

# Strategies for Coping with the Challenges of Incarceration Among Nigerian Prison Inmates

Chikwe Agbakwuru Ph.D Grace C. Awujo Ph.D

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

## Abstract

This paper investigated the strategies for coping with the challenges of incarceration among inmates of Port Harcourt Prison, Nigeria. The population was 2,997 inmates of the prison while the sample was 250 inmates drawn through stratified random sampling technique from the same Port Harcourt prison. Six research questions were posed and data for their investigation were collected through the administration of copies of an instrument designed by the researchers on the respondents. The instrument was titled "Prison Inmates Coping Strategies Questionnaire (PICSQ)". It was designed in the pattern of a modified 4-point Likert type scale and contained a total of 25 items that elicited information on how prison inmates cope with the challenges of incarceration. A pilot study of the instrument was conducted with 30 inmates of Ahoda Prison, Rivers State, Nigeria. The reliability co-efficients of the 6 sub-sections of section B ascertained through the Cronbach Alpha method were 0.81; 0.79; 0.76; 0.80; 0.75 and 0.83 respectively while the overall reliability co-efficient was 0.78. The research questions were answered with mean and standard deviation and the results show that involvement in religious activities, formation of surrogate families, engagement in educational and vocational training as well as emotion-focused strategy are ways of coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates while maintaining contact with family members/friends and engagement in aggressive behaviour are not coping strategies. These results were discussed and some recommendations were also made. One of the recommendations is that counselling psychologists and other psychological care givers should be employed in prison service to assist in the reformation of the inmates as well as assisting them to cope with the challenges of their situation.

**Keywords:** Strategies, Challenges, Incarceration, Prison Inmates

## Background of the Study

Incarceration is a means used by modern societies in controlling crime. Its history in Nigeria dates back to 1872 when the British colonial administrators established the Broad Street Prison in Lagos Colony (Omenuko, 2002). Incarceration is the detention of a person in prison typically as punishment for a crime (Anonymous, A). It is often used interchangeably with imprisonment. Incarceration serves a number of purposes to the state. These include:

- To isolate criminals and prevent them from committing more crimes.
- To punish criminals for committing crimes.
- To deter others from committing crimes.
- To rehabilitate criminals (Anonymous B).

Agbakwuru (2012) has also identified the need to protect the life of the incarcerated person, to safeguard public interest and inability to satisfy bail conditions as other reasons for incarceration.

Normally, felony offenders are incarcerated in prison. Prison is therefore a federally operated facility for the incarceration of felony offenders sentenced by the criminal courts (Siegal cited in Agbakwuru, 2012). In other words, it is a place where criminals are physically confined or interred and usually deprived of a range of personal freedom (Alao, 2009).

Incarcerated inmates in Nigerian prisons live in terrible conditions. In fact, despite the fact that torture, cruel and inhuman or degrading treatment/punishment are violations of human rights and are condemned by the international community as offence to human dignity (Anonymous, C), they have continued to serve as major characteristics of the Nigerian prison. Onagoruwa (2001) supported this assertion when he opined that Nigerian prisons are glorified animal cages and that people sent there get a foretaste of hell as it were. According to him, the overall picture of Nigerian prison and the inmates is one of unredeemed gloom, hopelessness and a repulsive cauldron of human squalor and degradation.

Commenting specifically on the problems of Nigerian prisons and the inmates incarcerated in them, scholars (Uzoeshi, 2004; Picken, 2012; Adebajo, 1995 & Melgosa, 2001) have identified 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 labelled 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 as some of the problems of Nigerian prison and its inmates.

The survival of incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prisons under these dehumanizing and degrading conditions greatly depend on their abilities to cope with the challenges of life in incarceration. Ability to cope or coping strategy means the same thing in this paper. They are used interchangeably with adjustment of the inmates which is behavioural adaptation to a particular environment or set of circumstances (Colman, 2003). They also refer to the efforts made to master, reduce or tolerate the demands created by stress (Weiten, Dunn and Hammer, 2011).

Adopting effective coping strategy by incarcerated inmates of prison is key to survival. This assertion makes more meaning when one recalls that the psychological impact of arrest; trial, incarceration and life in prison are too stressful that one requires effective coping strategy to survive (Alao, 2009). Effective coping strategy helps to moderate the stress which the individual experiences and thus, enhance the chances of one's survival from the challenges of incarceration.

Unfortunately, there is an apparent lack of research reports in Nigeria which have uncovered how incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prisons cope with the stress of incarceration. This type of knowledge is needed by counselling psychologists, prison staff and other psychological care givers as a pre-requisite to rendering effective psychological assistance to prison inmates. It is therefore hoped that the results of this study will greatly contribute to knowledge by uncovering strategies for coping with the stress of incarceration among prison inmates. This will help counselling psychologists in general and prison counsellors in particular, the entire prison staff as well as other psychological care givers to devise appropriate means of helping incarcerated inmates of prison to learn effective ways of coping with their situation.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent does involvement in religious activities constitute a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates?
2. To what extent does relying on surrogate families constitute a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates?
3. To what extent does maintaining contact with family members/friends constitute a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates?
4. To what extent does involvement in educational and vocational programmes constitute a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates?
5. To what extent does engagement in aggressive behaviours constitute a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates?
6. To what extent does using emotion-focused approach constitute a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates?

## Methodology

This study was carried out in Port Harcourt Prison Rivers State, Nigeria and the design of study is causal comparative design. A causal comparative study is one that collects and analyzes data about some variables retrospectively or about variables which are already in place without manipulating any of them in order to find out how some of them influence or relate to other variables (Nwankwo, 2006). This design was considered most appropriate for this study because the sample are already incarcerated and somehow coping with the challenges of incarceration although one does not know how they cope with the situation. The population according to data obtained from Port Harcourt Prison record at the time of this study (24-04-2014) was 2,997. The sample of study is 250 inmates of Port Harcourt Prison drawn through stratified random sampling technique. This sampling technique was adopted so that all classes of incarcerated inmates of the prison will be part of the study. A breakdown of the sample shows that 172 are awaiting trial males, 28 are awaiting trial females, 20 are convicted males and 6 are convicted females. Eleven others are condemned males, 5 are condemned females, 2 are male lifers and the remaining 6 are male lodgers.

Relevant data for answering the research questions were collected through the administration of copies of an instrument tagged "Prison Inmates Coping Strategies Questionnaire (PICSQ)" on the respondents through the prison staff. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers. It consists of sections A and B. Section A elicited demographic data of the respondents while section B sought relevant information for answering the research questions. This section was designed in the pattern of a modified 4-point Likert type questionnaire and composes of 6 sub-sections that correspond with the number of research questions posed for the study. Field trial

of this instrument was carried out with 30 inmates of Ahoad Prison, Rivers State, Nigeria and the obtained reliability co-efficient using Cronbach Alpha method was 0.81; 0.79; 0.76; 0.80; 0.75; and 0.83 for the 6 sub-sections respectively while the overall reliability co-efficient was 0.78. The 6 research questions were answered with mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) and standard deviation (S.D). Since for each of the items, the minimum and maximum mean scores are 1.00 and 4.00 respectively, 2.50 was adopted as the criterion or cut-off mean score.

## Results

The results of the statistical analysis of the research questions are presented in the following tables:

**Table 1:**  $\bar{x}$  and S.D analysis of involvement in religious activities as a coping strategy of incarcerated prison inmates.

S/ No	Items	$\bar{x}$ Score	S.D.	Criterion $\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Attending religious worship in prison	3.65	0.98	2.50	Accept
2	Praying and communing with God	3.72	1.01		Accept
3	Singing praises to God	3.76	0.89		Accept
4	Building faith and hope in God	3.51	0.79		Accept
5	Having genuine repentance to free oneself from the sense of guilt.	2.40	0.87		Reject
	Grand mean score	3.41	-		Accept

The result on table one shows that the mean scores of items 1,2,3,4 and the grand mean score are greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. The conclusion which can be drawn from this result is that involvement in religious activities is a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among Nigerian prison inmates.

**Table 2:**  $\bar{x}$  and S.D analysis of formation of surrogate families as a coping strategy of incarcerated prison inmates.

S/ No	Items	$\bar{x}$ Score	S.D.	Criterion $\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Relying on caring relationship of surrogate families for love	3.81	0.60	2.50	Accept
2	Relying on surrogate families for resolution of conflicts in prison cells.	3.62	0.54		Accept
3	Relying on surrogate families in prison for protection.	3.73	0.68		Accept
4	Deriving a sense of belonging from surrogate families in prison	3.50	0.71		Accept
5	Relying on surrogate families for good feeding	2.89	1.02		Accept
6	Sharing feelings/problems with surrogate families.	2.91	1.00		Accept
7	Re-assessing and re-defining one's situation with the help of surrogate families	2.67	0.93		
	Grand mean score	3.30			Accept

The result on table two shows that all the mean scores and the grand mean score exceed the criterion mean score of 2.50. The meaning which can be derived from this result is that formation and belonging to surrogate families in prison is a coping strategy for incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prison.

**Table 3:**  $\bar{x}$  and S.D analysis of contact with family members/friends as a coping strategy of incarcerated prison inmates.

S/ No	Items	$\bar{x}$ Score	S.D	Criterion $\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Lobbying prison staff to enable one to receive visitors/family members.	1.00	0.03	2.50	Reject
2	Contacting one's family/ friends with cell phones and other ICT facilities	0.99	1.00		Reject
	Grand mean score	0.95			Reject

The information on table 3 shows that the mean scores of the 2 items and the grand mean score are below the criterion mean score of 2.50. This result means that contact with family members/friends is not a

strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates in Nigeria.

**Table 4:**  $\bar{x}$  and S.D. analysis of involvement in educational and vocational programmes as coping strategy of incarcerated inmates of prison.

S/ No	Items	$\bar{x}$ Score	S.D	Criterion $\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Engaging in educational programme to keep oneself busy	2.98	0.99	2.50	Accept
2	Engaging in educational programme to learn how to cope with one's challenges.	3.06	0.66		Accept
3	Learning vocational skills in order to be occupied and escape boredom.	3.01	0.78		Accept
4	Engaging in educational and vocational training to be self-employed or be employed after release	3.15	0.82		Accept
	Grand mean score	3.05			Accept

Information on table 4 shows that all the mean scores and the grand mean score are greater than the criterion mean of 2.50. The conclusion which can be drawn from this result is that involvement in educational and vocational programme is a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates in Nigeria.

**Table 5:**  $\bar{x}$  and S.D. analysis of engagement in aggressive behaviours as a coping strategy of incarcerated inmates of prison.

S/ No	Items	$\bar{x}$ Score	S.D	Criterion $\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Dominating fellow inmates through physical aggression	1.62	0.71	2.50	Reject
2	Dominating fellow inmates through verbal aggression	1.83	0.51		Reject
3	Intimidating fellow inmates	1.90	0.30		Reject
4	Being aggressive to prison staff	0.49	0.32		Reject
5	Being uncooperative with prison staff	0.52	0.41		Reject
	Grand mean score	1.27		Reject	

The result on table 5 shows that all the mean scores and the grand mean score are less than the criterion mean score of 2.50. The meaning of this result is that engaging in aggressive behaviour is not a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates in Nigeria.

**Table 6:**  $\bar{x}$  and S.D. analysis of emotion-focused strategy as a coping strategy of incarcerated inmates of prison

S/ No	Items	$\bar{x}$ Score	S.D	Criterion $\bar{x}$	Decision
1	Consoling oneself	3.00	0.83	2.50	Accept
2	Engaging in self-pity	2.69	1.01		Accept
3	Withdrawing into oneself	2.34	1.02		Accept
4	Accepting one's fate	3.06	0.96		Accept
	Grand mean score	2.77			Accept

The result on table 6 shows that the mean scores of items 1,2,4 and the grand are greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. The conclusion which can be drawn from this result is that emotion-focused strategy is a coping strategy of incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prison.

### Discussion

The result on table one shows that involvement in religious activities is a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates in Nigeria. This finding is probably because when people are beset by storms and stress, they seek shelter and deliverance from God (Agbakwuru, 2013). The reliance on religious activities as a coping strategy among incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prison is based on the experiences of inner peace, joy and hope whenever they commune with their creator. Furthermore, the choice of the strategy is also based on the fact that religion provides prisoners with a sense of security and helps them to choose prosocial behaviour over violent or maladaptive strategies.

In a related way, the result of the second research question shows that formation of surrogate families is a coping strategy among prison inmates. This is so because having been deprived of the loving and caring

relationship of their families, incarcerated inmates of prison create alternative family (surrogate family) to satisfy their human need of love and belonging.

On the other hand, the result of the statistical analysis of research question three shows that maintaining contact with family members/friends is not a coping strategy among prison inmates in Nigeria. The reason for this finding is not farfetched. According to Kone (2014), prison guards frequently demand that inmates pay bribe for such privileges as visiting the hospital, receiving visitors and contacting their families. Wealthy prisoners are even allowed to use mobile phones. Since most of the incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prison are poor, it is therefore understandable why contact with family members/friends is not a coping strategy among them.

In contrast to the finding of research question three, the result of question four shows that engagement in educational and vocational programmes constitutes a strategy for coping with the challenges of incarceration among prison inmates. These programmes beside other advantages keep them busy and thus remove the stress caused by idleness.

Furthermore, the result of research question five reveals that engagement in aggressive behaviour is not a coping strategy among incarcerated inmates of Nigerian prison. This is so because prison life is over regimented and prison staffs are in a position of authority over the helpless inmates. Again, most inmates try to behave very well in order to receive some favour from prison staff.

Finally, the result of research question six shows that emotion-focused strategy is a means of coping with life in incarceration among prison inmates in Nigeria. In fact, having being stripped of their fundamental human rights by the state, prison inmates become psychologically/emotionally helpless hence most of them resign to fate and inactivity. This strategy however does not offer any meaningful help to them.

### Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- Religious activities should be promoted in prison since it helps incarcerated inmates to cope with their challenges.
- Relevant vocational and educational programmes should be provided in prison to keep the inmates busy and also prepare them for meaningful employment when they are released.
- Counselling psychologists and other psychological care givers should be employed in prison service not only to assist incarcerated inmates to learn and apply appropriate strategies for coping with their challenges but also to assist in the achievement of prison reformatory goal.

### REFERENCES

- Adebajo, F. (2002). *Release of prisoner*. Punch.
- Agbakwuru, C. (2012). *Guidance and counselling in non-school settings*. Owerri: Joe Mankpa Publishers.
- Agbakwuru, C. (2013). *Psychology and health*, Revised ed. Owerri: Career Publishers.
- Anonymous B. <http://www.kamus.net/term.php?>
- Anonymous C [http://www.amnestyusa.org/our\\_wor/campaigns/sec](http://www.amnestyusa.org/our_wor/campaigns/sec)
- Anonymous, A. <http://doclecture.net/1-894.html>
- Colman, A.M. (2003). *Oxford dictionary of psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kone, S.K. (2014). *Psychosocial challenges and coping strategies of prison inmates in Rivers State*. University of Port Harcourt: Unpublished Master of Education Seminar Paper.
- Mao, D.S. (2009, July-October). *Suicide and suicide attempts in prison*. CSP's development course, Prison Staff College, Barnawa-Kaduna
- Melgosa, J. (2001). *Less stress*. Spain: Marpa Artes Graficas.
- Nwankwo, O.C. (2006). *Practical guide to research writing*. Port Harcourt: Golden Publishers Ltd.
- Omenuko, I.C. (2002, October-December). *Imprisonment and capital punishment as a deterrent to future offenders: how effective?* The Reformer, 1, (2), 29.
- Onagoruwa, K. (2011). *Interview on launching of the civil liberties organization latest publication on behind the wall*.
- Picken, J. (2012). The coping strategies, adjustment and well-being of male inmates in the prison environment. *International Journal of Criminology*, [www.internet\\_journal\\_of\\_criminology.com](http://www.internet_journal_of_criminology.com).
- Uzoeshi, K.C. (2004) *Everyday stress and its management*. Port Harcourt: Paragraphics.
- Weiten, W.; Dunn, D., and Hammer, E. (2011). *Psychology applied to modern life: adjustment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Retrieved from <http://www.centage.co.uk/>