

# Subculture of Inmates in Thai Prisons

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research explains the characteristics of inmate grouping, the structure of prison groups, and the substructural model of inmates afflicting the prison administration. In-depth interviews were conducted with the group chiefs called “leaders” and with the authorities of five central prisons in Thailand empowered to control inmates sentenced to more than a 30-year term. The results revealed that most inmates were grouped by the same domicile before being convicted. Such grouping was to help their stay, to share among members, and to prevent maltreatment from other inmates. Such grouping, in general, presented no cultural clashes with the prison regulations but the subculture plagued the prison administration with three peculiarities: 1) the early adult inmate grouping with offensive records during youth, 2) the body and facial tattoo grouping, and 3) the trafficker grouping with financial influence in order to have a larger subculture group to exploit violations of the prison regulations such as mobile phone smuggling, trafficking, gambling, and blackmailing. Group size and the “Home” groupings were indispensable to building the group’s values and beliefs in the right direction or toward violation of the prison regulations.

**Keywords:** subculture, leader, group rules, structure of prison group

## บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาในครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่ออธิบายลักษณะการรวมกลุ่มของผู้ต้องขังในเรือนจำ โครงสร้างของกลุ่ม และรูปแบบของวัฒนธรรมรองที่ยึดถือในกลุ่มผู้ต้องขังซึ่งเป็นปัญหาต่อการบริหารงานเรือนจำ โดยใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ด้วยวิธีการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกจากผู้ต้องขังที่เป็นหัวหน้ากลุ่ม หรือที่เรียกว่า “พ่อบ้าน” และเจ้าหน้าที่ของเรือนจำกลางที่มีอำนาจการควบคุมผู้ต้องขังที่มีกำหนดโทษจำคุก 30 ปีขึ้นไป จำนวน 5 แห่ง ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ผู้ต้องขังส่วนใหญ่มีลักษณะการรวมกลุ่มที่มาจากภูมิลำเนาเดียวกันก่อนต้องโทษหรือแหล่งที่มาเดียวกัน จึงใช้

คำว่า “บ้าน” เรียกแทนการรวมกลุ่มของผู้ต้องขัง เช่น บ้านบางเขน บ้านชลบุรี บ้านบางขวาง ฯลฯ จุดมุ่งหมายคือการช่วยเหลือกันในด้านความเป็นอยู่ การแบ่งปันของสมาชิกในกลุ่ม ป้องกันการถูกรังแกจากผู้ต้องขังอื่นๆ ซึ่งโดยทั่วไปแล้วการรวมกลุ่มลักษณะนี้ไม่ได้มีวัฒนธรรมที่ขัดต่อกฎระเบียบของทางเรือนจำ แต่ลักษณะวัฒนธรรมรองที่เป็นปัญหาต่อการบริหารงานเรือนจำมักเกิดขึ้นจากการรวมกลุ่มผู้ต้องขัง 3 ลักษณะ ประกอบด้วย การรวมกลุ่มผู้ต้องขังวัยรุ่นที่มีประวัติการกระทำความผิดในช่วงเป็นเยาวชน การรวมกลุ่มผู้ต้องขังหน้าลาที่สักทั้งตัวและใบหน้า และการรวมกลุ่มผู้ต้องขังค้ายาเสพติดที่มีอิทธิพลทางการเงิน เพราะต้องการกลุ่มที่มีขนาดใหญ่ และมี

เป้าหมายในการแสวงหาผลประโยชน์จากการละเมิดกฎในเรือนจำ เช่น การลักลอบนำโทรศัพท์มือถือเข้าเรือนจำ การค้ายาเสพติด การพนัน และการรีดไถเพื่อให้มีรายได้ในการดูแลสมาชิกในบ้านและการสร้างอำนาจต่อรองกับบ้านอื่นๆ และต่อรองกับเจ้าหน้าที่เพื่อให้ใช้ชีวิตในเรือนจำได้อย่างสะดวกสบาย ขนาดของกลุ่มและลักษณะของพ่อบ้าน จึงมีส่วนสำคัญในการสร้างสร้างค่านิยม ความเชื่อของกลุ่มที่จะเป็นไปในทิศทางที่ถูกต้องหรือขัดต่อกฎระเบียบของเรือนจำ

**คำสำคัญ:** วัฒนธรรมรอง พ่อบ้าน กฎของการรวมกลุ่ม โครงสร้างกลุ่ม

## INTRODUCTION

Communities behind prison walls are like twilight zones from the perspective of the outsiders because the prisons are designed to punish offenders violating the social norms. Each inmate has a different personal background such as either being rich or poor, or having a high position or being jobless. When admitted into prison, they all have the same status—that of an inmate without freedom as well as being subject to prison rules. On account of the different living conditions from outsiders, the inmate communities form special groupings which are based on their subculture's specific characteristics and with dispositions to conflict with the authorities who supervise them. Sykes and Messinger (1960) noted inmate subculture sometimes hindered the administration of correctional officers around the world and that the levels of violence were different according to the social context and culture of each country.

Today, the Department of Corrections in Thailand encounters overcrowded prisons since the number of inmates has increased. Currently, there are 289,568 inmates whereas the prison and the correctional institutions around the country can accommodate just 111,405 inmates (Division of

Inmate Measures, 2005). Today, the prison population in Thailand is 160 percent of the standard capacity. In addition, the prison guard force consists of 11,000 personnel, which does not meet the standards of the United Nations which indicates the proportion should be a prison guard to one prisoner and the standards of the Office of Civil Service which indicates the proportion of one prison guard to 10 prisoners (The Research and Development Center of Criminology, 2005). The mission of the Department of Corrections is to meet the problems of inmate control and rehabilitation which disable its effectiveness and affect the risk of the operation, as well to promote social safety after the release of inmates and their return to society. In conclusion, their rehabilitation is ineffective which has been known to lead to higher rates of recidivism.

In addition, the problem of overcrowding has a psychological effect on inmates fueling the relationships between inmates because the overcrowded condition creates aggressive behavior among inmates and this has been identified as the major cause of all conditions in every prison problem (Haney, 2006). Steiner and Wooldridge (2009) noted that the rising number of inmates produces violence and abuse among themselves as well as between inmates and the authorities.

The impacts on the prison administration reflect the disciplinary violation of inmates and the creation of groups for protests, brawls, and assaults on the authorities. These result in risk to life and property and produce a negative image for the Department of Corrections. The most extreme tendencies will be found in the inmates convicted of capital punishment because they have been sentenced for prolonged imprisonment which can result in these inmates feeling oppressed and stressed. Bowker (1982, p. 147) stated that the longer the inmate groups are isolated from outsiders, the more distinct is their culture especially in the super maximum security where inmates have prolonged sentences (Jitsawang, 1985). Moreover, there are limitations within the prisons in Thailand

due to the scarcity of authorities and the physical environment of the prisons which are quite old. These conditions are inappropriate for inmate classification where the grouping influence affects the unavoidable exchange of learning, attitudes, and common values, which give birth to subcultures for specific groups and different models. If the subculture inmates are influenced by during their imprisonment is negative; it not only creates problems in prisons, but this subculture could become deep rooted and remain attached to them after their release back into society, with the risk of reoffending and leading to greater violent acts in the future.

Therefore, the study of “Subculture of Inmates in Thai Prisons” could create knowledge and understanding of the nature of prison groups, the structure of prison groups, and the subculture model adhered among inmates which plague the prison administration. This information has never been studied before which will be useful to the Department of Corrections leading to an effective inmate classification enabling approaches to be investigated to solve and to adapt inmate behavior to follow rules and discipline, and make sure their grouping is directed to more creativity rather than fostering a subculture which arouses problems while reducing social labeling for inmates which would lead to recidivism in future.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focused on explaining the nature of the prison group in terms of its structure and the subculture of the inmates. Many theorists have commented on inmate subcultures, the first perspective of which was the importation theory developed by Irwin which believed that the prison subculture was unclear in the social norms as well as adopting such values from outside by the offenders who had conventional values from the street gangs. When they were admitted into prisons they had a culture similar to the environment outside the

prisons (Wright, 1994). The deprivation theory of Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958) viewed that subcultures were deep rooted in the paradigm of the power relationship that had arisen in prisons. The hypothesis was that inmates reacted or adjusted to the imprisonment by creating a subculture of their own group and shared common values, social norms, and beliefs through the process of accepting the norms and conventional practices in the prisons; this was named prisonization (Sykes, 1958).

A major theory was the subculture theory which mentions that criminal behavior came from the values and beliefs of the group or the youth gang members (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958). Cohen (1955) commented that the subculture came from the consequences of the psychological conflict with capacity and individual opportunity. Thus, by the absence of capacity and opportunity to reach the targets for which most people aimed, a self-made culture was created as the principle to adhere to and to provide a social status as the middle class and this led to consequences such as the violation of the laws of the country. The six major characteristics of a subculture are: (1) non-utilitarian and actions that respond to one's mood and the absence of rationalization, (2) malice which was pleasing, but troubled others, (3) negativism which acted contrary to others, (4) versatility in being able to commit many offenses, (5) short-term hedonism-seeking, and (6) group autonomy involving ignoring any social prohibitions except the needs of the group. Therefore, some inmate groupings still wanted to seek benefits and the power to create a subculture being characterized by and leading to disciplinary violation and the creation of problems for the prison administration.

In addition, the differential association theory of Sutherland (1974) explained that criminal behavior came from interactive learning in a communication process. This theory prioritized frequency, intensity, and connection within the societies of the imitate groups and admired law breaking more than the condition of not violating.

This explained the inmate grouping which assembled those who agreed with the subculture and led to violating the prison regulations because expressing wants and similar values with the group affected members to violate the prison regulations.

The literature review of foreign research on inmate subculture includes such studies as Matt, Mark, and Hochstetler (2004) from data collection conducted with US male inmates. This research found that inmates who had been involved in gangs and later were convicted had a higher risk of violating prison rules. This research surveyed records of violence in prison with the actions of inmates involved in street gangs before being convicted, and the prison grouping. For both kinds of grouping, the recidivists showed that the variables of the gang grouping had significance over the prediction of violent behavior especially for those both inside and outside prison gangs. In addition, inmate subculture was studied in prisons in Holland by Grapendal (1990) who supported the importation model. The current study adopted the theoretical principles to link the studies of the inmate subculture in Thai prisons with the inmate groups which have created a subculture leading to problems for the prison administration.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative research which involved in-depth interviews for data collection conducted with inmates who were leaders in the five central prisons of Khao Bin, Rayong, Bang Kwang, Klong Prem and Phra Nakhon Sri Ayudhya. The instrument quality was checked by three experts from the Department of Corrections in relation to the content validity. When dealing with the selection process, the researcher specified the samples' quantifications congruent with the in-depth interview by requesting the prison to select 10 distinguished leaders. The distinguished leaders also needed to be willing to provide information before conducting a case study. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 25 prison authorities who had

experience supervising prison inmates. This study was certified by the Research Ethics Committee for Human Research, Department of Social Science, COA. No. 2013/251.0509.

## RESULTS

The results of the in-depth studies on inmates reflected the inmate subculture model displaying similar needs and values within groups co-existing and merging both the adoption of the adhered subculture from outside and the subculture creation of one's group under the pressure of the prison environment in the light of the importation theory and the deprivation theory through the learning process within the group. The individual inmate needed interaction during imprisonment based on the differential association theory. In addition, inmates belonging to the outside gangs favored high risk (Matt, Mark, & Hochstetler, 2004) as well as affecting members with their high tendency to rebel against prison regulations based on the subculture theory.

This study was divided into three parts: (1) prison groups, (2) the structure of prison groups, and (3) the subculture grouping model that plagued the prison administration.

### Prison group (Home)

The prison group or "Home" founded in the prison communities contained a large and diverse number of inmates. Thus, the group could be from the same background to help each other and include grouping by members of previous gangs outside prison, by domicile, and by prison-transfer (except for the aged inmates or inmates with a mental disorder also known as "leaks" who were alone in the prison). The "Home" was thus called by the characteristics of the grouping of its members. Grouping by domicile of Bangkok or the local district where inmates came from resulted in names such as the Fang Thon Home, the Pathum Home, and the Bangkhen Home whereas inmates from

other regions would group by province or where transferred from the same prison, they may group with the same inmates transferred from the same prison such as the Bangkwang Home, and the Klongprem Home and so on.

*“....communities inside here are not different from outside but just downsized. In the Special Prison of Thonburi, when a new inmates arrive, we send an agent to ask and if they come from Thonburi, we admit them. So we have hundreds of members...”*

*Leader (26 years old)*

September 10, 2013

Each prison had different numbers of Homes which depended on the size, locality, and number of inmates and every inmate had their Home (Figure 1).

#### Size of prison group

The group size ranged from a small Home with not more than 5 members to ones with 100 members and the size depended on many factors such as:

**Type of prison:** The results were different for an open prison and a closed prison. In an open prison, inmates could enter and exit all the time. Most were prisons empowered to control inmates with short-term imprisonment. There was supervision during their trials and there was rotation

of exit-entry among members since inmates during trial could submit a bail application or when the court ruled and might be subjected to maximum imprisonment and then might be transferred to another prison with maximum supervision power. A closed prison contained inmates transferred from other prisons and usually included prisons supervising the maximum punishment inmates or a maximum security prison involving the control of inmates with influence or whose conduct was problematic to the prison.

**Zoning in prison:** In a single zone prison or one built a long time ago there was no zoning for supervision. Most of these prisons were small and there were a few zones to meet large number of inmates. There were unlikely to be large Home groups and usually just a Home group of the local boss. Others were small Homes specific for each group coming from the same domicile or a Home of previously acquainted inmates.

**Zone size in prison:** The zone size and number of inmates in each zone also affected the prison grouping because the members were grouped in the same area within the zone for common activities such as for meals and seated leisure activities in any areas of their zone. Therefore, if the zone was small but the Home group was large, they would be divided into 3 to 5 members in each Home for convenience and expedition of common activities. If the zone was large with hundreds of inmates; they attempted to operate as a larger group for negotiation power with other groups.

*“...When I was in Zone 5, it was the largest Home and had negotiation power with other Homes. If any Home grew larger and its power grew, it would be chopped up by transferring the leader so that only a single large Home supervised all zones...”*

*Leader (30 years old)*

September 17, 2013



**Figure 1** Classification of inmates in each zone in prison

*“...My Home was in dispute with the Pathum Home because it was a similar large size and this caused a*

*conflict of interest often ending in zone fights...*

*Leader (26 years old)*

September 10, 2013

### Structure of prison group

The structure of the prison group of each Home or in every gang would specify a member's status within the Home and their duties through an organizational administration system structured with chain of command into three levels (Figure 2). The following are some examples discussed throughout the study.

**Leader:** The leader was an inmate positioned as the group chief with the duty to supervise the members and the members admired and respected their leader. He played the most important role when dealing with power involving decision-making in all things relevant to the existence, safety, and keeping peace and order within the group. He had the power to negotiate on behalf of the group with other Homes when problems arose among members from small conflicts, including taking responsibility where a member had created a problem or violated other Home members.

**Consultant:** The consultant was an inmate who helped the leader to supervise members within the Home. Most consultants were older than other

members in the group, a respected person, with good demeanor and they reported to the leader or made decisions if the leader was away. If the leader was transferred to another zone or to another prison, a consultant would replace the leader to prevent the group's dissolution.

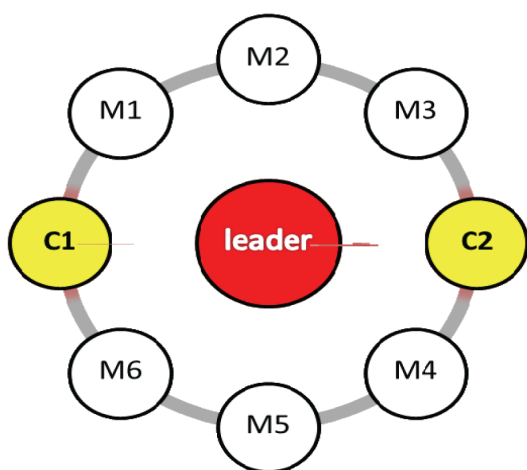
**Members:** Members were inmates under the supervision of the Home, playing roles being assigned by the leader such as cooking, washing clothes, washing plates, brewing coffee, queuing to buy goods, and reserving spaces.

**Rules of the Home:** The rules were: (1) no blackmailing of group members, (2) obey home leader's orders, (3) help group members, (4) express loyalty for the group, and (4) share possessions among group members.

### Subculture model afflicting the prison administration

Data from interviews of the prison authorities and the inmates relative to the culture focused on exploitation and violation of the prison regulations such as mobile phone smuggling, trafficking, gambling, and blackmailing. To earn income in order to supervise members and to create negotiation power with other Homes and the authorities to ease their prison lives, most subculture models consisted of one of three major groups:

**Early adult inmates or inmates with offence records during youth with experience in a Probation and Protection Institution or a Training School for Children and Youth:** On account of the inmate group growing to adulthood, the influence of the friend group was important on forming a gang in prison among members who had known each other outside prison. They were in the same gang as before or had known each other since being in a probation and protection institution due to committing offences at a young age such as the OROS gang which was influential in the Thonburi area and was a large group in prison with hundreds of members. It was a prison group with members who knew each other from Ban Ubekkha. The



**Figure 2** Structure of prison groups



firmness of control within group members was stronger than in other prison groups and gang members had the tattoo of the OROS gang on their hands. The Vong Vian Yai gang would have the letter “V” on their hands to show their grouping. Such culture would be inherited from batch to batch and members wanted group acceptance and financial status.

*“...the inmate group rose because offenders flocked in to the same place and were living together for a long time. They were probated by others and lost their freedom of self-rule, and were oppressed and stressed. They were deviant and accepted the group culture and values. The group was so influential over members’ behavior because it taught about attitudes, behavior, customs, and values. There was behavior-transfer among inmates for acceptance in order to spend life in prison with social status....”*

*Prison authority, Zone Chief*  
September 19, 2013

*“...I am a member of the second batch of the OROS gang. We have all been tattooed with the symbol of OROS on our hands. We met each other in Ban Ubekha in 2002. Originally, we were young offenders when we had less self-control. Looking at each other’s faces, if we disliked, we stabbed. We held that if we did not harm them, they would harm us. Everyone wants an easy life and if we are rogues we will have an easy life but if we fear them, we will have a hard time. When we arrived in a large prison, we have large number of members, often violate discipline and have been transferred to every zone. Now, we have been admitted to the special zone....”*

*Leader (26 years old)*  
September 10, 2013

The subculture within the group reflected the members’ behavior favoring violence, risk, aggression when quarrelling, and illegally tattooing in prison. The inmates had tattoos all over the body, face, and head and such tattoos were done since

being confined in the probation and protection institution and tattooing had continued until there was no space to place another tattoo on their body. They had records of often violating discipline and were degraded to the worse class of inmates.

The early adult inmate group was mostly led by a big brother or respected person and it was not necessary to have good economic status but rather to be able to supervise peace and order and to address problems because this kind of gang had members who were most likely poor and their relatives did not deposit large amounts of money. The gang existed by running a protection racket and extortion or for debt collection in prison and members were called “samurai”.

**Habitual offenders, recidivists, and body or facial tattooing:** Inmates with tattoos on their whole body or on the unexposed part of the body were mostly individuals who had recidivated more than five times. There were likely traffickers and thieves sentenced to short-term imprisonment. They were often entering and exiting prison. Upon release, before long they were re-arrested and re-admitted into prison and were unable to have a normal life in society especially during the daytime when other people in society could clearly see their faces and they were feared. Police watched them carefully in most cases wanting to arrest this group of people most of the time causing the individual to be labeled because of the tattoos on their bodies. Most of the time, these individuals would need to be active during the night in order for individuals not to see their tattoos and label them as outsiders. In addition, the majority of the individuals felt some sort of rejection from their families. They were inmates without relatives and they were humiliated because of what the tattoos represented. On their release, they could not apply for jobs and were stuck with permanent deviant behavior. The previous scenario goes back to labeling theory which indicates these individuals had turned into habitual criminals.

In prison, they grouped themselves because other groups did not accept them as members

because they often created problems such as breaking prison regulations. This group of inmates represented the worst individuals inside prison because of their high rate of recidivism. This group of inmates felt they had nothing to lose.

**Inmates with influence and financial status especially big traffickers:** This group of inmates had been mostly convicted of trafficking or of being the big distributors and producers and of importing or exporting narcotics with good financial status. The group was able to create influence in prison and used money to buy everything. They could collect a large number of members to obtain negotiation power with other prison groups or the prison authorities or misbehave to further their interests in prison, by smuggling mobile phones into prisons, running narcotic networks with outsiders, as well as running open gambling in prison. They earned an immense amount of money which enabled them to continue supervising the lives of their members.

Most leaders would not show off and demanded others to play their leader's role to prevent being transferred to other zones or prisons because they were influential inmates. Upon being arrested for an offence, often the real offenders were not caught because there were scapegoats.

*'...I was imprisoned for 30 years for exporting narcotics. I have 10 dependents with expenses of 3,000–4,000 baht a month. I think that the culture here is like outside but just downsized. There are interests, building influence in the zone but the real leader is unlikely to show off for fear of being transferred and loss of interest...'*

*Leader (47 years old)*

September 20, 2013

*"...Inside here, the big traffickers earn large amounts to gamble in hundreds of thousands a time. Anyone who opens a gambling ring, I would charge for protection for peace and order. If they do not pay, they will be in trouble. Most have money; they pay. Hiring for collecting debts of gamblers who*

*cannot pay means they will meet stabs with iron..."*

*Leader (26 years old)*

September 10, 2013

## DISCUSSION

In summary, the study of subculture of inmates in Thai prisons had integrated models between adopting a subculture brought from outside prison into the prison under the perspective of the importation theory and the subculture creation of their own group under the stress of the environment in prison under the perspective of the deprivation theory. Their grouping was under the perspective of the importation theory characterized in the young adult inmate group who had been admitted into a probation and protection institution before or into a training center for children and youths. The inmate group from trafficking cases was most influential and ran a criminal network which valued seeking gains through violating the social regulations. There was also the subculture of the group favoring violation of the social regulations, which was consistent with the study on subcultures in Holland conducted by Grapendal (1990) who supported the adoption of the importation model. Similarly, the subculture created as a result of the oppressing environment in prison was consistent with the deprivation theory especially the inmate group who tattooed their entire bodies and faces. Members of this inmate group were recidivists and habitual offenders and upon being so labeled within prison and resisted by outside society, they were not accepted into other groups while appealing to fellow inmates through their subculture of violence.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the qualitative research into the subculture of inmates in Thai prisons revealed that generally the nature of the inmate groups depended on their personal backgrounds to help



each other and to meet the needs of the group under the restrictions of the prison. The prison culture favored larger groupings to seek gains and influence. The group structure comprised leaders, consultants, and group members who played different roles but were linked and this influenced the behaviors of its members. The inmate subculture model seeking gains, power, and influence in prison was caused by prolonged imprisonment or by the previous inmate subculture in which inmates had been previously grouped before conviction. It was possible to adopt the importation theory and the deprivation theory to explain the inmate subculture in Thai prisons, especially in those prisons empowered to supervise with maximum punishment. The more prolonged the inmate grouping the more intense was the transmission of the inmate subculture. This affected the subculture behavior which resisted abiding by the prison rules.

Recommendations from this study could be classified into recommendations for policies which include that prisons must develop the process of inmate classification by behavior to set the approach for corrections and training to meet each individual inmate's needs. There should be a specific program to rehabilitate the behavior of inmates violating discipline. It is necessary to adopt modern technology regarding the use of CCTV which can record inmates' behavior in every corner to pursue their movements, for example by preventing the mobilization of inmates for protests as such protests affect the peace and social order inside prison. It is necessary to install a sound recording system to learn of information for specific language communication which might violate important discipline in prison. A recommendation for the operators is that the prison authorities must supervise inmates with fairness, a motivation to maintain discipline and provide places to keep inmates classified as leaders who violate social regulations. Such action should help to prevent the negative transmission of the subculture affecting the prison administration and to seek activities useful

for grouping in building a creative culture for more positive rather than negative effects.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study encountered limitations associated with generalizing from the specific results of the study. This is common to all studies of prisoner behavior regardless of the nature of the sample, which includes the difficulty of generalizing the findings from one particular correctional facility or group of prisoners to the entire correctional system or prisoner population. The study was designed to collect subjective data related to sensitive emotions and personal behavior. Consequently, this study must recruit subjects in a manner that will inevitably lead to sampling bias. As a result, this study was very cautious when raising questions to avoid detrimental psychological impacts on the inmates.

Further studies could involve comparative investigations between male and female inmates and investigate the working culture of the prison authorities by the level of prison security focusing on similarities and differences.

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