

Stress experience and coping mechanisms of female inmates in BJMP: implications to correctional nursing



Original article

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Abstract: **Objective:** The stress experienced by female Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) in correctional facilities is a significant yet underexplored issue. This study aims to explore the stressors and coping mechanisms of female PDLs using Callista Roy's Adaptation Model (RAM) to understand their adaptive processes within a prison environment.

Methods: A qualitative design was employed using purposive sampling. Ten female PDLs from a Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines were interviewed using 3 guided questions to explore their stress experiences and coping strategies. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes from the collected data.

Results: The study identified interpersonal conflicts, family separation, legal delays, and challenging prison environments as primary sources of stress. To manage these stressors, the participants employed various coping strategies, including emotional introspection, engagement in physical activities, participation in religious practices, and seeking support from peers and family members. These strategies reflect adaptive responses within the framework of RAM.

Conclusions: The findings highlight the need for comprehensive interventions that promote the mental well-being of female PDLs. Recommendations include implementing conflict resolution programs, facilitating family communication, organizing physical and group activities, and providing mental health services. The study highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach to inmate care, recognizing the complex nature of stress and adaptation. These insights can guide correctional institutions and healthcare professionals in developing targeted interventions to improve the well-being and rehabilitation outcomes of female PDLs, thereby enhancing their reintegration into society.

Keywords: *coping mechanisms of PDLs • correctional nursing practices • female inmates' mental health • Philippine prison system • Roy's Adaptation Model (RAM) • stress management in prisons*

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1. Introduction

Female Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) face overwhelming stress behind bars, finding ways to cope in a hidden struggle. Correctional nurses play a vital role

in supporting them, fostering resilience, and promoting mental well-being, transforming prisons into places of healing and hope. The World Health Organization

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(2020) defines stress as psychological strain from demanding circumstances, a natural response that drives individuals to confront challenges.¹ While stress is universal, how one manages it greatly affects one's overall well-being. Stressful experiences can lead to personal growth, resulting in greater psychological strength, improved problem-solving, and a deeper understanding of values, a concept known as post-traumatic growth.²

1.1. Stress experience

Studies on female PDLs in the Philippines highlight significant psychological challenges and adaptive behaviors. van den Bergh et al.³ found that stress from family separation, poor living conditions, and future uncertainty often led to anxiety and depression. Harner and Riley⁴ emphasize the need for robust prison support systems, including psychological services and counseling, to help manage stress effectively. These studies suggest that addressing female PDLs' psychological well-being requires a multifaceted approach combining individual and systemic interventions.

1.2. Coping mechanism

The study explores coping mechanisms among PDLs and their impact on overall well-being. Coping strategies encompass various psychophysical, psychological, personal, and metaphysical aspects, crucial for maintaining life quality. Equitable healthcare provision in prisons is vital, aligning with community standards. Coping mechanisms, consciously applied, aim to manage stress, differing from defense mechanisms, which are subconscious. Healthy coping fosters resilience against stressors, facilitating long-term adaptation.

Health education programs play a key role in stress management, emphasizing the nurse's responsibility to integrate coping interventions. Female PDLs utilize adaptive coping strategies like seeking social support and engaging in religious or educational activities, mitigating isolation and depressive symptoms. Conversely, maladaptive coping methods such as substance abuse exacerbate difficulties, underlining the necessity for structured programs promoting adaptive coping to enhance mental health and reintegration prospects.

1.3. Correctional nursing

Correctional nursing is a relatively new specialization, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It focuses on providing care to incarcerated individuals and emphasizes qualities like competence, compassion, and using

proven medical practices as highlighted by Goddard et al.⁵, Peternelj-Taylor,⁶ and Shelton et al.⁷ Correctional nurses handle the typical duties of nurses in other settings, including routine checkups, emergency care, and treatment of chronic conditions and injuries. However, they take on the additional challenge of addressing the specific needs of inmates, such as substance abuse and mental health problems.

The correctional nursing, also called forensic nursing, provides healthcare to PDLs in prisons, jails and detention centers. These nurses play a vital role in maintaining the physical and mental health of inmates, many of whom have complex medical needs and lacked consistent medical care before incarceration as mentioned by Dhaliwal et al.⁸ According to the Association for the Prevention of Torture⁹ prisons need to have easily accessible medical care that's similar in quality to what's available outside. This is because inmates are a vulnerable group with high risks of mental and physical health problems. Nurses working in prisons should have specialized training to address these issues and promote overall well-being, potentially including programs that improve life expectancy and outlook.

1.4. Theoretical framework

RAM posits that PDLs experience stress from various sources, prompting adaptive responses to maintain well-being. These responses include problem-focused, emotion-focused, and relationship-focused coping strategies. Stress, viewed positively, can motivate growth and adaptation within the challenging prison environment. Additionally, Roy's model identifies adaptive modes encompassing physiological, psychological, and social aspects of adaptation. Nurses play a crucial role in promoting positive adaptation and reducing stress among PDLs through therapeutic interventions. Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping further explains how individuals perceive, respond to, and cope with stressors. It highlights the importance of cognitive appraisal in shaping coping strategies, offering insights into PDLs' experiences in the prison environment. This framework aids in understanding the complex interactions between PDLs and their surroundings, guiding interventions to enhance their well-being.

1.5. Statement of objective

The study aimed to explore the stress experience and coping mechanisms among female PDLs in a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Specifically, it aimed and explore the following:

1. Describe the experiences that caused the stress among female PDLs at BJMP.
2. Describe the most common coping mechanisms of the female PDLs.
3. Craft pro-active recommendation based on salient findings in relation to correctional nursing.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The researchers used a qualitative approach to understand PDLs' stress and coping mechanisms. Sirisilla¹⁰ noted that a descriptive design provides an accurate depiction of a population's attributes and behaviors. By closely observing and collecting data, this method offers deep insights and guides future research. Thus, a descriptive qualitative research design is essential for comprehensively understanding PDLs' stress experiences and coping strategies in correctional facilities without altering the variables.

2.2. Research environment

The study was conducted at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines, selected for its role in supervising jails and detention facilities. This setting enabled the researchers to explore the high stress levels and unique challenges faced by female PDLs, including confinement, restricted autonomy, and social isolation. The study ensured the safety of PDLs and adhered to ethical standards, with cooperation from BJMP. BJMP provides health services, educational initiatives, income-generating activities, religious programs, and recreational activities for PDLs. The insights from this study can help improve existing programs, guide policymaking, contribute to academic literature, and enhance nursing practices, ultimately benefiting the PDL community.

2.3. Research key informants

This study focused on the most vulnerable female PDLs at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines with 10 key informants, though the number could vary due to hearings or new arrivals. Researchers used a respectful approach to gain participation, clearly explaining their role and the study's aims, benefits, and confidentiality. They emphasized voluntary participation and addressed any concerns. Consent forms were provided and explained thoroughly. The study continued until data saturation was reached. Informants were selected based on safety considerations and their ability to answer the guide questions, as suggested by the jail warden.

2.3.1. Inclusion criteria

There was a criterion during the selection of informants as it was covering those PDLs, particularly those females who agreed and consented to participate in the study and committed minor crimes. Lastly, those female PDLs who were currently detained at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines during the time of the interview.

2.3.2. Exclusion criteria

The researcher excluded female PDLs particularly those who have mental health conditions and who were major offenders. Researchers chose to omit individuals who were currently involved in legal proceedings or facing disciplinary actions, as these situations have the potential to influence their answers and jeopardize the study's credibility.

2.4. Research instrument

The researchers employed a purposive sampling technique to select informants. According to Campbell et al.¹¹ purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling approach in which participants are intentionally selected based on their ability to provide relevant and information-rich insights related to the phenomenon under investigation. The first interview question focused on identifying the experiences that caused stress among female PDLs at the BJMP, while the second question explored their most common coping mechanisms.

2.5. Data gathering procedure

The researchers conducted a study at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. They prepared communication letters that were approved by the officers and developed two guided interview questions. On 20 December 2023, they presented their title proposal, including Chapters 1 and 2, which was reviewed by the University Research Ethics Board (UREB). A letter to conduct the study was sent to the Dean of the School of Health and Natural Sciences (SHaNs). On 23 April 2024, the researchers held an orientation session to build rapport with the PDLs. They introduced themselves, explained the study's purpose, benefits, and risks, assured confidentiality, and answered questions. Consent forms were given out, and 13 PDLs agreed to participate. The researchers then informed the PDLs' lawyers, who needed to sign a consent or waiver before the interviews could proceed. The researchers also awaited regional approval to use an audio recorder.

The interviews were conducted in a private, secure room within the facility, with each session lasting

approximately 30–45 min. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences. Example questions included: “Can you describe a situation that caused you significant stress while in detention?” and “What strategies do you use to cope with stress in this environment?” The researchers took detailed notes and, with consent, audio-recorded the sessions for accuracy.

2.6. Establishing trustworthiness

During the interviews, each participant was escorted individually to a secure room by a jail officer. Three researchers conducted the interviews to minimize intimidation. To ensure confidentiality and safety, the jail officer stayed at a 2-meter distance. The interviews were conducted in Tagalog as requested by the PDLs, and the researchers maintained a neutral and non-judgmental stance, allowing the PDLs to speak freely. After the interviews, the researchers reassured the participants about the confidentiality of their information and expressed gratitude for their participation. There were two interview sessions in total.

The research advisor and BJMP officers played essential roles in the data collection process. The advisor provided guidance on methodology and ethics, while BJMP officers supported logistics, ensured security, and maintained confidentiality during the interviews. This cooperation ensured the research was conducted smoothly and ethically.

2.7. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized in the research to uncover key themes. This method involves scrutinizing data to detect patterns, generate codes, and formulate themes. The researchers followed a structured 6-step process, which included familiarization, code generation, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report creation. They meticulously executed these steps to generate a comprehensive report that greatly influenced the research findings.

3. Results

3.1. Section 1: Descriptions on the experiences of female PDLs, that caused their stress

The major cause has to do with interpersonal issues among PDLs with 60% (6/10) of the informants saying that this was the major cause of their stress. In the code of fights and attitude, where this resulted in another source of stress for the PDLs which stems from

their family affiliations, in 50% (5/10) of the informants. Additionally, 30% (3/10) of the informants identified their case status as a source of stress. Lastly, 20% (2/10) of the informants cited the prison environment as a source of their stress.

There are four sub themes regarding the cause of stress of the informants, namely, interpersonal issues, family affiliation, case status and prison environment arranged in a descending manner with regards to the experiences of the informants inside. For interpersonal, these are fights and the attitudes of fellow PDLs. Under the subtheme of relationship, only family is being established. On the other hand, under the subtheme of case status, namely, postpone hearings and others. And lastly, the subtheme of environment; namely, the noise and new environment. The distribution of stressors is shown in Table 1.

3.2. Section 2: Coping mechanisms and most common coping mechanism of female PDLs

The coping mechanisms employed by female PDLs can be categorized into three primary themes, listed in descending order: emotion-focused coping reported by 60% (6/10), social coping, and religious coping. Within the emotion-focused category, four distinct strategies were identified: rest and relaxation result of 40% (4/10), isolation result of 40% (4/10), physical activities reported by 70% (7/10) informants and arts and crafts found as it is 80% (8/10) informants. In the realm of social coping, two specific strategies emerged: peer support resulted 70% (7/10) of PDLs and family support resulted to 30% (3/10).

Moreover, the common stress management within prisons revolves around three key coping mechanisms: religious coping result of 60% (6/10) of informants, emotion-focused coping reported by 60% (6/10) of informants, and social coping result of 20% (2/10) of informants. Religious coping specifically emphasizes one religious involvement. Emotion-focused coping includes four - diversion, physical activities, rest/relaxation, and isolation. Social coping primarily one it is family support.

One participant shared, “When I feel stressed, I pray. It helps me feel calm and gives me hope that things

Stressors	Number of participants reporting
Interpersonal conflicts	6
Family separation	5
Legal delays	3
Prison environment	2

Table 1. Distribution of stressors ($n=10$).

will get better.” Another participant mentioned, “I like to draw and paint. It helps me forget about my problems for a while.” These quotes illustrate the emotional and psychological relief that religious and creative activities provide.

3.3. Section 3: Proactive recommendations based on salient findings

Based on salient findings, the following proactive recommendations are synthesized:

1. Prisons can improve the lives of PDL women by offering programs that address unique stressors. These programs include trauma-informed care for staff, increased family connection opportunities, and conflict resolution skills training for inmates. This can improve well-being during incarceration and increase success upon release.
2. Prisons can significantly improve female inmates' well-being through various programs. Creative activities (art, crafts): Help with emotional regulation, stress reduction, and self-expression. Physical activities (Zumba, volleyball): Improve both physical and mental health by reducing anxiety and depression. Social support (peer groups, visits): Reduce stress and boost mental resilience. Religious programs: Provide spiritual support and a sense of purpose. Rest and relaxation programs (meditation, reading): Help manage emotions and reduce stress. Stronger family connections (visits, therapy): Provide emotional backing and hope, aiding rehabilitation. These programs create a supportive environment that benefits both mental and physical health, ultimately helping female inmates reintegrate into society successfully.
3. Trauma-informed care can be implemented through staff training programs that focus on recognizing and responding to trauma symptoms. Family connections can be enhanced through scheduled video calls or family therapy sessions, which can be facilitated by correctional nurses in collaboration with social workers.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex stress experiences and diverse coping strategies employed by female PDLs at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. The results align with previous literature on stress among incarcerated populations while also contributing unique insights into the coping mechanisms specific to the local context.

The primary sources of stress identified among female PDLs were interpersonal conflicts, family separation, delays in legal proceedings, and prison conditions. The stress related to family separation is particularly consistent with the cultural importance of familial ties in the Philippines, where emotional support from relatives plays a critical role in individual well-being.

Notably, emotion-focused coping strategies emerged as the most common response among the participants. This included arts, physical activities, and introspection, reinforcing the adaptive role of constructive coping strategies and supportive prison environments among incarcerated women, as noted by Harner and Riley.⁴ Additionally, religious coping, another prominent mechanism in this study, echoes the role of spirituality in managing psychological distress in prison populations worldwide. The use of peer and family support further highlights the significance of maintaining relational bonds, even within the constraints of incarceration.

The results affirm the applicability of RAM in correctional nursing. Stressors within the prison environment prompt adaptive responses across physiological, psychological, and social domains. The reliance on arts, physical activities, and religious practices demonstrates how PDLs engage in relationship-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, as conceptualized by RAM. Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is evident in the way PDLs cognitively appraise stressors, modulating their responses based on available internal and external resources.

These theoretical frameworks provide a lens for correctional nurses to develop interventions that support adaptive coping. For example, the introduction of structured group activities and regular religious services can facilitate positive adaptation and mitigate the negative psychological impact of incarceration.

The findings are consistent with previous research on the coping mechanisms of female prisoners. Studies by Harner and Riley⁴ and other research on incarcerated women have identified social support, spirituality, and adaptive coping strategies as important factors in reducing psychological distress. However, this study expands on these findings by emphasizing the significance of arts and crafts as a primary emotional outlet, a theme less explored in earlier literature. This suggests that creative activities may offer untapped potential for improving mental health in correctional settings.

Furthermore, the identification of legal delays as a stressor is consistent with international studies by Dhaliwal et al.⁸ which highlight the psychological burden of prolonged legal processes on inmates. This accentuates the need for systemic reforms, such as faster case

processing and access to legal counseling, to alleviate such stress.

The study emphasizes the vital role of correctional nurses in fostering resilience among female PDLs. Nurses can integrate arts-based therapy, promote physical exercise, and organize peer support groups to enhance inmates' coping capacity. Additionally, family involvement through facilitated communication—such as scheduled video calls or letter exchanges—can be strengthened, given the emotional relief it offers to inmates.

Religious services also emerge as essential elements in mental health interventions, reinforcing the need for designated spaces and schedules for worship. Correctional nurses must collaborate with prison administrators to ensure that inmates have access to spiritual support, promoting holistic care.

The findings strongly support RAM, as the coping strategies employed by the participants align with the model's emphasis on adaptive responses to stressors. For example, the use of arts and physical activities reflects emotion-focused coping, while religious practices and peer support align with relationship-focused coping. This demonstrates how PDLs adapt to their environment by utilizing available resources, reinforcing the model's applicability in correctional settings.

While previous studies have highlighted the role of religious and social coping, this study uniquely identifies arts and crafts as a significant coping mechanism. This difference may be attributed to the cultural context of the Philippines, where creative expression is often used as a form of emotional release. Additionally, the emphasis on legal delays as a stressor is more pronounced in this study, possibly due to the specific challenges faced by PDLs in the Philippine legal system.

This study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small, limited to 10 female PDLs from a single correctional facility. This may affect the generalizability of the findings to other correctional environments or male inmate populations. Future research should involve a larger sample across multiple facilities to validate the findings and explore gender-specific differences in stress and coping mechanisms.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias, where participants may have underreported maladaptive coping mechanisms. Follow-up studies incorporating observational methods or mixed methodologies could yield more nuanced insights into inmate coping behaviors.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the mental health challenges and coping strategies of female PDLs. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive correctional programs that address interpersonal conflicts, family separation, legal

stressors, and the physical environment of prisons. Correctional nurses play an important role in implementing these interventions, fostering a supportive environment that promotes both emotional resilience and psychological well-being.

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings revealed in this study, the following conclusions were derived:

1. Female PDLs at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines face stress from personal and systemic factors. These include conflicts with other PDLs, difficulties maintaining family ties due to distance, anxiety about legal proceedings, and the challenging facility environment. Comprehensive interventions, such as conflict resolution programs, support for family communication, and mental health services, are essential to enhance their mental well-being.
2. Female PDLs at a BJMP facility in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines, use a variety of coping mechanisms to manage stress. These include internal strategies, such as emotional introspection and physical activities, and external strategies, such as seeking support from family, engaging in religious activities, and relying on social and peer support within the facility. These coping mechanisms highlight the importance of supportive communities and maintaining familial ties for the well-being of female PDLs. Religious involvement and emotion-focused strategies are common among these women, with religious activities contributing to emotional and psychological healing, and emotion-focused strategies helping them relax and reduce stress.
3. The proactive recommendations are deemed essential because they are based on the salient findings of this study.

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Authors' contributions

Nicole Angelu S. Aranda: Contributed to the conception of the study, data acquisition, and drafting the manuscript. **Jeshierlyn P. Baua:** Involved in data collection, analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript for intellectual content. **Rinoa Lei S. Guntalilib:**

Participated in the design of the study, data interpretation, and provided input during manuscript revisions.

Janelle V. Pasamonte: Assisted with data acquisition, contributed to literature review, and reviewed the manuscript for final approval. **Joman J. Baliton, RN, PhD:** Supervised the project, provided significant revisions, and approved the final version for publication. All authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the research.

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Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board (SMUREB) under the ethical code 2024 0533. The research adhered to ethical standards to safeguard participants' rights, ensure data integrity, and maintain transparency.

Conflicts of interest

All contributing authors declare no conflicts of interest.