

## The Jailer or the Jailed: Stress and Prison Workers in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study examined the sources of stress among prison workers in Nigeria. A total of 150 (110 male and 40 females) Prison staff drawn from the Oko and Benin Prisons in Edo state, Nigeria participated in the study. A questionnaire was used in collecting data that were analyzed in this study. The questionnaire was constructed by current researchers and was made up of four sections. Results revealed that riots in prisons (96%) were the highest source of stress to prison staff and the least source of stress was dilapidating building (50%). Results also revealed that gender and length of service have significant main effect on stress experienced by prison workers, while age has no significant main effect. The combinations of gender, age and length of service had a significant interaction effect on stress as experienced by prison workers. The results of the research prompted the recommendation that the Federal Government of Nigeria should have a good political will to provide solutions to problems facing the service and make the job less stressful.

**Key words:** Nigeria, penitentiary, prison officers, prison worker, reformation, rehabilitation, retribution, stress, stressors

### INTRODUCTION

Prison is a place delimited and declared as such by the law of the nation and created to ensure restraint and custody of individuals, accused or convicted of violating the criminal law of the state Federal Government of Nigeria (1990). Persons with deviant behavior from psychological and societal perspectives are considered as abnormal and these groups of people are sent to prison for normalcy to reign in our environment and the nation at large.

The aims of modern prison system anywhere in the world are protection of society, retribution, deterrence, reformation and rehabilitation of the convicted prisoners. To actualize these aims, professionally trained personnel are saddled with the day – to – day running of the penitentiary. The custodian role and control of offenders is a herculean task. There are basic things that must be put in place for effective prisons system the world over. The situation in Nigerian prisons is appalling and employees are constantly thrown into dangerous work-environment. This condition can be stressful and hazardous.

The hazardous and stressful work environment can only be seen and understood when situations like the widespread jail breaks experienced in Nigeria some years back are taken into considerations. Observers including prison authorities and government agencies that oversee the prisons express worry that the act of jail break in itself constitutes a serious threat to national security especially as dangerous weapons including guns, dagger, broken bottles and cutlasses were recovered from the prisoners each time they revolted.

Omorotionwman (2005) reported that the Nigerian prisons are in sordid state and the conditions under which

prisoners live are pathetic, unkind, wicked and anti-development, retrogressive and do not meet modern and international standards for prisons inmates all over the world. In his reaction, the Chairman, House of Representative Committee on Internal Affairs, Hon Ehioize West-Idahosa (2005), on his visit to Ikoyi prisons, reported the miserable conditions of prison environment, as he compared the Ikoyi prison to the Old Nazi concentration camp. He concluded by saying “it is probably the worst in Africa”.

Most of the Prisons in Nigeria are in a deteriorated situation as inmates are presently experiencing the problem of congestion and shortage of facilities like sleeping mattresses, poor lighting system and inadequate ventilation. Most of the buildings are leaking and the sewage disposal units are bad resulting into a terrible stench. Omorotionwman (2005) found that overcrowding encourages riots. In overcrowded prisons, inmates get on one another’s nerves and friction among them are quick to develop. Our prisons are crumbling with inadequate structures, understaffed, overcrowded and simply unfit for human habitation. Our prisoners are more carelessly handled than the animals in our zoos, which have more space and get more human care.

The three R’s policy of; reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration, which are the main purpose of imprisonment cannot be achieved due to the stress on prison facilities and officials. All that the government does is to keep inmates under harsh conditions, and treat them harshly too. The staff are underpaid and their morale very low. There is constant friction between staff and inmates. This kind of unwholesome relationship can throw the prison staff into psychological stress. Geren (1990) defines psychological stress as “a particular

relationship between person and the environment that is appraised or perceived by the person as taxing or exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/her well being”.

Although stress is found in all aspects of our lives, they seem particularly numerous on the job or workplace. Cooper and Marshall (1976), defined work stress as negative environmental factors or stressors associated with a particular job. Work stress may result when there is a lack of harmony between the worker and his/her work environment. The relevance of work in any society cannot be overemphasized. To us, work may serve as a means of survival and personal identity and self-actualization (Achal, 1993). However, it is equally important to recognize that the work environment can pose a threat to the health and well being of workers. The prison staff is no exception to this condition. In fact the work environment has been viewed as a threat or risk factor with regards to the physical health and safety for workers. Also certain occupational risk factors such as adverse psychological factors at work have been blamed for some psychosomatic and behavioural disorders (EI Batawi, 1984). Levi (1990) stated that if a mismatch exists between the worker and the job, if the workers are (or feels) unable to control their work conditions, or if the workers cope ineffectively or lack social support, then potentially pathogenic reactions may occur and that these reactions can be emotional, cognitive, behavioural or physiological which under certain conditions might lead to physical, mental diseases or both.

In its pristine form, the prison is a place for punishment, correction and reformation of offenders but the prevalent situation of our prison system has made it another hell for those convicted who are made to suffer severe conditions of living as they wallow in all sorts of miseries. It is this intolerable condition that makes the work environment hazardous for prison workers. Most employees entering the criminal justice system recognize that verbal and minimal physical abuse from those in their care, custody and control is a reality of the job. Critical incidents and stressors experienced by employees in prisons include: held hostage, riot, physical/sexual assault, death or serious injury in line of duty, suicide or inmates or employee, use of lethal force on inmate, participation in execution and witness to any of the above (Mitchell and Everly, 1993).

Stress is a complex phenomenon. It is a very subjective experience. What is a challenge for one person will be a stressor for another. It depends largely on background experiences, temperament and environmental condition. Occupational stress is that which derives specially from conditions in work place (Otto, 1982). The Nigeria Prisons are in sordid state. Describing the nation's penitentiary in the manner above shows the antagonistic environment the prisons employees work. In most prison riots caused by administrative lapses, inmates had attacked prison warders and hence they experience stressful conditions. In this type of situation, the prison

staff is traumatized and how they are able to face the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is of serious concern.

Since the work environment in the nation's penitentiary is un-conducive, prison staff may experience a significant amount of stress in their work, which may lead to high job turnover, high rate of sick leave and troubled relationship with inmates, other staff and family members.

In view of the above therefore, the present study examined the sources of stress among prison workers in Nigeria. We thus hypothesized that gender, age and length of service would have a significantly main and interaction effect on stress among prison workers.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Participants:** A total of one hundred and fifty (150) workers drawn from two prisons in Edo state, Nigeria (Benin, and Oko, Prisons) participated in the study. One hundred and ten representing 73.3% were males while 40 (26.7%) were females. A total of 30 participants representing 20% of the entire participants reported having worked for between 1-5 years. 45(30%) had worked for between 6-10years, 30 (20%) for between 11-20years; 35 (23.3%) for between 21-30 years and 10(6.7%) had worked in the prisons for above 31 years.

**Instrument:** The instrument used in gathering data for this study was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed by current researchers. The questionnaire was made up of four sections, which are presented under the following sub-headings:

**Demographic variables:** This section of the questionnaire elicited social-demographic information about participants. Specifically, information required from the respondents included their religion, gender, age, length of service and department in the prisons office.

**Sources of stress:** To have a true reflection of the sources of stress among prison workers in Nigeria, the researchers embarked on an initial focus-group discussion with 10 (5males and 5females) prison officers to establish sources of stress. This was done in such a manner that would encourage the participants to speak honestly. Content was built into the scale as both expert judgments and Prison officers were involved in the item selection and generation. Questions asked centred on inmates misbehavior (such as riot in prison, staff being held hostage, verbal insult, abusive words, lethal force to quell riot or escape and so on), inadequate essential facilities (such as overcrowding, leaking roof, lack of better medicare, lack of workshop tools and so on) and staff working conditions (such as poor promotion opportunities, lack of office equipment, too many working hours per week and so on). After the initial content analysis, seventy items were generated from the focused

group discussion. The scale was then pre-tested among a sample of 50 (40males and 10 females) prison workers. Responses to the items were coded on a five point Likert response format ranging from not at all stressful (1) to extremely stressful (5). All items were scored in such a way that the higher the score, the higher the source of stress, while the lower the score, the lower the source of stress. The psychometric properties of the scale were determined. Item analysis using the inter-remainder correlation technique revealed 50 internally consistent items with coefficient alpha of 0.72 and Guttman split half reliability of 0.52.

**Symptoms of stress:** Using the Focus Group Discussion, the researchers generated 25 traits to measure symptoms of stress, such as nervous, tearful, frustrated and so on. The sub scale was also pre-tested among a sample of 50 prison officers. Responses to the items were coded on a five point Never (1) to many times a day (5) All the items were scored in such a way that the higher the score, the higher the symptoms of stress. Item analysis using the inter-remainder correlation technique revealed 15 internally consistent items with coefficient alpha of 0.53 and Guttman split half reliability of 0.46.

**Coping mechanisms:** Using the Focus Group Discussion, the researchers generated 6 items to measure coping mechanisms among prison workers, such as I pray or turn to God, I put in more efforts to correct the situation, I point out the problem to individual responsible, etc. Responses to the items were coded on a five-point: Never (1) to several times (5), Likert response format. All items were scored in such a way that the higher the score, the higher the coping mechanism, while the lower the score the lower the coping mechanism. A coefficient alpha of 0.82 was obtained for this study.

**Procedures:** Permission was sought and obtained from the prison authorities after due explanation on the aims and objectives of the study. Copies of the questionnaire were then distributed by the researchers to those on duty the first day. This was repeated the second day and third day for both prisons to obtained a representative sample.. After a week of the distribution, the researchers went back to retrieve the completed questionnaires.

**RESULTS**

On the sources of stress, majority of the participants (96%) reported riots in their prisons as the highest source of stress, while dilapidated building was the least source of stress to prison workers. The sources of stress description were arranged in order of intensity and the percentages are presented in Table 1.

The 2x2x2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the main and interaction effect of gender (Male and Female), Age (Old and Young) and length of service

Table 1: Showing sources of stress in order of intensity among Prison workers.

Description	Percentage
Riot in prison	96%
Staff held hostage	94%
Injuries inflicted	92%
Physical assault	90%
Possession of gun	88%
Possession of rope, knife, bottles and saw blade	86%
Inadequate/late payment if salaries	84%
Poor promotion opportunities	82%
Too many working hours	80%
Lack of reward for good work done	78%
Poor medical facilities for staff and family	76%
Poor supply of uniform/accoutrements	74%
Low status of the prison worker	72%
Overcrowded cells	70%
Lack of water electricity	68%
Lack of water supply	60%
Poor disciplinary procedure	56%
Poor sewage disposal	54%
Leaking roof	52%
Dilapidated building	50%

(Short and long) on stress experienced by prison workers. For age of respondents whose age falls within the age ranges of 18- 35 were classified as young while those above 35 were classified as old. For length of service, participants who had worked for the period of 1 to 10 years with the prison service were classified as short, while those who had worked for 11years and above were classified as long service. The results of the ANOVA revealed that the main effect of gender and length of service on stress experienced by prison workers was significant at < 0.05. There was however, no significant main effect of age on stress experienced by prison workers. The interaction effect of gender, age and length of service was found to be strongly significant at 0.01 levels. The interaction of gender and age was not found to be significant. Results are presented on Table 2.

**DISCUSSIONS**

The present study identifies the sources of stress among prison workers in Nigeria. The current findings suggest that the major source of stress to prison workers in Nigeria is riot among prisoners. This supported the findings of Omorotionwman (2005) that overcrowding in Nigerian prisons encourages riots. This was closely followed by staff held hostage. In addition, as evident in Table 1, poor sewage disposal, leaking roof and dilapidated building coming in this order are the least sources of stress in terms of physical structures

Further findings revealed that there were differences in stress level experienced by males and females. This finding shows that females prison workers report more stress than their male counterparts. In Nigeria, this is not surprising as women generally have a lot to contend with both as a worker, housewife and a mother. Age was found not to be significant. This shows that irrespective of age, the level of stress experienced by prison workers did not

Table 2: 2x2x2 ANOVA, showing the main and interaction effects of gender, age, and length of service (LS) on stress experienced by Prison workers.

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig. (P)
Intercept	114266.686	1	114266.686	1615.367	.000
Gender	346.745	1	346.745	3.450	.002 *
Age	10.325	1	10.325	.782	.682 ns
LS	418.687	1	418.687	4.771	.000 *
Gender*Age	16.632	1	16.632	.094	.360 ns
Gender*LS	2444.210	1	2444.210	2.316	.030 *
Age*LS	2564.145	1	564.259	2.637	.030 *
Gender*Age*LS	4533.033	2	4533.033	5.325	.000 *
Error	12432.312	86	70.737		
Total	242086.034	150			
Corrected Total	32044.123	149			

Note: LS = Length of Service; \* = Significant at 0.05; ns = not significant at 0.05

differ. This goes to show that in considering stress among prison workers, age is not an important factor as the psychological and physical causative factors of stress transcend age.

Length of service rather than age was found to be a high index of measuring stress among prison workers. This finding simply shows that the longer a worker stays within the prison environment the better and easier it becomes for such workers to develop various coping mechanisms to deal with stress factors within and around the work environment. This finding supports the work of Cooper and Marshall (1976) whose finding conceptualizes work stress as negative environmental factor or stressor associated with a particular job. Work stress may result when there is a lack of harmony between the worker and his/her environment. Thus, the longer the individual is within a given work environment the better the individual learns to cope with such work stressors.

Though we could not find a significant main effect of age on stress experienced by prison workers, when combined with gender and length of service a significant interaction effect occurred. This goes to show that these demographic variables when combined have significant role to play when considering stress experienced by prison workers. This finding is not supported by that of Warr and Wall (1979) who stated that personality characteristics rather than the biographical characteristics of the individual might be the more important determinant of individual differences in prison workers' sources of stress. True, as this study only tends to look at the peculiar factors that may be high in determining stress among prison workers, in our subsequent work, which is on going, we are looking at both the biological and psychological factors that may predispose prison workers to stress.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study did not cover all the prison formation in Edo state hence generalization should be done with caution. Secondly, this study did not take into consideration the psychological effect of stress on the prison workers.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcome of the research work prompted the following recommendations: The Federal Government of

Nigeria should make a proper political will to address the numerous debilitating problems facing the prisons to make the work environment friendly. The workers in the service should be exposed to regular training and re-training on the knowledge that stress is very harmful rather than helpful and that it poses a threat to health and well being of the individuals; and Government should make the reward of prison workers very attractive to remove frustration from their lives to enable them have good positive self-concept.

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