

## **CORRELATES OF COPING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF INCARCERATION AMONG NIGERIAN PRISON INMATES**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper investigated the correlates of coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates. The study was carried out in Port Harcourt Prison, Rivers State, Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of 2,997 inmates, of Port Harcourt Prison while the sample was 250 inmates who were composed through stratified random sampling technique from the population. Relevant data for testing the five null hypotheses formulated for the study were gathered through indirect administration of copies of “Correlates of Coping with Challenges of Incarceration Questionnaire (CCCIQ)” on the sample. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers’. Its reliability co-efficient which was ascertained through the test retest method within an interval of two weeks was 0.78. Statistical analysis was carried out with t-test of independent mean scores and the results show that sex, years of incarceration, educational level, nature of incarceration and marital status have significant influence on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. These results were discussed and some recommendations also made. One of the recommendations is that programmes and policies that will increase the ability of prison inmates to cope with their challenges should be put in place by the government and concerned non-governmental organizations.*

**KEYWORDS:** Coping, Challenges, Incarceration, Nigerian Prison, Inmates

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### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The prison or penitentiary is a state or federally operated facility for the incarceration of felony offenders sentenced by the criminal courts (Siegel, 2005). Incarceration in prison serves three major functions to the state. These are to punish the criminals, to deter others from committing crime and to reform the criminal for re-integration into the society. This is why it is often stated that prison as a correction ground has a remarkable impact on the inmates, both positively and negatively. However, the negative outweighs the positive. The negative impacts of prison on the wellbeing of incarcerated persons can be seen in terms

of overcrowding which has reached an alarming situation in Nigerian prisons. Overcrowding is a situation whereby the prison capacity outnumbers the prison population. This situation put a strain on facilities and creates problems such as accommodation, classification of inmates, floor space, medical care, bed and beddings, ventilation, personal hygiene, sanitation, etc. In fact, report by the Reformer (2009) shows that in the last few decades, inmates' population in Nigerian prisons has grown substantially to the extent of leading to overcrowding. This assertion was collaborated by Amnesty International Report (2012) which shows that in 2012, there were 49,000 inmates in two hundred and thirty four prisons out of which 20% were convicts while the rest were awaiting trial inmates. The overcrowding of prison alters the psychological, physiological and behavioural well-being of the inmates (Crystal, 2004).

Overcrowding or congestion in prison also leads to conflict and tension among prisoners. This affects the prisoners' psychological well-being. The negative impact of overcrowding on the psychological well-being of prisoners can be viewed from their feelings of not being secure, anxiety, depression and loneliness during incarceration. Picken (2012:5) observed that "inmates exhibit higher level of anxiety and depression than the general population along with lower levels of self-esteem". According to the same source, the threat or persistent fear of victimization among inmates that is presented in the prison environment can lead to hypervigilance. This is a situation whereby an individual feels threatened and always at alert for possible threats around his/her vicinity.

Closely related to the challenge of overcrowding is the issue of prisoners' food/feeding. As a result of over population, feeding the sea of inmates is almost impossible. Ehonwa (1996) stated that prisons hold about twice their capacity and feeding the army of prisoners adequately has been impossible. Consequently, the quantity and quality of food given to inmates are deplorable. Talking about nutritional or balanced diet for prisoners is going overboard. There is no such thing as balance diet or nutritional food. Prisoners are fed with all sorts of concoction called food.

In addition to the problem of overpopulation of prisoners, their feeding problem is also compounded by three other factors viz:

- The grossly inadequate budgetary allocation for the feeding of prisoners.
- The sharp business practices of prison food contractors, and
- Warders' theft of food items (Ehonwa, 1996). These acts put a strain on section 22 of the prison regulations, laws of the Federation (2004, Cap.: 29) which describe the quantity and quality of food to be given to the prisoners according to the nature of labour given to them.

Furthermore, there is the challenge of prisoners' health. Truly, the condition prisoners find themselves in terms of feeding, sanitary condition, poor hygiene, congestion, the general prison environment and unhealthy practices among inmates contribute to the ill-health of prisoners. Some prisoners' health problems get too bad before they even stand trial while

some die while awaiting trial. This happens because of poor hygienic condition of the prison, lack of health care services and poor feeding condition of prisoners. This ugly state of affair has prompted the World Health Organization (2013) to recognize the need to promote good health care of prisoners.

The health challenge of prisoners in Nigerian prisons can also be seen from the fact that life in the nation's prisons usually involves a high risk of becoming seriously sick or a lost opportunity of recovering from an existing sickness. Prisoners who were healthy before entering prison have a high risk of leaving prison with life threatening ailments like HIV, tuberculosis, drug problem and poor mental health. Those who entered prison with health issues most often leave prison without receiving good medical care or even dying in the process of their incarceration. Ehonwa (1996) reported that tuberculosis and other respiratory tract illnesses, skin diseases, malaria and many other diseases still thrive in Nigeria prisons. According to the same source, there was a scabies outbreak in Ilorin prison in 1992 and the next year, eighty-nine inmates in three prisons in Lagos State tested positive to tuberculosis test administered by National Institute of Medical Research. High risk behaviours such as rape, unprotected sex, homosexuality and intravenous drug use are known to exist in prisons and the health care delivery service in Nigerian prisons are not functioning. These situations have tremendous effect on the health conditions of inmates. Beside the challenges already pointed out in this paper, review of literature by Agbakwuru and Awujo (2016:153-154) has also uncovered many other challenges faced by incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prisons. These challenges are "overcrowding, poor sanitation (inadequate toilet facilities, toiletries, and water supply), inadequate finance, food, medicines, denial of contact with families and friends, loss of freedom, fear of not knowing what will become of their loved ones, fear of survival, stigma of being labeled ex-convicts, excess noise, isolation, sexual intimidation, inadequate facilities, dilapidated infrastructure, dearth of materials for training inmates in various trades, lack of manpower as well as over regimented life to the extent that there is strict control in virtually all activities of the inmates". Similarly, Agbakwuru and Awujo (2016) have discovered that Nigerian prisoners cope with these problems/challenges through involvement in religious activities, formation of surrogate families in prisons, engagement in educational and vocational training and emotion focused strategy.

Sadly, there is an apparent gap in knowledge regarding the correlates of coping with these challenges among inmates in Nigerian prisons. Correlates here refer to factors that influence how prison inmates cope with these challenges of incarceration. These factors or correlates are products of classification of prisoners and good knowledge of their influence on how prisoners cope with the challenges of their incarceration is fundamental to any step or measure which is aimed at improving the well-being of incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prisons. It is also pre-requisite to any genuine effort aimed at prison reformation (Agbakwuru & Ibe-Godfrey, 2016).

This study was therefore embarked upon to provide answer to this unresolved problem in knowledge bank. The study was guided by the following null hypotheses:

1. Sex does not significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates.
2. Years of incarceration does not significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates.
3. Educational level does not significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates.
4. Marital status does not significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates.
5. Nature of incarceration does not significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The design of this study is ex-post facto because the study merely collected and analysed data on some variables retrospectively without manipulating any of them. The design was considered most appropriate for this study because the inmates were already incarcerated. The researchers' therefore made comparison of the scores from the dependent variables in order to find out their influence on the independent variables. The study was carried out in Port Harcourt Prison in Port Harcourt City Council Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. This area was considered most appropriate for the research because Port Harcourt Prison has one of the highest number of population of prisoners in Nigerian prisons. Therefore, the area of study provided adequate population for the study. Statistical data obtained by the researchers from Port Harcourt prison records show that the population of the study was 2,997 inmates. This number comprises of 2,633 awaiting trial males (ATM), 38 awaiting trial females (ATF), 78 convicted males and 7 convicted females, 18 lifers, 208 condemned male prisoners, 9 condemned female prisoners and 6 male lodgers. The sample of the study was 250 inmates who were drawn from Port Harcourt prison using stratified random sampling technique. This number consisted of 172 awaiting trial males, 28 awaiting trial females, 20 convicted males, 6 convicted females, 11 condemned males, 5 condemned females, 2 male lifers and 6 male lodgers. This gave a total of 211 males and 39 females. Stratified random sampling technique was considered most appropriate for composing the sample because there were different categories of incarcerated persons in the prison. This sampling technique ensured that all the categories were included in the study.

The instrument used for data collection was "Correlates of Coping with Challenges of Incarceration Questionnaire (CCCIQ)". This was a researchers' developed instrument. It contained 20 items which were divided into two sections. Section A elicited information on the correlates or factors while section B elicited information on the challenges of incarceration. Section B was designed in the pattern of a modified four-point Likert type scale of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD) with response scores of 4,3,2, and 1 point respectively. The reliability co-efficient of this

instrument was ascertained through the test re-test method with 30 respondents from Ahoda Prison, Rivers State and the interval of the first and second tests was two weeks. Data obtained from the two sets of tests were correlated with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient and the reliability co-efficient obtained was 0.78. This high reliability co-efficient shows that the instrument is very reliable for the study.

Relevant data were collected from the respondents through the administration of copies of the research instrument on the prison inmates through the prison authorities. This measure was taken because of security implications. The five null hypotheses were tested with t-test of independent sample means.

## RESULTS

Results of the statistical analysis of the data are presented in the following tables:

**Table 1:** t-test analysis of influence of sex on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

Sex	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Df	t-cal	t-critical	Result
Male	211	3.01	0.92	248	4.33	1.96	Significant
Female	39	2.43	1.01				

\*significant at 0.05

The result on table 1 shows that at 248 degree of freedom, the t-calculate of 4.33 is greater than the t-critical of 1.96 hence the null hypothesis was rejected. The conclusion which was drawn from this result is that sex significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

**Table 2:** t-test analysis of influence of years of incarceration on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

Years of incarceration	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Df	t-cal	t-critical	Result
< 5 years	112	2.30	0.96	248	5.30	1.96	Significant
5 years and above	138	2.92	0.88				

\* significant at 0.05

The result on table 2 shows that the t-calculated of 5.30 is greater than the t-critical of 1.96 at 248 degree of freedom hence the null hypothesis was rejected. The conclusion which was drawn from this result is that years of incarceration significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

**Table 3:** t-test analysis of influence of educational level on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

Educational Level	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Df	t-cal	t-critical	Result
Not more than ordinary level	201	3.52	0.77	248	7.27	1.96	Significant
More than ordinary level	49	2.43	0.98				

\*significant at 0.05

The result on table 3 shows that at 248 degree of freedom, the t-calculated of 7.27 is greater than the t-critical of 1.96 hence the null hypothesis was rejected. The conclusion which was drawn from this result is that educational level significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

**Table 4:** t-test analysis of influence of nature of incarceration on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

Nature of incarceration	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Df	t-cal	t-critical	Result
Awaiting trial	180	2.39	1.02	248	5.16	1.96	Significant
Convicted	70	3.11	0.98				

\*significant at 0.05

The result on table 4 shows that at the 248 degree of freedom, the t-calculated of 5.16 is greater than the t-critical of 1.96. Based on this, the null hypothesis was rejected and its alternative form accepted. The conclusion which was drawn from this result is that nature of incarceration significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

**Table 5:** t-test analysis of influence of marital status on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates

Marital status	N	$\bar{X}$	S.D	Df	t-cal	t-critical	Result
Married	109	3.60	0.82	248	2.57	1.96	Significant
Single	141	3.89	0.96				

\*significant at 0.05

The result on table 5 shows that at 248 degree of freedom the t-calculated of 2.57 was greater than the t-critical of 1.96 hence the null hypothesis was rejected. The conclusion which was drawn from this result is that marital status significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The result of statistical analysis of hypothesis 1 shows that sex significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. The higher mean score of the males (3.01) as opposed to the 2.43 of the females show that the males cope better with the challenges of incarceration than the females. This result is expected because in Nigeria if not in the whole of Africa, women are regarded as the weaker sex. They are more emotional than the males and always look for help to cope with their challenges. The reverse of these situations apply to their male counterparts who are culturally expected to endure hardship, be bold, courageous, less emotional and independent in handling or solving their problems. Thus, when both sexes are incarcerated or faced with challenges, the males tend to fare better in coping with the challenges than the females.

Similarly, the result of analysis of hypothesis 2 shows that years of incarceration has a significant influence on coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. Those who have spent more than five years in incarceration cope better with the challenges than those who have spent less than five years. This could be observed from their mean scores of 2.92 and 2.30 respectively. This result seem to be attributed to the fact that having spent a long time in incarceration, those who have spent more than five years have accepted their fate and have also learnt how to survive in incarceration. This enhanced their ability to cope better than their colleagues who by virtue of their shorter period of stay in incarceration have not been able to accept their fate nor learnt how to survive in incarceration hence they fared poorer in coping with the challenges of incarceration. The result may also be attributed to stock-on-syndrome by those who have spent more than five years in incarceration.

Furthermore, result of the investigation of hypothesis 3 shows that educational level significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. The influence is in favour of those with not more than ordinary level certificate whose mean score is 3.52 as opposed to the 2.43 of those with more than ordinary level certificate. Again, this result is expected because the less educated one is, the less the prospect of the individual and vice versa. Thus, when a person with fewer prospects in life is incarcerated, there is every likelihood that such individual will feel less pain with his/her situation and therefore cope better with life in incarceration. On the other hand, the more educated people feel greater sense of loss and pain due to their incarceration. These feelings limited their effectiveness in coping with the challenges of incarceration.

Concerning the statistical analysis of hypothesis 4, the result shows that nature of incarceration significantly influences coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. The influence is in favour of the convicted with mean score of 3.11 as opposed to the awaiting trials whose mean score is 2.39. The reason why the convicted inmates cope better with the challenges of incarceration is not unconnected with the fact

that their conviction bestows on them the so-called “convict benefits” which the awaiting trials do not enjoy. This is unlike the awaiting trial inmates whose situations bring out both the brutality and perversity of the Nigerian prison system (Ehonwa, 1996). They are almost always more than the convicted or at least half their number and their conditions are worse than the convicted inmates. This assertion is corroborated by the report of Civil Liberty Organization (1991) which shows that awaiting trial persons do not bathe more than once or twice a month. These situations accounted for the higher mean scores of the convicted inmates in coping with the challenges of incarceration than the awaiting trial inmates.

Finally, the result of statistical investigation of hypothesis 5 shows that marital status significantly influence coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. Those who are single cope better than those who are married. This is observed from their mean scores of 3.89 and 3.60 respectively. This result is not surprising because married life is associated with enormous family responsibilities and if an individual with these responsibilities is incarcerated, the mere thought of those responsibilities which the individual is no longer taking care of will weigh heavily on the individual and consequently reduce the person’s ability to cope effectively with the challenges of the situation that one finds oneself in. This situation does not apply to the singles hence they are able to cope better than the married. The assertion of Agbakwuru and Awujo (2016) that some of the problems of incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prison include denial of contact with families and friends and fear of not knowing what will become of their loved ones support the result of hypothesis 5. This is in the sense that these two problems weigh heavier on the married than the singles hence the singles are able to cope better than the married.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the light of the discussion in this paper, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. Programmes and policies that will increase the ability of prison inmates to cope with their challenges should be put in place by the government and non-government organizations.
2. Government and non-government organizations should provide and improve necessary psychological and guidance services in prisons. This is necessary to help inmates to cope with the challenges of their incarceration.
3. Government should take necessary measures to reduce the long period of awaiting trial in prison custody because of the enormous challenges faced by the individuals and their difficulty in coping effectively with the challenges after all, some of them are innocent.



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