

Jail Term Length, Gender and Age as Determinants of Psychological Distress Among Prison Inmates in Owerri

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Abstract

Nigerian prisons are in a deteriorated state with the number of inmates surpassing, infolds, the original capacities; thereby resulting in some social and psychological problems. The increases in criminal cases, which have resulted in several suspects being sent to prisons as awaiting trial inmates, have worsened the conditions of our prisons. This study explored the impacts of the length of jail terms, gender and age on psychological distress among prison inmates in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Using convenience sampling technique, 287 prison inmates were selected for the study. They comprised of 193 males and 94 females with ages ranging from 18 to 71 years and a mean age of 48.34 years. The participants were administered with the Psychophysiological Symptoms Checklist so as to assess their level of distress. Data was collected using the cross-sectional survey design while 3-Way ANOVA on SPSS version 21 was used to analyse data collected. Results revealed that prisoners, who are males, older, and serving longer jail terms, showed significantly higher levels of psychological distress among the prison inmates in Owerri. The study recommends that regular mental and physical health checks be carried out on prison inmates, especially among the aged males who are serving long jail terms.

Keywords

Psychological Distress, Jail Term, Prison Inmates, Nigerian Prisons, Owerri

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1. Introduction

In 1974, a second year medical student named Hans Seley observed that patients who suffered from a wide variety of somatic (physical) disorders all seemed to experience similar symptoms. Many of them were reported to have decreased appetite, decreased muscular strength and endurance, and lowered level of ambition or drive. In addition, Seley found that these symptoms occurred whenever individuals needed to adapt to a changing internal or external environment, this observation and identification however led to the term “stress”. Stress is defined as a non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it [1]. This definition implies

that stress is a normal part of life and may occur as a result of both pleasant and unpleasant environmental experiences. It is an individual’s physical and mental reaction to environmental demands. Seley differentiated positive reaction to stress from negative reaction to stress. The positive reactions to stress, he called eustress (good stress) while the negative reaction to stress; he called distress (bad stress). To him when this unpleasant and harmful stress becomes too great and lasts too long, individuals may experience distress. Distress is a state in which an individual’s coping abilities begin to breakdown. At this stage, it is not out of place concluding that all aspects of an individual (physical, social, financial, spiritual and psychological) can become distressed.

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Psychological distress however is a major problem of the present era especially among prison inmates. It is the emotional condition that one feels when it is necessary to cope with upsetting, frustrating or harmful situations [2]. Psychological distress is a general term used to describe unpleasant feelings or emotions that impact one's level of functioning, such as; hypertension, anxiety, high blood pressure, depression and so on. Prison inmates face a lot of challenges in their confined environments; as a result, they tend to experience high level of stress which may have adverse impact on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural states. To make matters worse, the mental health of prison inmates are most times not given the required attention. Only routine health screenings are usually done. With the severely overcrowded situation, easily identifying prison inmates experiencing severe psychological distress becomes almost impossible.

The state of the environment prison inmates are kept could add to escalating their level of psychological distress. No wonder some Nigerian authors had referred to Nigerian prisons as glorified animal cages where people sent there get a foretaste of hell as it were [3]. The overall picture of Nigerian prison and the inmates is one of unredeemed gloom and hopelessness affirming that the whole structure is a repulsive cauldron of human squalor and degradation. Most of the prisons in Nigeria are in a deteriorated state as inmates are presently experiencing the problem of congestion and shortage of facilities like sleeping mattresses, lighting system, inadequate ventilation, poor sanitation, lack of food and medicine and denial of contact with families and friends [4]. Guards and workers demand bribes for such privileges as receiving visitors and contacting their family members. In many Nigeria prisons, inmates sleep two to one in a bed or on the floor in filthy cells [5]. These problems and experiences have created a deplorable situation in the Nigerian prisons and are damaging the physical and mental wellbeing of inmates. All these fall short of the United Nations standard for the treatment of prisoners [6]. The experiences or problems inmates pass through while in prison, the uncomfortable environment, the social withdrawal and isolation, lack of trust virtually for everyone around them may result to living an isolated life which in the long run could result to psychological distress.

As a matter of fact, Owerri Prisons, in Imo State, Nigeria, is not an exception to these unwholesome situations described above. The prison which was built in 1905, to accommodate 548 inmates, today, contains as at the last count, 2,038 prisoners [7]. Out of this figure, many are awaiting trial inmates, with just few convicts serving various jail terms. Presently, the Owerri prison with over congested inmates of about 2, 038, has about 65% of these inmates sleeping on

bare floor with no mattress or mat or any form of beddings. Most of these inmates suffer a lot even to the point of being restricted from enjoying sunshine, electricity, proper ventilation at night or fresh air. The cells are poorly managed; no fumigation, irregular disinfection and cleaning. The mosquitoes, cockroaches and rats population are quite frightening; thus making the prison environment hazardous and not conducive to support life. It is against this background that the researchers deemed it important to investigate the impacts of jail terms, gender and age on the psychological distress among prison inmates in Owerri, Imo State.

1.1. Jail Term, Age, Gender and Psychological Distress

Jail term as used in this study refers to the period of time an individual spends in prison. Convicts are meant to serve short, medium or long jail terms depending on the severity of their offence and or based on the orders of the courts. Since most Nigerian prisons are not regularly maintained or expanded, coupled with the rise in incidences of crime and an increase in population growth rate, the prisons are now overcrowded. An overcrowded and poorly maintained prison environment may have a way of distressing the inhabitants psychologically. For instance, it has been reported that prison inmates who had stayed longer in prison reported more psychological disorders than prisoners serving medium and short sentences [8]. It has also been identified that prisoners serving longer sentences reported more severe psychological disturbances than other categories of prisoners [8]. Thus, the number of years inmates spend in prisons contribute to their psychological distress. Similarly, Dachew, Fekadu, Kisi, Yigzaw, and Bisetegn [9] had assessed the prevalence and associated factors of psychological distress among 649 prison inmates found in prisons of Northwest, Ethiopia. They identified that the prevalence of psychological distress among prisoners was higher among males (84.4 %) than females (74.0 %). Specifically, the study found that long duration of stay in the prison, low to no satisfaction with prison services, location of the prison and gender were factors significantly associated with psychological distress among prisoners. There is also a likelihood that the knowledge that one would spend a long time in prison could result to high levels of psychological distress. Another study by MacKenzie and Goodstein [10], concluded in that inmates who were new to prison but anticipated serving long sentences in prison experienced the most stress. They however identified that prison inmates who had received long sentences and had already served a lengthy time in prison appeared to have developed a method of coping with the experience. In their study, Armiya'u, Obembe, Audu, and Afolaranmi [11] raised an alarm of the prevalence of a high

rate of psychiatric disorders among prison inmates in Nigeria, which they stated should be a concern to health care policy makers in the country. More recently, Orjiakor, Ugwu, Eze, Ugwu, Ibeagha, and Onu [12] in a hermeneutic phenomenology study among prolonged Awaiting Trial Prisoners (ATPs) found that their experiences upon incarceration reflected a mixture of disbelief, denial, and negative emotions. This was followed by experiences of alienation from society and an atmosphere of uncertainty. These factors point clearly the onset of psychological distress among prison inmates.

Gender on the other hand entails the state of being a male or a female; it may also have a way of influencing the prison inmates' response to psychological distress. Socially phobic women have been found to be hyper responsive to stress, while socially phobic men manifested no physiological differences when compared with control subjects but males reported more psychological and somatic complaints which showed that there may be gender differences in psychological distress [13]. In a research on the influence of gender, socio-economic status and jail term on psychological distress among prison inmates involving 113 (63 males and 50 females) Olorunwaju and Ogedemgbe [14] showed that gender had no significant influence on psychological distress, while socio economic status and jail term had significant influences on psychological distress of prison inmates. Lindquist and Lindquist [15] in their study examined the influence of gender and environmental stress on the mental health of a sample of 198 male and female jail inmates. The study found that female inmates had significantly higher levels of mental distress than their male counterparts. However, the study identified that environmental stress was equally detrimental to the mental health of both male and female inmates.

There are notable differences in psychological distress across gender and age groups [16]. Conceptually, age is the length of time a person has existed. Irrespective of the age of any individual, he/she may experience psychological distress when exposed in an unwholesome condition like the prison. Baidawi [17] in a study aimed at determining the level of psychological distress among sentenced prisoners ($n = 173$) in two Australian jurisdictions (Victoria and New South Wales) found that the average K10 scores of the older prisoners were significantly lower than the younger prisoners' ($p = .04$). The study further observed significantly higher distress levels among older prisoners when compared to the general population ($p < .001$) with older prisoners being three times more likely to display very high levels of distress. The study concluded that the levels of distress seen among older prisoners were significantly lower than that of younger prisoners. Similarly, findings on the impact of age and

attitude of prison staff on psychological symptoms of prison inmates revealed that age influences inmates' psychological distress with older inmates having more psychological stress symptoms than younger inmates. Attitudes of staff also had significant influence on psychological distress [18]. Crawley and Sparks [19] also identified the experience of distress among first time older prison inmates. They noted that older prisoners exhibit higher feelings of distress with the perception of their prison experience as a disaster. For those serving life sentences, the likelihood that they will die in prison increases their distress resulting into frustration and depression [20].

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Barlow and Durand's [21] Cognitive Theory of Psychological Distress provides explanation to psychological distress experience of prison inmates. The theory explains that people's excessive affect and dysfunctional behaviour is due to inappropriate ways of interpreting their experiences. The essence of the model is that emotional difficulties begin when the way we see events gets exaggerated beyond the available evidence, this manner of seeing things tend to have a negative influence on feelings and behaviour in a vicious cycle.

Cognitive theorists strongly believe that negatively based cognition is a core process in psychological distress. This reflects why distressed individuals have negative view of themselves, their environment and the future [22]. Applying this cognitive theory of psychological distress to the happenings in the world of prisoners today, the researchers carefully observed that psychological distress experienced by inmates can easily be traced to their negative views of themselves, the prison environment, and other people around them. The inmates tend to view themselves as worthless, inadequate, unlovable and deficient. These irrational feelings of themselves as a result of exaggerated events around them are exactly what psychological distress denotes. Sadness, anxiety, distraction and other symptoms of mental illness are manifestations of psychological distress which most prisoners experience.

1.3. Hypotheses

- 1 Length of jail term will significantly determine psychological distress among prison inmates in Owerri
- 2 Gender differences will significantly impact on psychological distress response among prison inmates in Owerri.
- 3 Age level of inmates will significantly determine psychological distress response among prison inmates in Owerri.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted in Owerri city which is the capital of Imo State, Nigeria. Owerri is a city in South-Eastern Nigeria made up of mainly literate population; mostly civil servants, students and traders. Two hundred and eighty-seven prison inmates were sampled using the convenience sampling technique from among the population of 993 prison inmates in the Owerri Prisons as at the time of the study. Among participants sampled were one hundred and ninety-three males and ninety-four females with ages ranging from 18 to 71 years and a mean age of 48.34 years.

2.2. Instrument

The Psychophysiological Symptoms Checklist (PSC), developed by Omoluabi [23], was used to measure stress reaction levels of the prison inmates in order to assess their level of distress. The PSC is a 50-item inventory scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (slight effect) to 5 (very severe effect). The inventory has an alpha reliability coefficient of .78 and a Spearman-Brown split half coefficient of .88 [23]. Ebai [24], obtained concurrent validity coefficients of .47 for males and .41 for females by correlating PSC current version with the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). The norm for male is 48.89 while that of female is 49.78 [25]. Scores higher than the norms indicate high stress level while scores lower than the norms indicate coping adequately with stress. The instrument also has a demographic section that enabled the researchers obtain participants' age, gender and length of jail terms.

2.3. Procedure

After obtaining the necessary permission from the administrative department of the Zone E headquarters Nigerian Prisons Service Owerri, the consent of prison inmates who were willing to participate in the study was sought by presenting the questionnaire with an attached consent letter. Only participants who were readily available and willing to participate in the study were allowed to complete the questionnaire after they were reassured that the study was purely for academic purpose and would have no negative consequences on person. The confidentiality of the information provided to the researchers was also transmitted to the participants. Queries on the mode of completion were answered by the researchers. Upon completion, the researchers collected the filled questionnaires and expressed appreciation to the participants for their efforts. In all, ethical principles of informed and voluntary consents, confidentiality, and beneficence were fully observed throughout the data

collection process.

2.4. Design and Statistics

A Cross Sectional Survey Design was used in the study because a sample of the population across gender and ages of the prison inmates were studied at within a specified timeframe using questionnaires as the major tool for data collection. The 3-Way ANOVA statistical method was used to analyze data collected. The analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

3. Results

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviation for Jail Term, Gender and Age on Psychological Distress.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Short-Term	101.13	26.81	137
Mid-Term	125.44	22.87	62
Long-Term	141.70	21.45	88
Female	134.26	28.47	94
Male	111.31	28.20	193
Young	105.90	27.32	166
Old	136.55	24.57	121

The table above shows means and standard deviation differences of different levels of jail term, gender and age on psychological distress of prison inmates in Owerri. Prison inmates who had short-term were 137 in numbers with a mean of 101.13 and standard deviation of 26.81, those who had mid-term were 62, with a mean of 125.44 and standard deviation of 22.87 while those who had long-term were 88, with a mean of 141.70 and standard deviation of 21.45. Female inmates were 94 in number; with a mean of 134.26 and standard deviation of 28.47 while their males were 193, with a mean of 111.31 and standard deviation of 28.20. Young inmates were 166, with a mean of 105.90 and standard deviation of 27.32; while the old inmates were 121, with a mean of 136.55 and standard deviation of 24.57.

The table also clearly shows low variation (SD = 21.45 and 22.87) in psychological distress response of inmates who had long term and mid-term respectively than those who had short-term. The relatively low variation of psychological distress response of inmates who had spent long and medium jail terms indicate that they easily responded to psychological distress than inmates who had spent short jail terms. Similarly, low variation (SD = 24.57) was noted among old prison inmates than young inmates which indicates that old inmates are easily prone to psychological distress than the young ones. Finally, there is little or no wide variation found between the female and male genders, pointing to the fact that both groups had the tendency of responding to psychological distress in prison in the same manner, though the males got psychologically distressed more than the

females as the results stipulate below.

Table 2. 3-Way ANOVA for Jail Term, Gender and Age on Psychological Distress.

Source	Type III Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Jail Term (A)	29140.52	2	1457.26	35.49	.000 ^{Sig}
Gender (B)	16968.31	1	16968.31	41.34	.000 ^{Sig}
Age level (C)	12398.79	1	12398.79	39.20	.000 ^{Sig}
AXB	899.79	2	449.90	1.10	.336 ^{NS}
AXC	2856.24	2	1428.12	3.48	.032 ^{Sig}
BXC	9.576	1	9.58	.02	.879 ^{NS}
AXBXC	356.35	2	178.18	.43	.648 ^{NS}
Error	112888.53	275	410.50		

Note: ^{Sig}= Significant. ^{NS}= Not Significant

From Table 1 above, the means obtained show that long term prison inmates (M = 141.70) scored significantly higher in psychological distress than mid-term prison inmates (M = 125.44) and short term prison inmates (M = 101.13). The first null hypothesis which states that there will be no statistically significant influence of jail term on psychological distress response among prison inmates in Owerri was rejected [F (2, 275) = 35.49, p < .05] at 95% confidence interval. The result implies that length of jail terms significantly determine psychological distress among prison inmates in Owerri.

Similarly, the result of the second null hypothesis which states that there will be no statistically significant influence of gender on psychological distress response among prison inmates in Owerri was rejected [F (1, 275) = 41.34, p < .05] at the 95% confidence interval. The means obtained (Table 1) show that female prison inmate (M = 134.26) scored higher than their male counterparts (M = 111.31) in psychological distress. The result implies that gender difference is a significant determinant of prison inmates' level of psychological distress.

Finally, results of the third null hypothesis which states that there will be no statistically significant influence of age on psychological distress response among prison inmates in Owerri as shown in table 2 above, was also rejected [F (1, 275) = 39.20, p < .05] at the 95% confidence interval. The means obtained (Table 1) show that older prison inmates (M = 136.55) scored higher than younger prison inmates (M = 105.90) in psychological distress. The result implies that age is a significant determinant of prison inmates' level of response to psychological wellbeing.

4. Discussion

The first finding of this study clearly shows variation in psychological distress response among inmates who had spent long term, mid-term and short-term in jail. While there is relatively low standard deviation of psychological distress response among inmates with long and mid-term jails, inmate with short term jail had high standard

deviation. This suggests that prison inmates with long and mid-term jails easily respond to psychological distress than inmates with short jail term. Prison environment in Nigeria generally, is not quite a pleasant place to be, so, it is not out of place concluding that the longer an inmate stays there thinking about his/her life and probably family, the more he/she becomes psychologically distressed. The result of the first hypothesis implies that jail term determines psychological distress response among prison inmates in Owerri. This finding corroborates with the work of Idemudia [8] who observed that prison inmates who had stayed longer in prison reported more psychological disorders than prisoners serving medium and short sentences. Furthermore, the finding of this study is in line with Cognitive Theory of Psychological Distress which explains that negatively based cognition of an individual is a core process in psychological distress. Prison inmates who had long term jail may have had what the researchers called inappropriate interpretation of themselves, their environment and experiences. They may have seen themselves as worthless and rejected by the society. The unpleasant treatment in the prison may have made them believe that the society has rejected them. They may have thought about their jail terms as a very long time of ugly experience, hence they get distressed and sad.

The second finding of this study implies that gender is a significant determinant of prison inmates' response to psychological distress. Though the variation seems quite not wide but males seem to respond adequately to psychological distress more than females as the result indicated. The reason could be that the culture of the Nigerian setting demands that males become more exposed to responsibilities, face more societal demands and are exposed to external happenings around them much earlier than females. On the other hand, females are faced with less stressful life situations with parents providing better living conditions for them. As a result of serving jail terms, these females are more likely to get psychologically distressed. Some reviewed studies support that gender influences prison inmates' response to psychological distress [13] [15]. A finding of a study carried

out by Olorunwaju and Ogedemgbe [18], contradicts the result of the present study. Contradictions in these results could be as a result of the location (environment) where the study was carried out, and some other variables (such as socioeconomic status, marital status of the inmates) which were not factored in this study.

The third finding of this study shows that age had significant influence on psychological distress among prison inmates as older prison inmates were more psychologically distressed than younger prison inmates. Several previous studies on psychological distress had identified an increase in the prevalence of psychological distress after 65 years old, hence concurring in some ways with the current finding [26] [27]. However, it is worth noting that since older inmates may have spent more time in jail than their younger counterparts; this long duration may have made them to become more psychologically distressed. Also, older inmates could have reported higher levels of psychological distress because they feel time is running out for them to achieve their life goals and that they may likely to spend the rest of their healthy life in jail. This is further confirmed by Cairney and Krause [26] who noted that for older persons, chronic stress, recent life events and childhood trauma emerge as major risk factors for psychological distress.

5. Recommendations

The paper therefore recommends that regular mental and physical health checks be carried out among prison inmates, especially among the aged males who are serving long jail terms. Where distress is identified, clinical therapies and treatments should be proffered. Also, efforts should be made to hasten trials of accused persons awaiting trial as spending long terms in jail can increase their level of psychological distress and thereby affect their psychological and physical health status.

Furthermore, efforts by government and well meaning individuals or organisations to provide skill training for prison inmates should be intensified on a higher scale as this will provide inmates with other activities to focus on while serving their terms. By so doing, it is most likely that engaging in other meaningful activities, the level of psychological distress will be reduced.

Finally, there should be a reorientation on the attitude of prison personnel towards the inmates. The personnel should be made to realise that there are custodian and reorientation officers who should focus more on character building and developing positive behavioural change among prison inmates.

6. Summary and Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to investigate if jail term length, gender and age are determinants of psychological distress among inmates in Owerri prison. Across-sectional survey was carried out among two hundred and eighty seven (287) prison inmates who were drawn through convenience sampling technique from Owerri Prisons, Imo State. The analysis carried out from the data collected revealed that jail term, gender and age all had significant influences on psychological distress among prison inmates in Owerri. The paper concludes by recommending that mental and physical health checks be offered to prison inmates in Owerri with more emphasis on older males serving longer jail terms. There is therefore a need to overhaul the Nigerian prison environment and practises. Prison personnel need to be retrained especially in the area of character building and the development of positive behavioural change among prisoners. The standard of care for prison inmates need to be improved by providing them with better and more comfortable environment, improved healthcare facilities and better recreational facilities.

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