Stress And Burnout of Working In A Prison Environment by Prison Wardens In Nigeria

Dr. Solomon Joseph Okwendi¹, Victor Ushi²

¹Salem University
Department Criminology and Penology, P.M.B. 1060
Lokoja, Nigeria
E-mail: okwendi@yahoo.com

&

²Capella University
School of Public Safety (Criminal Justice)
Minneapolis, MN., United States
E-mail: victorushi@yahoo.com

Abstract:
Many years ago a researcher once observed that, “any organization or social structure which consists of one group of people kept inside who do not want to be there and the other group who are there to make sure they stay in will be an organization under stress”. Many offenders serving increasingly longer sentences do not fear punishment or respect the authority of correctional officers. The available empirical and anecdotal evidence convincingly documents that stress and burnout among prison officers is widespread and, in many cases, severe. In many prisons and jails, there are too few officers available to man the prison system because of unattractive salaries, high turnover, and excessive use of sick time and disability leave. A study conducted by the National Criminal Justice Corrections Programs group revealed that stress and burnout contributes to physical and psychological changes in our body and minds that impact high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, diabetes, heart attacks, strokes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and suicides. This article reviews the literature on stress and burnout among prison wardens in Nigeria as it relates to working in adult federal prisons and addresses the causes of stress and burnout among prison wardens, possible solutions to the problem of stress and burnout, as well as its impact on the criminal justice system.

Key Words: Stress, Burnout, Prison, and Correction Officers

Introduction
To say the least, working in a prison environment is an interesting experience. The truth of the matter is that working in a prison environment can be exciting, boring, and very stressful. One of the most distinct stressed out jobs in law enforcement is prison warden jobs (Paoline, Lambert, & Hogan, 2006). Research suggests that working in a prison environment affects prison staff with a higher level of job stress, burnout, and with a negative outcomes including health problems, death, illnesses, social and mental problems, as well as decreased job performance (Paoline et al, 2006). Interestingly, those working in a prison environment are prone to sicknesses and diseases such as heart attacks, hypertension, ulcers, and other stress related illnesses that can result in lack
of job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, turnover intent, and actual turnover among prison staff (Paoline et al, 2006). Similarly, low levels of job satisfaction have also been linked to burnout which when combined with stress lead to compassion fatigue (Paoline et al, 2006). Compassion fatigue is described as “the formal caregivers reduced capacity or interest in being empathic or bearing the suffering of clients, and is the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced or suffered by a person” (Adams, Boscarino, & Figley, 2006). It is the “reduced capacity or interest in being empathic” that is ascribed to prison wardens (Adams et al, 2006).

The prison system in Nigeria has been associated with corruption, negligence of constitutional duties, and underperformance (Awe, 1968). Additionally, prison staffs are understaffed, underpaid, and under-trained. Prison staff faces hardened criminals on a daily basis in shifts that stretch from eight to sixteen hours at a time. During these working hours, they face their stressors who are the inmates while at the same time controlling their thoughts and actions. Moreover, aside from the obvious dangers of being assaulted or killed by an inmate, there are other risks associated with working in a prison environment including; exposure to communicable and incurable diseases such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and Hepatitis C. Furthermore, there are inmates who take pleasure in spitting, peeing or defecating into a container and throwing them at correctional officers. So that is always a concern.

Some of the prisoners live in conditions that are not hygienic. Prison wardens are expected to search their belongings and their bodies for weapons and contraband. Working in a prison environment can be stressful and hazardous. Every year, a number of prison officers are injured in confrontations with inmates. Correctional officers may work indoors or outdoors. Some correctional institutions are well lighted, temperature controlled, and ventilated, while others are old, overcrowded, hot, and noisy. Prison and jail security must be provided around the clock, which often means that officers work all hours of the day and night, weekends, and holidays. In addition, officers may be required to work paid overtime. Because of challenging working conditions, successful correctional officers must have a specific set of skills. They must: Enjoy working with others, possess excellent interpersonal skills, such as patience and sensitivity; be self-confident; be assertive and have the ability to resolve conflict; be able to employ stress-reduction techniques so as to prevent fatigue and burnout; be physically capable of coping with physical demands of the profession; and be mentally and emotionally stable so as to cope with the pressures of the job and be able to remain calm in stressful situations. The importance of this article is to draw the attention of prison administrators in Nigeria to the fact that inmates are not all the same, and that if prison staffs are not well trained to work with all types of prisoners, higher occupational stress and burnout will likely occur, which can lead to poor job performance (Gilbert, 1990).

**Prison System in Pre and Post-Independence Nigeria**

According to Orakwe (n.d.), the origin of modern prison in Nigeria dates back to 1861 as introduced by the British colonial masters and patterned after the British model to protect their personnel and further their economic and political interest in the country. Prior to this, Nigeria had a dual prison system until its consolidation in 1968. According to Orakwe (n.d.), the prison system introduced by
the British did not make provision for the reformation of prisoners nor did it create an avenue for “systematic penal policy from which direction could be sought for penal administration” (Para, 3). Instead, prisoners were utilized for public works at the discretion of the British colonial masters and to intimidate, as well as punish those opposed to British colonial rule.

Today, the Nigeria Prison Service is an institution in progress in that it has grown from being a poorly trained organization without a reform policy under the British overlord to become an envy of the West Africa sub-region with well trained staff and massive manpower development. Moreover, modern day Nigeria prisons boost of professionals such as nurses, doctors, social workers, psychologists, criminologists, and well-educated staff among its employees. Besides, massive transformation has taken place since 1980 from its three Directorates to six Directorates in 1993. Following the reorganization and removal of the Nigeria prison Service from the Civil Service in 1992, it now has a command structure with zonal commands in all the 36 states of the federation including Abuja.

**Stress and Burnout among Prison Staff in Nigeria: Literature Review**

Stress is a silent killer among prison workers world over, including Nigeria. As noted by the United States Department of Health and Human Service (2010), stress has the capability to keep the individual correction officers awake at night, make them display their aggression on their spouses and children, as well as make the job look frightening. Stress come with a negative stimulus known as stressors including frustration, conflicts, unclear directions, conflicting roles, and being asked to do too many tasks and not being provided with enough resources, and pressures (Butcher, Mineka & Hooley, 2007, p. 145; Griffin, 2006; Lambert, Hogan, & Tucker, 2009). The response of individuals to stressors has been described as job stress. Additionally, job stress also involves a general worker’s feelings of job-related conflicts, fear, frustration, concerns, apprehensions, and sufferings (Griffin, 2006; Lambert et al., 2009).

Even though some studies have described prison job stress and burnout as the same, this is not correct in the sense that while stress lead to negative consequences such as mental and physical health problems, frustrations and conflicts within and outside work environment as noted by (Whitehead & Lindquist, 1986), burnout on the other hand takes time to develop because it is the end product of prolonged exposure to job stress. According to Whitehead and Lindquist (1986), job stress is one of the major causes of burnout. Burnout, as also postulated by (Hogan et al, 2006) is harmful both to prison staffs, families, friends, co-workers, inmates, as well as to the organization.

Several studies have found that a huge increase has occurred in prison population worldwide, including Nigeria, and the increase in prison inmates has created job stress and burnout for most prison staff (Omorotionwman, 2005; Bailey, 2006, Perrone, 2007). In a study carried out by Schaufeli and Peeters (2000) on prison staff stress and burnout, the results revealed that prison staff/correctional officers face significant problems with occupational stress and job burnout. According to Omortonwman (2005), prisons in Nigeria are in a sordid state in that the conditions under which inmates live are lamentable, unfriendly, and harsh, hence they do not meet international standards for prisoners’ world-over. Nigeria prisons are characterized by overcrowding and shortage of facilities such as recreational facilities and vocational training centers.

Organizational structure has also been linked to prison staff job stress (Lambert et al, 2006; Dowden & Tellier, 2004). Organizational structure applies to the whole organization, and as such cut across the prison staff work environment. Organizational structures impact every work environment. Lincoln and Kelleberg (1990) posit that every organization uses several dimensions of structure to control, influence, and manage employees. Job-related stress and burnout is
rampant and severe among prison staff (Lambert et al, 2006). An indispensable source of stress and burnout among prison staff in Nigeria, as well as in other parts of the world is supervising people who do not want to be confined and, as a result, employ all manner of tricks and manipulations to make their conditions of confinement as conducive as possible. Other sources of stress and burnout in the prison system among staff and correction officers include; understaffing, rotating shift work, overtime, and dealing with hardened criminals who do not want to be there in the first place (Lambert et al, 2006). In addition, the threat of inmate violence and the actual violence from inmates, poor public image and support, low pay creates stress and burnout for officers.

The disadvantages of working in the prison system in Nigeria far outweigh its advantages to which several studies have attested to (Obiora, 2011, Omorotionwman, 2005). Addressing the problems of burnout and stress among Nigerian prison staff should be of importance to the Nigerian government because motivation influences employee preferences in the workplace. In fact, stress and burnout can cause impaired health problems, early retirement, and impaired family life. Lambert, Paoline, and Hogan (2006) summed it best when they wrote that “Correctional employees are as much imprisoned as their captives and a very real pain of that imprisonment is interaction with less than desirable persons” (p.54).

Working in such a violent environment day after day is stressful and frustrating for correctional officers and can affect their lives styles, careers, family life, marriage, and other personal and social life outside of the confines of the institutional walls.

Solutions to the Problem of Stress and Burnout among Prison Staff in Nigeria

Prison workers in Nigeria are constantly being challenged by the day to put a great deal of effort aimed at dealing with the threatening environment in which they work or else they could find themselves continually responding and reacting to offended inmates, which leaves them to some degree of job pressure. In this regard, Silberman (2007) recommends that proper training and organizational support can provide correctional staff with the right tools they need to appropriately deal with the various problems, situations, and issues they come across in the course of their duties. Silberman (2007) also suggests that those in charge of prison system should implement the pre-service and ongoing training for both new and old hires of the prison system as this will give them the proper tools and education they need to confront the different situations that could lead to burnout and stress in the system.

Some of the possible causes of burnout and stress among correctional officers as outlined by (Lambert et al, 2006) includes; poor communication between staff and management on one hand, and staff and inmates on the other. Other causes comprises lack of support for employees, confusion about specific role within the organization, lack of motivation from the management, and income not reflecting the contribution to the team. The panacea to these problems is for the management of prison system to identify them and promptly deal with them before they lead to stress and burnout. Silberman (2007 and Hoey(1998) proposes holding one to one meetings with employees of the system by the organizational leaders as this will help to identify the possible sources of stress and burnout with a view of implementing stress and burnout coping and relieve measures such as training workshops for stress management for individuals and group support (Tracy, 2003; Smith, 1984; Hoey, 1998). Even though there is evidence that upon detection stress among correction officers can be corrected and treated effectively (Smith, 1984), it makes sense for correctional leadership to focus on the prevention.

Implications for the Criminal Justice System.

Working in a prison environment can be very stressful. Prison staff faces daily challenges in changing offender behavior, a task that is difficult. In Nigeria, as well as in other parts of the world,
correctional staff work hard to provide inmates the mental and physical health needs, educational opportunities, and work skill development programs in a secure and safe environment. Yet, not all inmates within this context engage in productive activities. Some of these inmates exhibit violent behaviors towards correctional staff such as harassing, provocative, and damaging behaviors. Staff may be assaulted with a mixture of bodily fluids thrown in their face. Prison staffs are subjected to constant hours of screaming and curses, these angry outbursts from inmates may incite other offenders into similar behaviors, thus providing a harsh environment for correctional officers to work in. Simply put, inmates behaviors towards staffs could result in increased levels of emotional exhaustion (Garland, 2002). Conceivably, increased levels of leadership support would act to protect correctional workers from stress and burnout.

**Conclusion**

Modern prison in Nigeria as we have it today is a byproduct of the British colonial administrators that started in Lagos in 1861 to carry out the objectives of the British Overlord. Some of its long standing problems includes; overcrowding, lack of resources, and brutality. Overcrowding and lack of resources are the two most important problems facing correctional officers, and has contributed to making working in the environment stressful for staff. The lack of adequate accommodation for prisoners has made it impossible for correctional officers to carry out their primary functions of maintaining control over inmates both to those who are awaiting trial or those who have been convicted of a crime. Prison overcrowding often results in decreased inmate supervision due to under staffing, less resources for inmates and inadequate living conditions. All of these factors can lead to a potentially explosive combination of boredom, isolation, violence, and stressful situation to both the correctional officers and inmates as well.

Besides overcrowding, many prisons and prisoners in Nigeria lack adequate access to health care, mental health counseling, and vocational training/education. This has a detrimental effect on prisoners' health and well-being, as well as their future success in society after they complete their sentences. This lack of resources also affects society because inmates are less likely to be rehabilitated and, therefore, are more likely to commit more crimes, thereby giving correctional officers more work to do. Without access to treatment and other programs, inmates are much more likely to reoffend upon release and continue to cycle in and out of the prison system.

**References:**


