

INCARCERATION RELATED STRESSORS AMONG FEMALE INMATES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Imprisonment is associated with a range of adverse psychological consequences that may undermine inmates' emotional well-being and adjustment during incarceration. Women in prison may experience particularly complex forms of distress due to separation from family, restricted autonomy, uncertainty about the future, and unresolved emotional burdens related to their past. This study examined the types of incarceration-related stressors experienced by female inmates in a prison located in the southern region of Malaysia. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed, and 123 female inmates participated in the study. Data were collected using the Prison Stress Scale (PS Scale) and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations. The findings indicated that the most salient stressors experienced by the inmates were missing family or friends, concerns about the future, regrets about the past, and missing freedom. Overall, the respondents reported a moderately high level of stress during incarceration. These findings underscore the emotional and psychosocial burden of imprisonment among women and provide useful insights for prison authorities, counselors, and mental health practitioners in designing appropriate intervention and support programmes to enhance the psychological well-being of female inmates.*

Keywords: *Female Inmates, Prison Stress, Incarceration, Psychological Well-Being, Malaysia, Correctional Counseling*

Introduction

Imprisonment is widely recognized as a psychologically demanding experience that may adversely affect inmates' emotional, social, and physical well-being. Correctional institutions are structured environments characterized by restricted movement, reduced autonomy, separation from significant others, and institutional routines that may intensify stress and emotional strain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Picken, 2012). Research has consistently shown that incarceration can contribute to psychological deterioration, including depression, hopelessness, anxiety, hostility, and emotional withdrawal among prison populations (Picken, 2012). More recent evidence also indicates that women in prison experience substantial mental health needs and psychosocial vulnerabilities, often shaped by trauma histories, social disadvantage, and disrupted support systems (Aboaja et al., 2023; Bright et al., 2023).

Stress in prison is not merely an individual response but is closely connected to the correctional environment itself. Conditions such as limited privacy, institutional control, restricted decision-making, uncertainty about release, and reduced access to emotional support can contribute significantly to distress (McLennan et al., 2025). The prison setting may therefore become a context in which emotional, relational, and situational stressors accumulate over time, affecting inmates' ability to cope and adjust (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McLennan et al., 2025).

For female inmates, incarceration may involve additional layers of emotional burden. Women in prison often occupy key relational roles outside prison, including as mothers, daughters, wives, or family caregivers. Imprisonment may therefore involve not only the loss of physical freedom but also the disruption of attachment bonds, caregiving responsibilities, and identity-linked social roles (Bright et al., 2023). Recent literature suggests that women prisoners frequently report stress related to separation from family, emotional disconnection, autonomy loss, and uncertainty about post-release life (Aboaja et al., 2023; Bright et al., 2023).

Despite growing international attention to prison mental health, empirical attention to the specific stressors experienced by female inmates in the Malaysian context remains limited. Understanding these stressors is important because it can inform the development of more responsive correctional counseling, prison mental health services, and psychosocial support programmes. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the types of incarceration-related stressors experienced by female inmates in a prison in the southern region of Malaysia and to discuss the implications of these stressors for psychological support and correctional counseling.

Literature Review

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

Stressors and the Prison Environment

Stress is commonly understood as a state of psychological or emotional strain that occurs when individuals perceive that the demands placed upon them exceed their available coping resources. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized stress as a transactional process shaped by the relationship between the individual and the environment, particularly when environmental demands are appraised as threatening or overwhelming. In correctional settings, this framework is especially relevant because prison environments impose ongoing restrictions on autonomy, privacy, movement, and interpersonal relationships.

Previous prison research has shown that incarceration is associated with a broad range of stressors, including isolation, loss of freedom, institutional routines, uncertainty, and limited

control over daily life (Picken, 2012; McLennan et al., 2025). These experiences may place sustained pressure on inmates' coping capacities and contribute to psychological strain over time.

Incarceration-Related Stressors

A substantial body of prison literature has identified multiple incarceration-related stressors. These include social isolation, separation from loved ones, fear of victimization, restricted freedom, inadequate healthcare, excessive noise, institutional routines, and uncertainty regarding life after release (Maitland & Sluder, 1998; Picken, 2012; McLennan et al., 2025). In addition to environmental and institutional challenges, imprisonment may also trigger internal emotional stressors such as guilt, shame, regret, loneliness, and anxiety.

Recent qualitative work has emphasized that the psychological burden of imprisonment often extends beyond confinement itself. For example, McLennan et al. (2025) reported that separation from loved ones, loss of freedom, and reduced autonomy are among the most psychologically difficult aspects of imprisonment. Similarly, Bright et al. (2023) found that women's experiences of prison-based mental healthcare are deeply shaped by trauma, emotional vulnerability, and the prison environment.

Female Inmates and Gendered Experiences of Stress

The prison experience is not necessarily gender-neutral. Female inmates may encounter incarceration in ways that are shaped by prior trauma, caregiving responsibilities, social stigma, and relational disruption. Studies have shown that women prisoners often present with significant mental health needs and may be particularly affected by emotional disconnection and social loss (Aboaja et al., 2023; Bright et al., 2023).

Women in prison may be especially affected by separation from children, family members, and social support networks, as well as by uncertainty regarding post-release reintegration. These experiences may make relational and emotional stressors especially salient among incarcerated women. In this regard, examining prison stressors among female inmates is important not only for understanding their incarceration experiences but also for informing gender-responsive counseling, rehabilitation, and psychosocial intervention.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to examine the types of incarceration-related stressors experienced by female inmates during imprisonment. A descriptive approach was appropriate because the study aimed to identify and describe the nature and level of stressors reported by the respondents rather than to test causal relationships (Jackson, 2009).

Sample

The study involved 123 female inmates selected through purposive sampling from a prison located in the southern region of Malaysia. The respondents represented different racial or ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, and durations of imprisonment, and ranged in age from 17 to 57 years. The sample size was constrained by institutional access limitations and security-related restrictions imposed by the prison authorities.

Instrument

Data were collected using the Prison Stress Scale (PS Scale). The original instrument is linked to prison stress research developed from earlier prison environment studies (Maitland & Sluder, 1998). The expanded version used in later prison coping research includes 19 items and has been associated with acceptable reliability in prior work (Rocheleau, 2011).

The scale measures multiple prison-related stressors, including social, emotional, environmental, and institutional challenges. One example of an item is “missing family or friends.” Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not hard at all to 5 = Very hard. Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived stress.

Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to the selected respondents within the prison setting with permission from the relevant prison authorities. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, to identify the most and least stressful incarceration-related experiences reported by the respondents.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee and the Malaysian Prison Department prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Research Finding

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

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviation of Types of Stressors

No.	Items	Responses					Overall Stress Index	
		Not hard at all (%)	Not hard (%)	Neutral (%)	Hard (%)	Very hard (%)	Mean	SD
1.	Missing family or friends.	4 (3.3)	9 (7.3)	16 (13.0)	25 (20.3)	69 (56.1)	4.18	1.11
5.	Concerns about the future.	2 (1.6)	7 (5.7)	24 (19.5)	31 (25.2)	59 (48.0)	4.12	1.02
4.	Regrets about the past.	2 (1.6)	7 (5.7)	29 (23.6)	36 (29.3)	49 (39.8)	4.00	1.00

No.	Items	Responses					Overall Stress Index	
		Not hard at all (%)	Not hard (%)	Neutral (%)	Hard (%)	Very hard (%)	Mean	SD
11.	Missing freedom.	2 (1.6)	13 (10.6)	36 (29.3)	32 (26.0)	40 (32.5)	3.77	1.06
13.	Not being able to make my own decisions.	7 (5.7)	15 (12.2)	39 (31.7)	39 (31.7)	23 (18.7)	3.45	1.10
9.	Excessive noise.	7 (5.7)	17 (13.8)	53 (43.1)	24 (19.5)	22 (17.9)	3.30	1.09
10.	Quality of medical care.	12 (9.8)	16 (13.0)	50 (40.7)	28 (22.8)	17 (13.8)	3.17	1.13
19.	Concerns about my safety.	11 (8.9)	21 (17.1)	49 (39.8)	23 (18.7)	19 (15.4)	3.14	1.15
17.	Following prison rules.	23 (18.7)	23 (18.7)	34 (27.6)	31 (25.2)	12 (9.8)	2.88	1.25
15.	Environment where we eat.	14 (11.4)	19 (15.4)	66 (53.7)	16 (13.0)	8 (6.5)	2.87	.99
3.	Conflicts with prisoners.	20 (16.3)	20 (16.3)	53 (43.1)	21 (17.1)	9 (7.3)	2.82	1.12
12.	Conflicts with staff.	24 (19.5)	21 (17.1)	51 (41.5)	16 (13.0)	11 (8.9)	2.74	1.17

Overall Stress Level

The results of the study indicated that the female inmates experienced a moderately high level of stress overall during incarceration ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .49$). This finding suggests that imprisonment was associated with a substantial level of emotional and psychosocial strain among the respondents.

Most Salient Stressors

Among the 19 items assessed using the Prison Stress Scale, the highest-rated stressor was missing family or friends ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.11$). This was followed by concerns about the future ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.02$), regrets about the past ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.00$), and missing freedom ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.06$).

These findings suggest that the most significant stressors experienced by the respondents were primarily emotional and psychosocial in nature rather than purely institutional. In particular, the results point to the importance of separation, uncertainty, self-reflection, and loss of autonomy in shaping the prison experience of female inmates.

Moderately Stressful Experiences

The respondents also reported moderately high stress in relation to not being able to make their own decisions ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.10$), excessive noise ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.09$), quality of medical care ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.13$), and concerns about safety ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.15$).

These findings indicate that institutional and environmental aspects of prison life also contributed to the respondents' stress. Although these stressors were not ranked as highly as family separation or future concerns, they nonetheless reflect meaningful sources of day-to-day psychological burden.

Least Stressful Experiences

The least stressful experiences reported by the respondents were following prison rules ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.25$), the environment where meals were taken ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .99$), conflicts with prisoners ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.12$), and conflicts with staff ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.17$).

This pattern suggests that although institutional compliance and interpersonal tensions were present, they were relatively less distressing than emotionally laden experiences such as missing loved ones, worrying about the future, and reflecting on past regrets.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the types of incarceration-related stressors experienced by female inmates in a prison in Malaysia. Overall, the findings revealed that the respondents experienced a moderately high level of stress during incarceration. This suggests that imprisonment is not merely a form of physical confinement, but also a psychologically demanding experience that may place a substantial emotional burden on women in correctional settings (Picken, 2012; McLennan et al., 2025).

One of the most notable findings of this study was that missing family or friends emerged as the highest-rated stressor. This indicates that emotional separation from loved ones constitutes one of the most difficult aspects of imprisonment for female inmates. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that women in prison often experience incarceration as a disruption of emotionally significant and identity-defining relationships, particularly those involving children, spouses, and close family members (Bright et al., 2023). For many women, imprisonment may therefore involve not only physical restriction, but also a profound sense of loneliness, emotional disconnection, and relational loss.

The findings also showed that concerns about the future and regrets about the past were among the most salient stressors experienced by the respondents. These results suggest that the prison experience may be psychologically shaped by both retrospective and anticipatory distress. Concerns about the future may reflect uncertainty regarding reintegration, family acceptance, employment opportunities, stigma, and the ability to rebuild life after release. Meanwhile, regret about the past may reflect guilt, shame, remorse, or unresolved emotional pain associated with prior experiences and life choices. From the perspective of the transactional theory of stress, such experiences may become particularly distressing when individuals perceive them as exceeding their coping resources or emotional capacity to manage them effectively (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Another important finding was that missing freedom and not being able to make one's own decisions were also experienced as meaningful stressors. These results highlight the psychological significance of autonomy loss in the prison environment. Incarceration involves substantial restrictions on personal choice, privacy, movement, and self-determination, which may lead to frustration, helplessness, and emotional strain. Recent evidence similarly suggests that the loss of control and reduced autonomy are among the most psychologically difficult

aspects of prison life, particularly when individuals feel unable to regulate their own daily routines or personal decisions (McLennan et al., 2025).

In addition, the respondents reported moderately high stress related to excessive noise, quality of medical care, and concerns about safety. These findings indicate that prison stress is not limited to emotional separation and future uncertainty, but also includes institutional and environmental conditions that shape daily living experiences. Although these factors were not among the highest-ranked stressors, they remain important because they may influence inmates' sense of comfort, security, dignity, and well-being during incarceration. This finding supports previous literature indicating that prison conditions and service-related issues can significantly affect psychological adjustment and emotional stability among incarcerated individuals (Maitland & Sluder, 1998; Bright et al., 2023).

By contrast, following prison rules, conflicts with prisoners, and conflicts with staff were among the least stressful experiences reported by the respondents. One possible explanation is that the inmates may have gradually adapted to the institutional routines and expectations of prison life, making these aspects less emotionally burdensome compared to separation-related and self-reflective stressors. Another possibility is that emotional and relational losses were more salient to the respondents than overt interpersonal tensions within the prison setting. This pattern suggests that the prison experience of female inmates may be shaped more strongly by internal emotional distress than by direct institutional confrontation.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that the incarceration experience of female inmates is strongly influenced by separation, uncertainty, regret, and autonomy loss. These stressors are largely psychosocial in nature and reflect the emotional consequences of imprisonment rather than only the structural realities of prison life. As such, the findings reinforce the need for prison-based interventions that address not only behavioural adjustment but also the deeper emotional and psychological experiences of incarcerated women.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for correctional counseling, prison mental health services, and rehabilitation planning for female inmates.

First, because missing family or friends emerged as the most significant stressor, prison-based support services should pay greater attention to the emotional impact of family separation and relational loss. Female inmates may benefit from counseling interventions that focus on grief, loneliness, emotional expression, and attachment-related distress. Where feasible, correctional institutions may also consider strengthening family contact opportunities and psychosocial support mechanisms that help inmates maintain meaningful relational ties during incarceration (Bright et al., 2023).

Second, the prominence of concerns about the future suggests that female inmates may benefit from future-oriented counseling and psychosocial preparation during incarceration. Counseling interventions could help inmates address fears related to release, reintegration, social stigma, family relationships, employability, and self-worth. Structured programmes focused on goal setting, realistic planning, and emotional readiness for community re-entry may help reduce uncertainty and improve post-release adjustment.

Third, the finding that regrets about the past represented a major source of stress indicates a need for counseling approaches that address guilt, shame, self-blame, and unresolved emotional experiences. Supportive counseling, cognitive restructuring, reflective work, and strengths-based interventions may help female inmates reinterpret past experiences more constructively and develop a healthier sense of self.

Fourth, the stress associated with missing freedom and limited decision-making suggests that prison-based interventions should aim, where possible, to strengthen a sense of personal agency and psychological autonomy even within a restrictive environment. Counselling and rehabilitation programmes that emphasize emotional regulation, coping skills, self-efficacy, resilience, and personal responsibility may be especially valuable in helping inmates feel more psychologically empowered during incarceration.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective support for female inmates should be gender-responsive, emotionally informed, and psychosocially grounded. Correctional counseling should move beyond a narrow focus on institutional adjustment and instead address the deeper emotional, relational, and identity-related burdens associated with imprisonment.

Limitations of the Study

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted in one prison institution only, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to female inmates in other correctional settings in Malaysia. Second, the use of a descriptive survey design means that the findings are limited to identifying and describing stressors rather than explaining causal relationships between prison experiences and psychological outcomes. Third, the study relied on self-report data, which may be influenced by social desirability, emotional state, or response bias. Future studies may benefit from using multi-site samples, inferential analysis, or qualitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the incarceration experiences of female inmates.

Conclusion

This study found that female inmates in a Malaysian prison experienced a moderately high level of incarceration-related stress, with the most prominent stressors being missing family or friends, concerns about the future, regrets about the past, and missing freedom. These findings demonstrate that imprisonment affects women not only through physical confinement but also through emotional separation, uncertainty, diminished autonomy, and psychosocial disruption.

The study contributes to the limited literature on women's prison experiences and highlights the need for more responsive correctional counseling and prison mental health support. Addressing the emotional and psychosocial burden of incarceration is essential if prison institutions are to support not only institutional management but also rehabilitation, psychological well-being, and eventual reintegration into society.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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