

The Impact of Prison's Social Environment on Mental Health among Prisoners in East Gojjam Zone Correctional Centers, North-West Ethiopia

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess the impact of prison's social environment on mental health among prisoners in East Gojjam Zone correctional centers. In this study institutional based descriptive cross-sectional study design with mixed approach was employed. Both quantitative and qualitative data are utilized by using questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Frequency, percentage, and table were used to describe the prisoners' risk of experiencing mental illness at correctional centers. In addition, prison social environment that affect the mental health of prisoners variables were analyzed using bivariate and multi variate logistic regression analysis method. For qualitative data thematic analysis was utilized. The covariates that were prison's social environment variable identified as important factors in explaining the variability in the mental health of prisoners. With regard to results, out of the total respondents 73.25% (n=293) of prisoners were more likely to experience mental illness while the rest 26.75% (n=107) did not indicate the risk of experiencing mental illness due to being in correctional centers. There are risk factors related to prison's social environment that affect mental health of prisoners. Overall, removal of liberty, boredom, problematic relationship inside prison, difficulty of contact with families, difficult to access physical activity, lack of mental health support, isolation from social networks, insecurity about future prospects, overcrowding, dirty and depressing prison environment, feelings of guilt about the offences and lack of time for relaxation are reported. Thus, effective mental health service should be given for prisoners.

Key Words: Prison Social Environment, Mental Health, Prisoners, Mixed Approach

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

It is appropriate to say that the prison environment is one of the main challenges to the mental health of prisoners. An estimated 450 million people worldwide suffer from mental or behavioral disorders. These disorders are especially prevalent in prison populations (World Health Report, 2001). Studies have shown that mental health problems are more common among the prison population than the community (Bland, Wolff & Shi, 2008).

Determinants relevant to the prison environment are external factors such as overcrowding, dirty and unhygienic living conditions, poor quality of food, inadequate health care, physical or verbal aggression by inmates, lack of purposeful activity, either enforced solitude or lack of privacy and time for quiet relaxation and reflection is not conducive to good mental health, and is not often a useful catalyst for mental health care for myriad reasons (Nurse *et al*, 2003).

There are also internal factors that play a contributory role are mostly emotional in nature, where prisoners may have feelings of guilt or shame about the offences they have committed, experience stigma of being imprisoned, worry about the impact of their behavior on other people, including their families and friends. The cumulative effect of all these factors, tends to worsen their mental health and increases the likelihood of damage to the wellbeing of prisoners (Blaauw, 2007).

There are considerable researches to suggest that the prison populations are at greater risk of developing mental health problems compared with people in the outside community and most of the information concerning prisoners' mental health obtained from researches done in well developed countries. Indeed, there were a variety of researches conducted in Ethiopia on mental health. However, a closer review confirms that most of the studies emphasized on general populations and it was difficult to get empirical studies on the impact of prison social environment on prisoners' mental health. Hence, this study was conducted to assess the impact of prison's social environment on mental health among prisoners in East Gojjam zone correctional centers.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Prisoners are less likely to have their mental health needs recognized and to receive treatment (Libeling, 1993). Living inside prison is very different from living in free society in almost all ways. It is a much worse experience to live in prison than outside. This implies being in prison is a negative experience (Brinded *et al*, 2001; De Viggiani, 2006.)

Imprisonment deprives individuals of rights and possessions including liberty, heterosexual relationships, goods and services, and security and autonomy. Once imprisoned, prisoners' communication with families and friends is limited and often without privacy. The subject of mental health in prisons deserves to be given urgent priority because imprisonment has adverse effects on the mental health of prisoners (Coyle, 2005).

The existing studies in Ethiopia correctional centers emphasized on crime and its determinants. However, Audu and his colleagues (2002) studied the lifetime prevalence of substance abuse and mental illness among homicide offenders in Jimma prison. Hence, there is difficulty of obtaining studies done on the impact of prison environment on mental health in Ethiopia in general and in East Gojjam zone in particular. Given this fact, the researcher tried to see the impact of prison's social environment on mental health among prisoners in East Gojjam correctional centers.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the risk of experiencing mental illness among prisoners in East Gojjam correctional centers?
2. Are there aspects of the prison's social environment that affect mental health of prisoners?
3. Is there any statistical significant difference between covariates and mental illness?

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research was primarily concerned with assessing the prison's social environment its impact on mental health among prisoners in East Gojjam Zone correctional centers. Thus, this study was conducted on selected correctional centers of East Gojjam Zone including Debre Markos, Bichena and Motta correctional centers.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Study Design

In this study institutional based descriptive cross-sectional study design with mixed approach was employed. Hence, quantitative and qualitative data are utilized by using questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion.

2.2 Population, Samples and Sampling Procedure

The study populations of this research were prisoners who are incarcerated in some selected East Gojjam correctional centers. Thus, the target population of this study was those prisoners who were imprisoned in Deber Markos, Bichena and Motta correctional centers. The researcher was employed the sample size determination formula which is developed by Naing, Winn and Rusli (2006) and found that 452 samples were selected in the study using simple random sampling technique. However, 400 participants who filled the full items of the questionnaire were considered for quantitative data analysis and the remaining were discarded because of incompleteness of responses. In addition, for qualitative data interview and FGD respondents were selected based on purposeful sampling technique.

2.3 Instruments

For this study questionnaires that assess the risk of experiencing mental illness and the aspects of prison social environment were used. In addition, interview and focus group discussion were used to investigate the impact of prison's social environment on prisoners' mental health. Interview and FGD were conducted with prison different concerned bodies such as healthcare professionals including nurses and health officers, prison psychologists (guidance and counselors) and support givers, prison officials, discipline workers and prisoners to explore aspects of the prison environment that have a negative impact on prisoners mental health.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Following obtaining permission letter from Debre Markos University which is accepted by prison officials, data collectors were selected and given short-term training to let them know the purpose of the study, how to administer the questionnaires and collect data using interview and FGD. Then purpose of the study was notified by the researcher with the help of psychologists (counselors) and some selected prison officials in the selected correctional centers and they facilitated conditions for data collection. Then the required data were collected.

2.5 Methods of Data Analysis

The data analysis was done using SPSS software version 20. The data were processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as table in terms of percentage and/or frequency to assess the prisoners' risk of experiencing mental illness at the time of imprisonment. Data in relation to the impact of prison social environment on prisoners' mental health were analyzed using inferential statistics such as bivariate and multi variate logistic regression analysis method. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis method.

3. Findings and Discussion

Table 1: The Risk of Experiencing Mental Illness

In this section the prisoners' risk of experiencing mental illness in relation to being in correctional centers was discussed.

Risk of Experiencing Mental Illness	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<i>At risk</i>	293	73.25
<i>Not at risk</i>	107	26.75

The result in table 1 revealed that out of the total respondents 73.25% (n=293) of prisoners were more likely to experience mental illness while the rest 26.75% (n=107) did not indicate the risk of experiencing mental illness due to being in correctional centers. Thus, most of participants were at greater risk of experiencing mental illness while imprisoned.

As far as the existing studies show in Ethiopia, it is difficult to get empirical studies on the prisoners' risk of experiencing mental illness. However, of the 206 prisoners in Lusaka central prison, Zambia, 63.1% had high possibility of mental disorders. Fatoye *et al* (2006) also reported that 87.8% incarcerated offenders in Nigeria had mental illness.

The high possibility of having mental illness among prisoners might be due to the overcrowded and dirty environment (correctional center), prisoners' isolation from their previous contacts and relationships with families, friends and wider social groups, worry about family and difficulty in communicating with them, lack privacy and liberty, no time for relaxation, difficult to access physical activity such as the gym, more concerns over their release and loss of previous social status, privilege, social gathering and social institutions.

Correctional centers cause social isolation, subjecting people to idleness, failing to respect their human dignity, that impact on prisoners in good mental health would be negative. The prison setting is argued to be inappropriate or detrimental for some prisoners' mental health. Imprisonment appears to be a cause for the development mental health problems (Suresh, 2011).

Table 2: Aspects of Prison's Social Environment that Affect Mental Health

In this section the prison environment that affect the mental health of prisoners was assessed.

Questions	Respon.	Frq	%
1. Is there overcrowding	No	80	20.0
	Yes	320	80.0
2. Is there lack of activity to perform	No	52	12.9
	Yes	348	87.1
3. Is there isolation from previous contacts and relationships with families, friends and wider social groups?	No	101	25.1
	Yes	299	74.9
4. Do you worry about your family?	No	18	4.6
	Yes	382	95.4
5. Is that difficulty in communicating with them?	No	204	50.9
	Yes	196	49.1
6. Are you unable to maintain contact with your family/partner/friends?	No	140	35.1
	Yes	260	64.9
7. Do you feel insecurity about future prospects (work, relationships)?	No	160	40.0
	Yes	240	60.0
8. Are there difficulties associated with accessing mental health services such as guidance and counseling?	No	194	48.6
	Yes	206	51.4
9. Do you receive poor social and family support?	No	102	25.4
	Yes	298	74.6
10. Is there lack privacy and liberty?	No	86	21.4
	Yes	314	78.6
11. Is there inadequate time for relaxation?	No	134	33.4
	Yes	266	66.6
12. Are you unable to have good relationship with other prisoner/s, police, guards?	No	194	48.6
	Yes	206	51.4
13. Is there repulsive ward atmosphere?	No	144	36.0
	Yes	256	64.0
14. Is there dirty and depressing prison environment?	No	140	35.1
	Yes	260	64.9
15. Is that difficult to access physical activity such as the gym?	No	44	10.9
	Yes	356	89.1
16. Do you have more concerns over your release?	No	76	18.9
	Yes	324	81.1
17. Do you lost your previous social status, prestige, privilege and social gathering?	No	79	19.7
	Yes	321	80.3

As indicated in table 2, concerning prison social environment from 400 respondents, 320 (80%), 348 (87.1%), 299(74.9%), 382(95.4%), 260(64.9%), 240(60%), 206(51.4%), 298(74.6%), 314(78.6%), 266(66.6%), 260(64.9%), 356(89.1%), 324(81.1%) and 321(80.3%) of them reported that the prison is overcrowded; there is lack of activity to perform; there is isolation from previous contacts and relationships with families, friends and wider social groups; there is worry about your family; unable to maintain contact with your family/partner/friends; feel insecurity about future prospects (work, relationships); difficulties associated with accessing mental health services such as guidance and counseling; receive poor social and family support; there is lack privacy and liberty; there is inadequate time for relaxation; the prison environment is dirty and depressing; it is difficult to access physical activity such as the gym; have more concerns over your release and there is loss of previous social status, privilege, social gathering and social institutions respectively.

Table 3: Prison’s Social Environment Factors Associated with Mental Illness

In this section the impact of prison’s social environment on mental health was assessed. Here the statistical significant difference between covariates and mental illness were analyzed.

Variables	COR		AOR	
	95% C.I (Lower, Upper)		95% C.I (Lower, Upper)	
Feel insecurity	.471 .579	(.288 .770))*	.011 1	.504 (.297 .857)*
Lack privacy and liberty	.602 .486	.332 1.094***		
Repulsive ward atmosphere	.719 .493	.443 1.168***		
Unable to have good relationship with another prisoner/s	0.649 0.538	(0.409, 1.027) ***		
Dirty and depressing prison environment	0.628 0.513	(0.383, 1.031)***		
Difficult to access physical activity	0.312 0.486	(0.118, 0.823) **	.014 1	.279 (0.101, 0.772) *
Loses previous social status, privilege, social gathering and social institutions	.634 .476	(0.343,1.170) ***		

*<=0.01, **<=0.05and ***<=0.2

As indicated in table 3 the bivariate and multivariate analysis of regression was employed in order to identify factors associated with prisons social environment on mental health. The bivariate analysis of p value less than 0.2 is entered to multivariate analysis. Some of the bivariate analysis variables entered to multivariate were feeling insecurity, lack privacy and liberty, repulsive ward atmosphere, unable to have good relationship with other prisoner/s,

police, guards, dirty and depressing prison environment, difficult to access physical activity and loss of previous social status.

Among those variables feeling insecurity and difficult to access physical contacts activity have a p value of less than 0.05 means that statistically significant. This implies secured prisoners in their feeling were 0.5 times less likely developing the risk of experiencing mental illness than those of unsecured prisoners (AOR,0.5 (0.297, 0.857)). Those prisoners having who had no difficulty in accessing physical activity such as gym had 0.3 times less likely developing mental illness than their counterparts (AOR=0.3(0.101, 0.772).

Participants' experiences are inextricably linked to the nature of their existences in the prison, as aspects of the prison environment affect mental health. One of the participants said:

... Being locked up for long hours, that's not going to be conducive to our mental health.

The person explained a prison stay is a period of alienation and separation from free society.

If you've got no visits, because I don't get any visits, if you get no family visits, and have no people to come and see you, it's harder for you on the inside, because you don't get that little link to the outside world.

There are risk factors related to prison's social environment that affect mental health of prisoners. Prison is an inherently distressing experience. As per different studies, the prison life and culture could exacerbate general levels of distress (Birmingham, 2003).

In line with the above explanation participants in focus group discussion their poor mental health to interplay between prison culture and the social environment. As discussed with prisoners, the authoritative use of punishment was found to negatively affect participants' wellbeing. One of the participants explained the following.

Human beings need fairness and respect: that is, they need to know that actions and decisions taken in relation to them are morally justifiable and to be in environments that treat them with dignity. Demeaning and careless treatment causes distress.

Prisoners often said that ... what made them feel safe was "having someone to talk to". However, they reported as their contact with their families is limited with time and without privacy.

The Impact of Prison or being in Correctional Center

Prison culture can affect prisoners' mental health. Imprisonment is traditionally associated with punishment, security, and control. Therefore, the concept of care is questionable. It is argued 'prison environments have a culture characterized by order, control, and discipline, and this overrides the healthcare needs of prisoners'. The practical consequences of being sent to prison have an effect on an individual's emotional well-being. One thing is the influence of the prison environment, because they arise from the ways prisons fracture family relations and destroy the person's networks of social support (Brooker and Birmingham, 2009).

The typical stresses of imprisonment are harmful to the mental health of those imprisoned. The stresses could be due to the sudden disruption in people's life; the separation from family support; and the coercive and highly regimented daily routine.

Some of the effects on persons as they enter prison as reported by focus group discussants:

... it is still not possible within a prison environment to provide the same level of exercise, and fresh air, for example, that is available elsewhere. The risks to mental health ... remain high. Separation from family and friends, entry into an alien environment, an uncertain future, loss of job and income, the rupture of many social relationships and supports, all induce mental distress and disorder.

Arrival at a new prison is a stressful process. Being in prison may in itself damage mental health: for example, because of separation from family and worries about children are particularly serious problems for women prisoners. The other thing having something to do is vital for prisoners. For prisoners, a lack of meaningful daytime activity and limited opportunities for exercise are major concerns.

Difficulty in communication and contact with families

For many prisoners, correctional centers appeared to be an especially isolating experience. When imprisoned, prisoners lose contact with their families that make visiting difficult and increase the sense of isolation. Loss of family contact is a significant factor in stress, feeling of loneliness, anxiety and depression which are the common mental health problems.

This was supplemented by information from the prisoner who said:

"What does it do to people's mental health and well-being to be denied a basic right like privacy with your loved ones and families? Having separation with those is painful and can hurt"

Lack of Activity

As studies indicate extended periods of inactivity lead to frustration, anxiety and hopelessness (Fazel and Danesh, 2002). Some prisoners explained the emotional impact of enforced idleness:

...if not given a chance to work, not given a chance to do anything, you build up anger, you know what I mean. It's going to release one day. It's just building up inside you and got to hold it down, hold it down, hold it down. Imprisonment . . . denies autonomy, degrades dignity, impairs or destroys self-reliance, inculcates authoritarian values, minimizes the likelihood of beneficial interaction with one's peers, fractures family ties, destroys the family's economic stability, and prejudices the prisoner's future prospects for any improvement in ... economic and social status.

Furthermore, inactivity is included in the prisoner narratives:

In the community you've got people you can talk to, all the time, when you've got friends, family, and whatever. In prison, you're just stuck behind a door for twenty-four hours of the day.

Prisoners' Time Usage and Activities Desire

The correctional setting is narrated as inactive and habitual and also the boredom in prison and a lack of mental stimulus are narrated as problematic. In relation to prisoners' time usage and activities desire, the idea posed is that the current amount of time without worthy activities is problematic. A desire for additional activities is professed by focus group discussants. Increased activity and stimulus in physical/practical and mental/psychological/emotional respects is requested, in order to decrease time spent alone and inactive. The discussants explained the following.

"We've got so much time on our hands. This is where the danger is. I think this still needs improving. Then you're banged up, all night. I think there could be some more activity, or just something else to do, anything".

Relationships inside Prison

Good co-operation and communication seems crucial to good team working in prison. Genuine rapport is noted as not often formed by the prisoners in this study. Connecting emotionally with prison officials is highlighted as difficult and infrequent. Trust is seen as problematic and challenging in the correctional social environment. The interviewees' narratives depict a general lack of trust and friendship-orientated reliability in the prison's social environment.

Boredom

The experience of boredom in selected correctional centers is reported:

That's the big thing, yeah, especially in terms of rehabilitation, they don't rehabilitate anyone, when all they do is lock you in your cell, it's just pure punishment, that's it.

As it is understood from participants, it is not punishment that is recorded as problematic; it is, instead, the experienced lack of valuable and stimulating activities that is highlighted as challenging that is boredom — both in relation to mental health and preparation for release.

One of the interviewee participants said:

... I look at the fact that, we're in prison, do you know what I mean, we are here as well to be punished which is boredom that again impacts mental wellbeing.

Lack of Mental Health Care and Services

Participants consistently reported that mental health services were under-provided. Concerns were traced to difficulties associated with accessing mental health services. One of the participants said:

"Here, in this prison, in terms of mental healthcare, I don't think there's much more that could be done, if I'm honest. I think we [the prisoners] receive poor mental healthcare, if we need it. I think, in terms of mental healthcare, access to services and the actual care is better in the community than in here [the prison]."

Females Isolation from their Children

For everyone, prisons limit access to families. Isolation makes it more difficult for the person to interact with others. Most of the women we met were parents and most were the main care giver prior to imprisonment. The women were different to the men in a number of respects. Most had been the parent prior to prison. Imprisonment always means disruption for children and families but especially so for the families of these women. Some women described the anxiety they experienced when they were first incarcerated to prison.

The women were also concerned about the impact that visits to a prison might have on their children. Most of the women felt they did not have enough contact with their children and some had not seen their children as they need.

4. Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrated that majority of prisoners in East Gojjam correctional centers are at greater risk of experiencing mental illness. There were aspects of the prison's social environment that affect mental health of prisoners and being in correctional centers had adverse effect on mental health. Overall, mental illness found to be strongly associated with prison's social environment.

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