

# Factors aggravating mental illness of imprisoned people

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**ABSTRACT.** *In this paper I will talk about prisoners' mental problems, and summarize some factors and reasons behind them. All information that I collect is from online survey or published paper, providing powerful evidence about incarcerated people's mental health. Also, I will particularly give the Chinese government and jail some advice on dealing with and supervising prisoners' mental problems.*

**KEYWORDS:** *mental health, incarceration, social ignorance*

## 1. Introduction

In this day and age, More than 10 million people are imprisoned worldwide, and the prevalence of all investigated mental disorders is higher in prisoners than in the general population. More often than not, people who suffer from depression do not get the attention and care they need, let alone inmates. Depression of criminals not only affects the physical and mental health of the criminals, but also affects the reform order of the sub-districts and the entire jail. Therefore, full attention should be given to these people, and we should analyze the factors and reasons behind the trend. However, there is not much research on this field in China, so I have to analyze American and European cases. In this way, Chinese jails can have a clear understanding of criminals' psychological illnesses, identify prisoners' abnormal behaviors in time, and take timely targeted measures to prevent accidents through my analysis of foreign research.

## 2. Methodology

Through the Internet, I can find various materials that include the inmates' mental health problems. However, many authors narrow down the sphere to one specific small area, or to females and so on. What I have done is selecting ones that have broad views, which are more appropriate cases for me to look into, such as "Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates". Also, I selected papers which have hypotheses about why one factor has impact on inmates' mental problems as additional materials for me to investigate interrelationships between these factors

and prisoners' mental illnesses.

### **3. Findings**

Most of my findings come from the United States and European Literature. Also, I organized my paper by using the Bronfrenbrenner Model. China has strict rules of governmental areas like jails, so there are quite few materials that normal people can find. In this case, I can only analyze other areas' research, and give China advice on helping depressed inmates to the Chinese government.

### **4. Discussion**

#### ***4.1 Individual level***

##### ***4.1.1 Age***

One of the biological factors that relates to depression in several countries is age. Researchers found that young adult prisoners in United States age between 18 and 30 years have a higher tendency to suffer from depression than other age groups in India, Pakistan, Brazil, and Nigeria. Therefore, there are two possibilities. First, places have differences, or age really plays an role in depression. Studies have claimed that the depression odds in adult incarcerated group is twenty times larger than those in other age groups. According to statistics in China, more than 50 million Chinese people are suffering from depression, a significant portion of which are teenagers. Yet most of them do not get the care and attention they need, usually being dismissed by parents and teachers as going through a "phase" or something inconsequential. Likewise, young adult prisoners are the majority in the depression group. Other possible reasons might be stigmatization, learning of criminal behavior and being a victim of bully. However, other researchers observed that in countries like the United States and Turkey, age is not a significant factor of depression. The possible explanation is that those young adult prisoners still have close relationships with family members, and feeling accepted appear to be protective factors associated with a lower likelihood of depression.

##### ***4.1.2 Sex***

According to studies in the United States, female inmates had much higher rates of mental health problems than male inmates, not only in federal prisons, but also in local and state jails. Specifically, about 73% of females have mental health problems while 75% in local jails. Also, females in the state prisons of local jails claimed that they were once diagnosed with a mental disorder in the past 12 months. This was nearly three times the rate of males who had mental problems in local jails. Although sex is observed to be related to depression, but the results are very

complex. A study once held in Australia specify that less female prisoners were depressed compared to men in India, which indicated the severity of depression is more in male than female participants. Many literature papers have already stated that women are at higher risk of depression because of biological reasons, but other psychological and social factors also make males susceptible to depression. This may relate to factors such as familial environment, prior depression records or anxiety disorders, social roles and cultural conditions, life events, vulnerability and so on. A previous study made in Malaysia found that stress have an association with depression. Nearly 70% female inmates show higher level stress than male prisoners. This reveals that female inmates are more likely to be affected by stressful life. Some common sources of stress for female prisoners are socioeconomic problems, family affairs, and educational restraints. Other possible factors that can cause the onset of female stress are unsuitable environments, living in crowded places, unhealthy diet, disordered lifestyle, and negative social relationships, because female are more sensitive to these aspects. In contrast, study conducted in India and Brazil showed that stress is not a significant predictor of depression. It is possible that stress depends on individual strategies. Some inmates reduce stress, and they deal with symptoms by simple physical activities, mind-body practices and so on. Since female inmates are more sensitive to bad atmosphere, their illness numbers can be reduced by offering a comfortable living place. Therefore, my suggestion for Chinese government is that the government should try to improve jail infrastructure to reduce some inmates' mental health illnesses,

#### ***4.1.3 Substance use***

According to some data in the United states, lots of depressed prisoners in local jail or state prisons have substances dependence or abuse. About 74% of state prisoners and 76% of local jails inmates met the criteria, and some State prisoners even had drugs in their mouth when they were arrested. Studies in Pakistan mentioned that the history of substance use is associated with depression. Similarly, a study in the United States reported that substance use, together with alcohol, hallucinogens can be predictors of depression. This phenomenon might be the result of the significant relationships between emotional discomfort, negative feelings, attitudes and craving of substance use during relapse in prison.

### ***4.2 Relational level***

#### ***4.2.1 Marital status***

A study found that widow inmates were three times more likely to experience depression than single female inmates in Ethiopia. The reason behind it might be that lonely experience makes them feel more depressed compared to single female inmates. Similarly, reports made in India, Brazil and Nigeria all found that there is a certain relationship between marital status and depression. By contrast, the study held by the author Holiday in the United States shows that marital status is not a

significant indicator of depression. The reason which cause this difference may be that single female inmates in the United States have better social supports. A study in Brazil shows that male inmates who develop normal or weak family ties were 2.5 times more likely to be affected by negative factors than those with strong family support. One possible reason is that prisoners with strong family support tend to forget the negative aspects of their lives and have the tendency to think about more positive aspects in their lives. Also, they have better methods to deal with depression and to reduce the rates of depression. Prisoners with weak family bonds tend to have more isolated feelings, struggling to connect themselves with prison environment and still searching for treatment of depression. Also, a study in Brazil pointed out that there was a relationship between depression and prison visit among male inmates. This study supports that visits by family, or religious and professional relationships can provide positive supports to depressed inmates in prison. What's more, a study in Ethiopia highlights that prisoners who received social support were 62% less likely to be depressed than inmates who did not received such support. On the other hand, a study in Nigeria showed that level of social support insignificant to depression despite 21.8% received good and 32.1% received fair support. This offers contradicted evidence for findings by Stice et al., who suggested that the appearance of social support is a protective factor which protect people from depression.

### ***4.3 Organizational level***

#### ***4.3.1 Education***

There is a study in Pakistan wrote by Shahid et al., who Pointed out people's need for education, because inmates who only studied in grade one to five level were at higher rates of depression, compared to those inmates who attained higher education level above grade six. Lack of education is probably one of the reason of inmates' ignorance on the means of securing legal aid that they ended up being incarcerated and depressed. However, another study in Nigeria discovered that the level of education was insignificant to depression. This was supported by a study which focuses on the connection between education and the experience of anxiety and depression among adults in Norway. This study found that higher education may lose the protective nature of education at increased depressive symptoms and can be a protective effect against depression.

#### ***4.3.2 Neighborhood***

Social factors can also affect inmates' personality, attitudes and lifestyles. According to the data provided in Pakistan and Turkey, inmate with the history of childhood sexual abuse and childhood labor were in high risk of depression. The possibility that inmates who once being abused had healthy problems is three times more than those who had not to report being physically or sexually abused in the childhood. This could be the result of the relationship between childhood stressful life events and the risk of depression. The psychological experience during

child labor creates hopelessness, shame, guilt, loss of confidence and anxiety, and these negative feelings can cause a higher risk of depression. However, only these two countries studied social factors' impact on depression, while other countries not. It is possible that children labor continues to be a great concern for many countries especially Asian origin countries. Here, my advice to Chinese government is to forbid children labor by law.

#### **4.4 Cultural/Structural level Discrimination**

A particular study in Ethiopia prison attempted to study the relationship between discrimination and depression, and also reported that detainees who are discriminated due to crime are two times more likely to show signs of depression in Ethiopia. Probably that country like Ethiopia still struggling with high prevalence of discrimination among their racial minorities and they frustrated with sentences given to them and there limited opportunity to proof their innocence.

#### **4.5 Limitations**

Although I collected data from the Internet broadly, I did not do a real experimentally investigation. In this way, this paper does not conclude all the factors that influence prisoners' mental health. Also, I have no access to Chinese former research on this field, so the advice that gives to the Chinese jails is not perfectly practical. Since every country has different situation, maybe my measures are not useful for China.

#### **5. Conclusion**

For one thing, this is what researchers on mental health, well being, and incarceration in China should look at in their own research. For another, the Chinese government should pay attention to prisoners' mental health, and take targeted measures to prevent accidents.

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