged. Overcrowding, lack of privacy, exposure to violence and availability of mental health services have all been identified as major structural issues contributing to the psychological decline of inmates (Trauma exposure and mental health of prisoners, 2021). For example, a study found that among male prisoners, personality traits such as high levels of negative emotionality and low capacity for emotional regulation have interactive relationships with institutional stressors, and therefore contribute to increased psychological distress and lower health outcomes (PTSD and depression within incarcerated populations, 2023). Thus, these studies illustrate the necessity of analyzing incarceration as a social process that generates and reinforces inequality in mental health.

Social and Emotional Resilience

Research suggests that Social-emotional Resilience is now viewed as one of the primary protective mechanisms to prevent the negative effects of Incarceration on individuals. Research has identified that Perceived Social Support from Family Members, Fellow Prisoners, and Correctional Staff, is a significant protective factor against the Psychological effects of Confinement. The literature suggests that prisoners who perceive high levels of both Emotional and Instrumental Support are less likely to experience Depressive Symptoms, they exhibit greater Emotional Stability, and they are more likely to utilize Adaptive Coping Strategies to deal with the stressors of imprisonment (Gün, 2024; Huang et al., 2020). Positive Interactions between prisoners and Correctional Staff have also been associated with Increased

Trust in Correctional Staff, Decreased Hostility toward Correctional Staff, and Greater participation in Rehabilitative Programs.

In contrast, Adverse Environmental Conditions, such as Overcrowding, Lack of Privacy, and Restrictive Social Interaction, can greatly diminish an individual's emotional resilience. These environmental conditions can lead to feelings of Emotional Detachment, Cynicism, and a Perception of Institutional Injustice, which can diminish an individual's ability to cope with Stress (The influence of environmental factors on mental health within prisons, 2019). As a result of prolonged exposure to these types of environmental conditions, an individual may experience Erosion of their Social Skills and Emotion Regulation Ability, thus increasing the likelihood for Long-term Psychological Harm and Social Withdrawal upon Release. Therefore, Resilience within a prison setting should be conceptualized as a socially mediated process shaped by Institutional Structures and Relational Dynamics rather than solely as an Individual Trait.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual model for this research is based on "Life Behind Bars" as an independent variable to influence psychological, social and emotional outcomes as dependent variables. The analytical explanation of the relationship between "Life Behind Bars" and the dependent variables is supported by both General Strain Theory (GST) and Self-Efficacy Theory by Bandura.

According to Agnew (2017), General Strain Theory indicates that prolonged exposure to stressors such as loss of freedom, social isolation and institutional control will produce negative emotional states including anger, frustration and despair. Due to the chronic and multifaceted nature of stressors experienced by inmates during confinement, prisoners are highly susceptible to experiencing psychological/emotional distress and maladaptive coping strategies in response to the stressors they experience. Therefore, General Strain Theory is helpful in illustrating the translation of structural elements of prison life to negative psychological/social outcomes.

Self-Efficacy Theory by Bandura (2018) explains that the degree to which an individual believes in their ability to exert control over their environment and bring about meaningful change in their lives, is directly related to their belief in their self-efficacy. Studies conducted in correctional environments demonstrate that higher levels of self-efficacy have been associated with better emotional regulation, enhanced resiliency and participation in rehabilitation programs (Nisser et al., 2024). This research views self-efficacy as an intervening process through which inmates may navigate the stresses of prison life and potentially reduce the adverse psychological effects of being imprisoned.

Methodology

Research Design

In this research study, a quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional research design was used to assess inmates' psychological, social, and emotional experiences and their perceptions within the prison environment; a quantitative method was utilized because it allows researchers to measure attitudes, perceptions, and the extent of well-being among a specific group of people by using numbers; a cross-sectional design was selected because it allows researchers to collect all of the required data at one time which is useful in assessing the current status of experiences and conditions of individuals who are incarcerated and does not affect or influence the environment of the study (e.g., the prison); this type of design is especially beneficial when working in institutional environments, such as prisons, due to limitations on accessing participants over time.

Population and Sampling

The sample included adult men (aged 18 years or older) who are incarcerated in various selected state correctional facilities. The decision to study only men is made primarily because they are a larger portion of the overall prison population than women and to help ensure that all data collected from the survey will have a consistent demographic base. A multi-staged stratified cluster sampling design was used to provide an adequate level of representation throughout the various types of prison units and levels of prison security. In the first stage of the sampling process, individual prisons served as the cluster units for the sample. In the second stage of the sampling process, inmates were grouped into categories by age group and length of incarceration, and then randomly sampled from those groups. This approach to sampling helped to increase the generalizability of the findings collected in this study; however, it did limit the amount of data that could be gathered due to the constraints placed upon the researchers with regard to gaining access to the prison.

The required sample size was calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula for large populations:

$$n = Z^2 p(1-p) / e^2$$

Where Z = 1.96 (95% confidence level), p = 0.5 (maximum variability), and e = 0.07 (margin of error). Based on this calculation, the final sample size was adjusted to 250 respondents to compensate for potential non-responses and incomplete questionnaires, ensuring sufficient statistical power for analysis.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire, developed specifically for the objectives of this study. The instrument consisted of four major sections:

i.   Demographic Information (age, education level, marital status, length of incarceration);
ii. Prison Environment (perceptions of overcrowding, routine control, and institutional conditions);
iii. Psychological Well-being (emotional distress, anxiety, and depressive indicators);
iv. Social and Emotional Coping (perceived social support, emotional regulation, and coping strategies).

Items were measured using close-ended questions to facilitate quantification and statistical analysis. Prior to full-scale data collection, the instrument was reviewed for clarity and relevance. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.78, which exceeds the acceptable threshold and indicates satisfactory reliability of the scale. Data collection was conducted with due consideration of ethical guidelines, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of respondents. Assistance was provided where necessary to accommodate literacy limitations without influencing responses.

Results and Data Analysis

Demographic Characteristics

Among the surveyed individuals, 50.8% were aged 26 to 30, and 68.4% originated from rural areas. Financially, 54% reported a monthly income between 30,000 and 40,000 PKR before their incarceration. In terms of educational background, 59.6% had completed their matriculation, while 18% lacked any formal education.

Prison Environment and Living Conditions

Inmates expressed significant concern regarding physical space:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Cells are overcrowded/lack space	14.8%	72.4%	10.0%	2.8%
Hygiene is satisfactory	12.0%	79.6%	5.6%	2.8%
Access to basic necessities	13.2%	75.2%	8.8%	2.8%

Psychological Impact

The psychological toll was evident, with 90.4% experiencing sadness or hopelessness and 82.8% feeling anxious about their future. Furthermore, 86.8% felt their life had no direction behind bars, and 93.2% expressed a sense of helplessness.

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regressions were conducted to identify predictors of psychological distress:

Table: Regression Predicting Psychological Impact

Predictor Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig.
Living Conditions	-0.42	-0.38	-3.45	0.001
Imprisonment Duration	0.35	0.30	2.85	0.005
Staff Treatment	-0.10	-0.08	-1.15	0.250
Rehab Access	-0.15	-0.12	-1.50	0.140

Note: $R^2 = 0.48$, $F (4, 124) = 28.50$, $p < 0.001$

The model explains 48% of the variance. Living conditions and duration are significant predictors, whereas staff treatment and rehab access were not statistically significant in this specific model.

Discussion

This research supports the view that long term imprisonment profoundly affects prisoners' subjective experience of their mental and emotional state and demonstrates clearly that imprisonment should be understood as a socially structured stressful environment. The elevated rates of anxiety, emotional instability and hopelessness amongst the prisoner population in this research are directly supported by the propositions of the General Strain Theory (GST) (Sugie & Turney, 2023; Agnew, 2017). GST states that the repeated experience of aversive conditions (including for example overcrowding, lack of control over one's own activities and prolonged separation from society) generates chronic strain that results in negative emotional outcomes.

The very high rate of psychological distress seen in this research illustrates how overcrowded prison settings act as ongoing sources of stress and thus increase prisoners' emotional vulnerabilities. At the same time, the data do not provide support for purely determinist interpretations of imprisonment. A sizeable percentage of the prisoners surveyed (79.2%) viewed themselves as valuable people, indicating that there was a considerable degree of self-efficacy present in these samples. This indicates that incarcerated individuals have the potential to possess a sense of self efficacy despite the existence of institutional constraints. This aligns with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2018), and that belief in one's ability to endure hardship and to maintain a positive view of oneself acts as a buffer against the detrimental psychological effects of enduring chronic stress (Bandura, 2018). Other

researchers have also found that prisoners who report higher self-efficacy tend to engage more actively in adaptive coping strategies and exhibit more effective emotional regulation (Nisser et al., 2024).

Contributing to self-efficacy and institutional structure, the social relationships established during imprisonment were identified as a key mechanism for coping with the emotional challenges of imprisonment. While many of the respondents indicated a tendency towards social withdrawal (87.2%), most of the respondents developed friendships within the prison (93.2%). This finding indicates that social withdrawal could serve as a protective emotional strategy and does not necessarily indicate a total disengagement from the social world. Research into prison life highlights the role that peer bonding in prison institutions plays in fostering informal support networks that help alleviate feelings of isolation and facilitate emotional survival (Gün, 2024; Liebling & Arnold, 2021). Peer-based support networks, while possibly limited in nature, contribute to resilience by providing a common sense of purpose and facilitating shared coping mechanisms in highly restrictive environments.

In addition to peer support, family support was identified as another important source of protection. Ninety-two percent of the respondents stated that they had relied on family to assist them in coping with imprisonment. Establishing and maintaining links with family members is documented to provide prisoners with a sense of social identity and emotional continuity, and to counteract the dehumanizing effects of institutionalization (Turney & Sugie, 2020). In collectivist cultures, the importance of family in supporting prisoners' emotional well-being and establishing a sense of belonging outside of prison is particularly evident. Collectively, peer based and family based support networks function as socially embedded resources that reduce the psychological damage caused by imprisonment and demonstrate that the resilience of prisoners is not just a product of individual characteristics but is a socially constructed process that is mediated by relational support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research shows that life in prison is marked by a persistent struggle between prisoners' institutional stresses and their own ability to cope (resilience). Overcrowding, extended length of stay, and limitations on prisoners' autonomy were found to be the most significant sources of psychological distress. The data supports theoretical expectations regarding the long-term negative impact of chronic strain on prisoners' mental health. However, inmates do not simply passively accept the effects of institutionalized control; their personal belief systems, social support structures, and coping strategies (i.e., religion, education, and inmate friendships) all play critical roles in maintaining both their emotional well-being and self-esteem.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates how combining quantitative data collection with sociological theory provides a more complete understanding of imprisonment as an experience that creates both potential vulnerabilities and opportunities for resilience. This research adds to our existing knowledge of incarceration, especially in prisons which have limited institutional resources and limited psychosocial support.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Mental Health Integration:** Prison administrations should implement mandatory, routine psychological screening, counseling services, and stress-management programs to address emotional distress and prevent long-term mental health deterioration.
- **Vocational and Educational Training:** Expanding access to vocational training and educational programs—covering both technical and soft skills—can enhance inmates' self-efficacy, improve post-release employability, and reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

- **Infrastructure and Overcrowding Reform:** Structural reforms aimed at reducing overcrowding are essential. Ensuring adequate personal space and humane living conditions can significantly alleviate psychological strain and improve overall well-being.
- **Enhanced Family Communication:** Facilitating regular, affordable, and accessible communication with family members should be prioritized, as sustained family contact strengthens emotional resilience and supports reintegration prospects.

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