

The Impact of Social Support Networks on Psychological Distress Among Incarcerated Individuals at Ukonga Central Prison, Dar Es Salaam-Tanzania.

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ABSTRACT: Incarceration presents substantial psychological challenges, often intensifying distress such as anxiety, depression, and emotional isolation. This qualitative study explored the impact of social support networks on psychological distress among inmates at Ukonga Central Prison, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Using purposive sampling, 30 participants including inmates, family members, and prison staff were interviewed to understand the types, impacts and strategies for enhancing these social support networks in mitigating distress among inmates. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes as the main sources of support within the prison context, the themes included family support networks, peer support networks, institutional support from correctional staff, and community-based support through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Findings highlight the critical role of family contact and peer solidarity in buffering psychological distress, while institutional limitations and restrictive visitation policies often exacerbate inmates' mental health challenges. The study highlights the need for improved communication infrastructure, expanded mental health services, stigma reduction, and structured reintegration programs to promote inmate well-being and successful reentry. These insights contribute to understanding and addressing mental health needs in Tanzanian prisons and similar low-resource correctional settings.

KEYWORDS: Social Support Networks, Psychological Distress, Incarcerated individuals

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Incarceration poses significant psychological challenges for individuals, often worsening pre-existing mental health conditions or prompting new forms of psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and emotional isolation (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2021). The prison environment is typically characterized by restricted autonomy, social stigma, institutional routines, and limited interpersonal contact, all of which contribute to mental health deterioration (Haney, 2018). In such settings, the presence or absence of social support networks can play a critical role in shaping the psychological well-being of inmates. Social support is broadly defined as the perception or reality of being cared for, having assistance available from others, and feeling part of a supportive social network (Thoits, 2011). Among incarcerated individuals, such support may come from family members, friends, fellow inmates, prison staff, religious groups, or community organizations. Research indicates that social support networks acts as a protective buffer against psychological distress by reducing the perceived severity of stressful events and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms (Taylor, 2011; Uchino, 2009).

2. BACKGROUND

Prison settings inherently restrict interpersonal interactions and relationships, which can lead to emotional deprivation and chronic stress. However, the availability of social support, whether from family, peers, or institutional personnel, can serve as a protective factor by promoting emotional resilience and reducing the impact of adverse prison conditions (Houser *et al.*, 2021). Understanding the role of social support networks in mitigating psychological distress among incarcerated populations is essential not only for enhancing prison mental health services but also for improving rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes post-release.

Globally, there is growing recognition of the mental health crisis within correctional systems. Inmates frequently enter prison with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including histories of trauma, substance use, and socio-economic disadvantage, which are often exacerbated by the prison environment (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2021). A 2023 review of mental health in prisons highlighted that more than half of incarcerated individuals suffer from some form of psychological disorder, with social isolation identified as a major contributing factor (Baranyi *et al.*, 2023). In this context, social support is increasingly being studied as a non-clinical yet effective means of reducing distress and enhancing wellbeing.

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Social support networks among inmates can take several forms: external support from family and friends, peer support within the prison, and support from institutional staff. Studies indicate that inmates who maintain regular contact with family members and receive emotional encouragement report lower levels of depression and anxiety (Jiang & Winfree, 2020). Similarly, peer mentoring programs and inmate support groups have shown promise in reducing feelings of hopelessness and social alienation (Wang *et al.*, 2022).

However, access to social support is often uneven and influenced by factors such as sentence length, gender, and prison policies. In many correctional institutions, especially in low-resource settings, limited infrastructure and punitive cultures hinder the formation and maintenance of supportive relationships (Houser *et al.*, 2021). Thus, there is a pressing need for empirical research to examine the nature, accessibility, and effectiveness of different forms of social support in reducing psychological distress among incarcerated populations, particularly in under-researched contexts such as Sub-Saharan Africa.

Numerous studies underscore the significance of social support networks in promoting mental health in carceral settings. For instance, inmates who maintain regular contact with family and receive emotional or instrumental support are less likely to experience depression and anxiety symptoms (Jiang & Winfree, 2020). Furthermore, the absence of such support has been linked to increased rates of suicide ideation and psychological breakdowns (Liebling & Maruna, 2013). The role of peer networks within prisons is also essential, as inmates who develop trust-based relationships with fellow prisoners often report improved emotional stability and reduced loneliness (de Clare & King, 2022).

Despite global recognition of the importance of social support, there is a need for context-specific investigations, especially in low- and middle-income countries. In many African prisons, including those in Tanzania, the limited resources, overcrowding, and underdeveloped rehabilitation programs heighten inmates' vulnerability to psychological distress (Muntingh & Ballard, 2020). However, little empirical research has explored the influence of social support networks on prisoners' mental health outcomes in such settings.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Incarceration is inherently stressful, often leading to heightened levels of psychological distress among inmates due to factors such as loss of freedom, overcrowding, limited family contact, and uncertainty about the future. In Tanzania, these conditions are especially pronounced in facilities such as Ukonga Central Prison, where inmates frequently experience emotional isolation, anxiety, and depression (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2024). Despite the growing recognition of mental health needs within correctional facilities, the role of social support networks including family contact, peer relationships, and institutional support remains underexplored and underutilized in the Tanzanian prison system (Mwakalobo & Sanga, 2023).

Social support is globally recognized as a critical buffer against psychological distress, fostering resilience and promoting mental well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2023). However, in Tanzania's correctional environment, harsh conditions, stigma, and inadequate mental health services often undermine the availability and effectiveness of such support systems (Tanzania Legal and Human Rights Centre [LHRC], 2024). Specifically, Ukonga Central Prison, one of the largest and most congested prisons in the country, presents unique challenges in facilitating sustained social connections that could mitigate inmates' psychological struggles. Although some initiatives have been introduced to improve inmate welfare, there is limited empirical data on how social support systems influence psychological distress among prisoners in the Tanzanian context. Therefore, there is a critical need to examine how various forms of social support affect the psychological well-being of inmates at Ukonga Central Prison, to inform more humanitarian and effective correctional practices.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Incarceration is widely recognized as a highly stressful experience that often leads to significant psychological distress, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Haney, 2018). Within this environment, social supports defined as the emotional, informational, and instrumental resources provided by family, peers, and institutional actors play a critical role in buffering the negative psychological effects of incarceration (Wallace & Wang, 2020). This study utilized three theories of Attachment Theory by Bowlby, Stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman and Social Support theory by Cohen and Wills. The leading theory was Social Support theory for its relevance with the study. Several studies have demonstrated that incarcerated individuals with strong social support report lower levels of distress and better overall mental health outcomes (Cochran & Mears, 2017; Johnson & Easterling, 2021).

Social support has been conceptualized through various lenses, including emotional support (e.g., expressions of empathy and concern), instrumental support (e.g., material aid), and informational support (e.g., advice and guidance) (Thoits, 2011). Each of these forms contributes to a reduced perception of stress and enhances coping abilities among incarcerated individuals (Schulz *et al.*, 2020). Family support, in particular, is one of the most significant predictors of psychological well-being during imprisonment. Regular contact with family whether through visits, letters, or phone calls has been associated with reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Jiang & Winfree, 2022).

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Peer support within prison environments also plays a pivotal role. Inmates often form informal support networks that help them navigate the harsh realities of prison life. These networks can reduce feelings of isolation and provide emotional stability (Slade, 2020). However, the quality and consistency of peer support vary depending on institutional culture, security level, and population dynamics (Liebling & Maruna, 2013).

Moreover, institutional support through counseling services, religious programming, and rehabilitative activities can contribute to psychological resilience. Programs that encourage social connection and foster a sense of community have shown to decrease psychological distress and promote emotional regulation (Gonzalez & Connell, 2021).

Despite the established benefits of social support networks, many incarcerated individuals face barriers to accessing such networks. These include restricted visitation policies, geographic distance from loved ones, stigma, and poor prison infrastructure (Turney, 2021). In low-resource settings such as many correctional institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, including Tanzania, these challenges are often exacerbated by overcrowding, limited psychosocial services, and weak rehabilitation frameworks (Kassie *et al.*, 2023).

In the Tanzanian context, limited research exists specifically on the role of social support networks in prison settings. However, studies in similar environments suggest that strengthening both external and internal support systems can significantly improve mental health outcomes among inmates (Alemayehu *et al.*, 2022). This underscores the importance of examining how various forms of support operate within specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts, such as Ukonga Central Prison.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of incarcerated individuals, their family members, and prison staff regarding the role of social support networks in mitigating psychological distress. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to provide in-depth insights into the subjective experiences and meanings attached to social support networks in the prison context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted at Ukonga Central Prison in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, one of the largest correctional facility in the country. This setting was selected due to its diverse inmate population and accessibility for engaging both incarcerated individuals and prison staff. Family members were interviewed around prison settings during visiting days.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 30 participants based on their relevance to the research objectives and ability to provide rich and meaningful informations. The sample included three participant groups of 10 Incarcerated individuals and were willing to discuss their psychological experiences and social relationship, 10 Family members (e.g., parents, spouses, or siblings) of incarcerated individuals who maintained some form of contact with their loved ones during incarceration and 10 Correctional officers who regularly interacted with inmates and had insights into their psychological wellbeing and social support systems. This stratification allowed for triangulation of perspectives and a holistic understanding of the experience. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and Focused group discussions conducted in Kiswahili and English, depending on participants' preferences. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore key areas, including types of social support networks available, Impacts of these support networks and Strategies for enhancing these social support networks. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings were based on four themes identified during interviews and focused group discussions which are presented thematically as below:

Family support networks

Participants reported that emotional support from loved ones via visits, letters, and phone calls was a major buffer against psychological distress. Inmates described feeling less isolated and more hopeful when maintaining these ties, while family members recognized their role but lamented logistical challenges in maintaining contact. *“visiting from my sister remind me I’m not forgotten... it helps me manage anxiety.”* Inmate C This aligns with findings by Jiang and Winfree (2022), who highlight that emotional connectedness can mitigate the effects of institutional stress and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression among inmates. Prison staff confirmed that inmates with stronger family ties displayed better emotional stability and fewer disciplinary issues.

Institutional Support

Institutional welfare services, such as counseling from correctional staffs however partial and recreational programs, were described as narrow and under-resourced. Inmates cited long wait times for medical and psychological support and a lack of stimulating activities, exacerbating feelings of neglect and stress. *“Recreational and educational programs are limited... when we have nothing to do, we dwell on sadness.”* (Inmate C.) Correctional officers acknowledged systemic constraints like overcrowding and insufficient trained personnel. These gaps echo previous studies, such as those by Fazel *et al.* (2021), which emphasize the need for structured welfare services to support inmate mental health.

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Peer Support networks

Inmate-to-inmate support emerged as a powerful coping mechanism. Shared experiences fostered empathy, reduced loneliness, and promoted group resilience, with some inmates describing their peer groups as "family inside." *"When we support each other, it helps us not feel so lost."* – (Inmate A.) This aligns with research by Liebling and Arnold (2019), who emphasize the significance of peer or inmate solidarity in buffering the harshness of incarceration, especially in under-resourced systems.

Community-Based Support through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO'S).

These include Faith-based practices which were widely acknowledged for their therapeutic benefits. Inmates, families, and officers noted that prayer, religious gatherings, and access to chaplains brought emotional comfort and inner peace. *"Prayer is my anchor... without spiritual support, many of us would feel more lost."* (Inmate B). This finding supports the work of Johnson and Larson (2020), who assert that spirituality can promote emotional regulation and provide meaning in restrictive environments.

Despite the proven benefits of these networks in reducing psychological challenges among inmates yet several constraints were encountered by these actors including

Communication Barriers and Visitation Rights

Participants emphasized that strict visitation rules, limited phone access, and poor infrastructure worsened feelings of abandonment and anxiety. Families were distressed by missed or cancelled visits, while officers cited security and overcrowding as reasons for restrictions. *"When I don't hear from my family, I feel anxious and depressed."* (Inmate B). As shown in research by DeClaire and Dixon (2022), communication barriers erode vital support systems and deepen psychological distress, underscoring the need for communication reforms in correctional policy.

Stigma, Isolation, and Rejection

Stigma from both within prison and the wider community contributed significantly to inmates' mental distress. Many felt judged, excluded, or abandoned, both by fellow inmates and their own families. *"Even our families reject us... that rejection is worse than the prison walls."* – (Inmate D). These findings mirror evidence by Arditti and Parkman (2021), who highlight the compounding effects of societal stigma on incarcerated individuals and the emotional toll of social rejection.

Counseling and Psychological Services

Despite recognition of the need, counseling services were described as sparse, with limited sessions, long waitlists, and concerns over confidentiality. Both inmates and staff observed a cultural stigma around seeking psychological help, deterring access. *"The counselling helped a bit... but there is a long waiting list."* (Inmate B). The lack of accessible mental health services reflects broader trends identified by Prins (2021), where high need among incarcerated populations is often met with inadequate institutional response.

Post-Release Support and Reintegration

Inmates expressed anxiety about life after prison, fearing rejection, unemployment, and relapse. Family members also worried about insufficient preparation and the emotional burden of reintegration. Prison staff recognized the absence of structured post-release programs and called for more vocational training and counseling. *"Without support, I feel like I'll fall back into the same problems."* (Inmate A). These concerns echo the findings of Travis and Western (2021), who argue that successful reintegration is closely tied to mental well-being and that a lack of structured support increases the risk of recidivism.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study illuminated the complex interplay of social support systems and psychological distress among incarcerated individuals at Ukonga Central Prison, as revealed through four key thematic actors. Emotional support from family and friends emerged as a vital protective factor, helping inmates cope with the isolation and anxiety inherent to incarceration. However, logistical challenges and restrictive communication policies often impeded consistent contact, exacerbating distress. Institutional welfare services, including counseling and recreational programs, were found to be insufficiently resourced, limiting their effectiveness in addressing inmates' mental health needs. Peer support and inmate solidarity played a crucial compensatory role, fostering resilience and emotional stability amid systemic gaps. Additionally, religious and spiritual engagement provided significant therapeutic benefits, underscoring the importance of facilitating access to faith-based resources.

Conversely, barriers such as stringent visitation rules, communication restrictions, stigma, and social rejection compounded inmates' psychological burden. Limited availability and cultural stigma surrounding counseling further hindered access to professional mental health care. Finally, concerns about post-release reintegration highlighted a critical gap in transitional support, posing risks for recidivism and deteriorating mental well-being.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found the need to Reform visitation policies, improve infrastructure and letter communication infrastructure to facilitate regular, meaningful contact between inmates and their loved ones. This could include extending visiting hours, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and implementing monitored but more accessible phone services. Increase investment in mental health counseling, recreational, and educational programs. Improving and add trained personnel to reduce wait times and expand program availability, thereby mitigating boredom and psychological distress. Encourage structured peer support groups within prisons to foster solidarity and emotional coping, recognizing inmates' role in providing mutual aid where institutional resources fall short. Support regular spiritual activities and ensure inmates have access to chaplains or religious counselors, recognizing the therapeutic role of faith in mental health.

Implement educational campaigns to reduce stigma associated with incarceration and mental health help-seeking among inmates, families, and staff, encouraging more open engagement with counseling services. Establish structured reintegration support focusing on vocational training, psychological counseling, and community linkage to reduce anxiety about reentry and lower recidivism risks. Advocate for policy reforms at governmental and institutional levels to allocate adequate resources addressing overcrowding, staff training, and infrastructure improvements that affect inmates' psychological well-being.

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