



**A Qualitative Investigation of
Trauma and Stress, Coping,
and Well-Being
Among Older Adults in Prison**



Tina Maschi, PhD, LCSW, ACSW

Associate Professor, Fordham University GSS
President, National Organization of Forensic Social Work

Deborah Viola, PhD

New York Medical College, School of Health Sciences and Practice

Overview

- **Background**
- **Methods**
- **Results**
- **Implications**
 - Funding sources: Community Trust Fund, GSA, JA Hartford Foundation



Learning Objectives

1. Explain trauma, stress, and oppression from incarcerated people's perspectives
2. Define and describe resistant resilience
3. List stress management and other strategies that assist incarcerated older people cope with depression and anxiety and other environmentally induced stressors



Background

- Approximately 250,000 adults aged 50 and older in U.S. custody (ACLU, 2012)
- Studies show high rates of life course trauma and stress among incarcerated youth and adults prior to prison that challenge their coping capacities (Maschi et al., 2011, 2012, 2013)
- Research on prison trauma, stress, and coping has mostly focused on youth and adult populations in prison (Maschi, Viola, Koskinen, in press)



Purpose & Significance

- **Purpose:** To fill a gap in the literature by exploring the processes of stress, coping, and well-being among older adults in prison
- **Significance:** Developing or improving prevention, assessment, and intervention for stress and overall wellness of individuals, families, communities



Methods

- **Research Design:** Cross-sectional correlation design; survey descriptive study
- **Total Sample:** 677 adults aged 50+ residing in the New Jersey Dept. of Corrections (Sept. 2010; 40% response rate)
 - **Subsample** of 201 responded to open-ended questions about stress and coping in prison



Methods

- **Data collection:** Self-administered mailed survey using the Dillman 4-step method
- **Stress and Coping Data Sources:** Used open-ended questions from the Life Stressors Checklist-Revised (LSC-R; Hugo et al., 2005) and Prison Stress and Coping Scale (Maschi, 2010)
- **Data analysis:** A grounded theory approach was used to identify the processes of stress and coping of older adults in prison



Sample Description N=677

- **Age:** Young old (50-54; 45%); middle old (55-64; 44%); older old (65-82; 11%).
- **Gender:** male (96%); female (4%)
- **Race/Ethnicity:** African American (45%); White (35%), Latino (15%)
- **Health:** Serious/chronic illness 22%, mental health or substance abuse: 28%
- **Family:** Married/partnered (24%); children (80%); grandchildren (58%); having at least one other incarcerated family member(20%)
- **Legal:** Violent offense history (62%), average years served-13 years; 5 years to release (64%)





FINDINGS



Findings

- Of 677 participants:
 - **53% of total sample reported experiencing stress in prison**
 - **86% felt moderately affected by stress in the past year**
- 201 participants described their current experiences of stress, coping and well-being in prison



Categories/Themes

Trauma & Oppression

1. Interpersonal
2. Institutional
(*Cultural/Structural*)
3. Social
4. Historical/
Economic
1. Internalized

Coping Sources

1. Root (*basic needs*)
2. Physical
3. Cognitive
4. Emotional
5. Social/Cultural
6. Spiritual
7. Participatory
8. Multi-dimensional

Interpersonal

- **31% reported interpersonal trauma and oppression in prison**
- 'One on one' interpersonal abuse, neglect, bullying, or harassment and demeaning attitudes, beliefs and unjust actions from correctional staff or other inmates
- Continuum from minor to severe of being a victim or witness to trauma, abuse, violence

Interpersonal: Staff

- **Interpersonal Trauma and Oppression-Staff**
 - *"bias from guards/security officers"*
 - *"harassment from officers"*
 - *"insidious comments"*
 - *"being picked on for petty things"*
 - *"constant shakedowns" "canceled recreation"*
 - *"you could be set up by an officer at any given time, just because they don't like you" "*
 - *"being punished for other people's actions"*
 - *"male guard feeling on body"*
 - *"corrections officers stomping inmates into comas getting dumped by gangs, this is an epidemic"*



Interpersonal: Other Incarcerated Persons

- **18% reported interpersonal trauma and oppression due to other incarcerated persons**
 - *“immature inmates, arguments”*
 - *“bias from gang members”*
 - *“aggression from other inmates”*
 - *“getting into fights with other inmates”*
 - *“being robbed”*

Institutional/Cultural: Attitudes, Beliefs, Practices

- **15% reported experiencing oppressive attitudes (stigma), beliefs, and practices from institutional staff, community, society**
 - *“subhuman status of being labeled prisoners”*
 - *“you’re identified as a number, and not as a human being,”*
 - *“you can’t get an answer from Department of Corrections or from social workers”*
 - *“being transferred to a new prison to be reclassified after 32 years which is a joke”*

Institutional/Cultural: Law, Policies, Rules

- **66% reported laws, policies, and institutional regulations as a source of stress and feelings of powerlessness**
 - *“fighting my case and bid for freedom while my son is in California spending a lot of money hiring one of the country’s top attorneys*
 - *“I have been denied parole 8 times”*
- **Staff’s use of created and enforced their own unfair, informal rules and/or failing to enforce protective existing policies**
 - *“they seem to lack a ‘higher power’ to address prison abuse and neglect”*

Institutional/Cultural: Apathy & Misuse of Power

■ Institutional Apathy

- *"there's a lack of programs to keep the mind active"*
- *"living with constant noise and cells that are constantly lit up"*

■ Misuse of Power

- *"there are searches where property becomes destroyed or stolen"*
- *"prison officers confine inmates in 2 cages 15-20 minutes 25 at times 3 meals 7 days a week;"*
- *"I've been locked up in a room for 23 hours a day for the past four months without an explanation from administration"*
- *"locked up in a cell 22 hours a day and not enough recreation time"*

Institutional/Cultural: Poor Nutrition and Healthcare

- **Poor Nutrition & Prison Healthcare**
 - *“food nutrition poor; variety-poor- balance-none-lack of use of utilities-water-no water to drink for 2 days, food, meat not cooked, not getting out to yard enough”*
 - *“everyone chain smokes around me all the time”*
 - *“a failure of medical personnel, malpractice, failure to treat, negligence, abuse, denial of vital medication, heart meds”*
 - *“failure to follow specialists’ recommendations for treatment of hypertension and pain”*
 - *older woman said: “I would not wish this place on my worst enemy”*

Social Trauma and Oppression

- **45% reported trauma and stress related to being separated from family and community**
 - *"I am confined like an animal and kept away from family, treated badly by officers"*
 - *"being here away from my family and not having freedoms"*
 - *"being transferred to a prison where my loved ones couldn't visit because of the distance"*
 - *lack of contact, "I cannot contact family, I think about my children, grandkids, children in DYFS"*
 - *"it is hard for me 'cause my son's mother ain't with me now. She's on my mind and I think about my kids and new granddaughter."*
 - *"poor mail delivery, lack of phones"*

Internalized Trauma and Oppression

- **Internal experiences or subjective response to past and current experiences of trauma and oppression**
- Can be in the form of fear, anxiety, guilt and/or depression, such as personal and health and safety, family separation, poor decision-making uncertainty of the future (e.g., employment and finances)
 - *"I am afraid of dying in here"*
 - *"I fear others will learn the details of my crime."*
 - *"I feel guilt- my family was harmed by my actions...how will I face my family?"*
 - *"I worry about when I get out-getting kids a place to live."*
 - *"Keeping a job to make ends meet."*

Historical and Economic

- **Historical and Economic Trauma and Oppression**
- “the black man is an endangered species”
- “the police framed me because I was black”
- “I make fifty cents a day for eight hours of work”
- “prison is new kind of slavery”
- “prisons are designed for young people. Us older folks find it hard to get a job or education here”

Coping Sources

Coping Domains

Types	Description	Sample Quotes
Root (12%, n = 24)	Basic Needs/Foundation: Food, Clothing, Safety, Love-Family Grounding	<i>"I try to be secure in myself"</i>
Physical (33%, n = 66)	Exercise (Yard, Run/Walk, Sports), Medication	<i>"I became a jogger and sprinter at 56 years old. I run 5 miles per day and sprint 105 yd sprints every other day"</i>
Cognitive (35%, n = 70)	Find Peace Within, Think Positive, Making Healthy Choices, Puzzles, Read	<i>"I try to think positive and try to meditate and read a great deal to take my mind off worries"</i>
Emotional (23%, n = 46)	Supportive Counseling, Anger and Stress Management, Music (listening)	<i>"I participate every Monday in group therapy. Cage Your Rage program 10 weeks"</i>

Coping Sources

Coping Domains		
Types	Description	Sample Quotes
Social (54%, n = 108)	Interaction with Family, Friends, or Peers in Prison, Program Participation	<i>"I keep in touch with family members"</i>
Spiritual (37%, n = 34)	Church, God, Pray, Service to Others	<i>"Pray to God and go to church regularly here"</i>
Participatory (13%, n = 26)	Classes, Vocational Training, Teaching, Leading a Book Club, Being a Paralegal	<i>"I run a bereavement group for other inmates."</i>
Multi-dimensional (7%, n = 14)	Art-Making, Music-Making, Yoga	<i>"I do yoga, doctor, I do yoga."</i>

Implications

- Coping and stress management
- Trauma informed care & violence prevention
- Specialized services and units (culturally responsive)
- Professional training-culturally responsive
- Intensive case management and discharge planning
- Family caregiving rights and policy reform: family visitation policies, prison, healthcare, and parole reform and advocacy efforts

Contact Information

- For more information or to received copies of journal articles, contact:

Fordham University Be the Evidence Project

Tina Maschi, PhD, LCSW, ACSW

Email: tmaschi@fordham.edu

Tel: 845-664-3150

BE THE EVIDENCE PROJECT

