
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Crisis in Jails: Ramifications of Overcrowding on Inmates' Quality of Life

Joven M. Villa¹✉ and Bimboy C. Cueno²

¹Security Officer 1, Negros Oriental Detention and Rehabilitation Center, Dumaguete City, Philippines

²Dean, College of Criminology, Foundation University, Dumaguete City, Philippines

Corresponding Author: Bimboy C. Cueno, **E-mail:** cuenobimboy@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Overcrowding in prisons and jails has long been a persistent problem in the Philippines, reflecting similar challenges experienced in many countries around the world. To fill-in the gap in the existing qualitative literatures, this phenomenological study was conducted to uncover the ramifications of jail overcrowding to the inmates' quality of life. This study employed Husserl's qualitative research design. Using Colaizzi's method of data analysis, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with purposively selected fifteen participants. Findings revealed that life inside the overcrowded jail was not only defined by isolated hardships but by a cascading interplay of structural deprivation, where overcrowding, extreme heat, stagnant air, noise, and constant surveillance functioned as the primary forces shaping inmates' daily realities. These environmental pressures generated compounded physical exhaustion, emotional volatility, and social strain, compelling participants to reorganize everyday life around immediate survival through strict routines, controlled movement, hygiene practices, and conflict avoidance. As pressures persisted, participants developed deliberate emotional self-regulation which serve as preventive strategies to preserve safety, dignity, and future possibilities. The study concluded that confinement should not be understood solely as deprivation or punishment, but as a complex human experience marked by adaptive resilience, learning, and identity transformation.

KEYWORDS

Jail overcrowding, ramifications, Phenomenology, Negros Island, Philippines

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 10 May 2026

PUBLISHED: 30 June 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijlps.2026.8.6.2

1. Introduction

Prison or jail overcrowding has been a perennial problem among various countries across the globe. It has continued to become a prevalent issue amongst nations. According to Fair and Walmsley (2024), about 11.5 million people are held in penal institutions across the globe. This seemingly insurmountable number of prisoners has brought forth critical concerns that plague the different incarceration facilities amongst countries. For instance, Sharma, et al. (2022) pointed out that overcrowding in prisons has greatly stunted the quality of life inside these facilities. They added that there were even human rights violations incurred out of these horrible jail situations across countries, namely: USA, Europe, Middle East and Africa. As a matter of fact, Baffour et al. (2024) noted that overcrowding has stimulated fear amongst the prisoners for the spread of communicable diseases, lack of access to basic resources and even psychological and emotional burden. Despite this alarming situation, Syafiq and Lukman (2025) found that even if people see overcrowding plagues a lot of facilities in the entire world, respondents do not see the need for the establishment of private facilities. Hence, it was not seen as urgent or pressing.

Locally, it is no different situation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime or UNODC (2023) posited that the Philippines ranked 11th in the highest prison population in the world. From 2015-2021, it was noted that there is a notable increase of 75% whereby it ballooned from 94, 691 to 165, 528. With this, Narag and Jones (2020) concurred that even the Philippine's prison condition is pictured out as highly overcrowded whereby a cell designed for ten people houses 100 inmates or so. This situation mirrors the fact that Philippines is no different from the rest of the world. It could even be worse. Ideally, Philippine Jails can only hold 20,746 prisoners (Marcelo, 2017; Rosario, 2018; Rosario, 2017). In 2023, the Commission on Audit urged the need for the

Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) to acquire more acres of land to address the high congestion rates of the agency. They pointed out that there is a stunning 3000 percent increase in some facilities. They even termed it as “far beyond the acceptable standards” under existing frameworks for the rights of inmates. Empirical studies on prison overcrowding are mostly conducted in foreign countries (Marco and Garcia-Guerrero, 2020; Sharma, 2022; Kamber, 2022). In the Philippines, majority of the literatures that tackles the issue are from social media outlets. Thus, as a means to advance literature, there is a need to conduct a study that will shed light on the phenomenon in the locale of Dumaguete City.

This study was also geared towards contributing to the pool of knowledge in addressing three Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), namely, SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, particularly Target 3.4, which promotes mental health and well-being, considering that prison overcrowding affects the psychological and physical condition of persons deprived of liberty. It also relates to SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, especially Target 10.2, which emphasizes social inclusion and the protection of vulnerable populations, including incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, the study supports SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, particularly Target 16.3 on ensuring equal access to justice and Target 16.a on strengthening institutions, as the findings may provide insights for improving correctional management and detention conditions.

2. Literature Review

Prison overcrowding is a complex and multifaceted issue that lacks a universally accepted definition. However, most academic and policy literature define it in terms of occupancy rates, which compare the number of inmates housed in a facility to its intended capacity. When the number of prisoners exceeds the designed capacity of a correctional facility, it is considered overcrowded (Nudd et al., 2024). According to Marco and Garcia-Guerrero (2020), the term “overcrowding” is commonly used to refer to the excessive number of inmates in prison cells. However, they argue that this definition is too broad and open-ended, making it difficult to measure accurately. As a result, there is a growing preference for the term “over-occupation,” which provides a more precise and measurable concept (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020).

The confusion partly arises from the use of incarceration rates as an indicator of overcrowding. Incarceration rate refers to the number of persons incarcerated per 100,000 population, which does not account for the actual spatial capacity of prison facilities (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). Thus, relying solely on this measure may lead to misleading conclusions regarding prison congestion. Furthermore, overcrowding cannot be fully understood without considering the physical characteristics of prison spaces, such as cell size and layout. For instance, Spain has a relatively low incarceration rate of 45.69; however, regions such as Catalonia report significantly higher rates ranging from 111 to 128.5, indicating uneven distribution and localized overcrowding (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). Given these limitations, scholars suggest using density measures, which refer to the ratio between the number of inmates and the number of available prison spaces. This approach provides a more accurate representation of overcrowding conditions (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). Globally, it has been observed that more than 100 countries operate prison systems that exceed 100% of their intended capacity (SPACE Report, 2020).

The 2020 SPACE Report further revealed that fifteen European countries reported overcrowded prison facilities, with ten of them—eight belonging to the European Union classifying the situation as “critical” (SPACE Report, 2020). These findings highlight the widespread nature of the problem. In response, the concept of “density” has been increasingly adopted as a standard metric for assessing prison occupancy. This allows for comparative analysis across countries, regions, and socio-economic contexts (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). However, debates continue regarding its precise definition and application. One emerging concept is “social density,” which refers to the number of individuals occupying a specific space such as a cell, dormitory, or prison wing. While useful, this measure does not always correspond with overall institutional density, making its interpretation complex (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). Sharma (2022) emphasized that prison overcrowding is a long-standing global issue that has persisted since the early 19th century. Despite numerous reforms and policy interventions, it remains difficult to address due to its dynamic and unpredictable nature.

One challenge in addressing overcrowding is the fluctuation in inmate populations. Criminal justice systems may experience sudden declines or surges in inmate numbers, making it difficult for administrators to plan effectively (Sharma, 2022). Moreover, public perception often favors stricter sentencing and longer incarceration, which can hinder reform efforts. Overcrowding may develop gradually due to continuous increases in inmate populations, resulting in chronic congestion. Alternatively, it may occur suddenly due to mass arrests or responses to violent incidents, as observed in countries such as Rwanda (Sharma, 2022).

In some jurisdictions, overcrowding is treated as a temporary or cyclical issue. However, in countries like India, it has become a persistent structural problem with limited long-term solutions (Sharma, 2022). This highlights the need for systemic reforms rather than short-term fixes. Addressing prison overcrowding requires comprehensive evaluation of prevention strategies and sustained commitment to long-term reforms. Effective solutions depend on reliable data and evidence-based research across various aspects of the criminal justice system (Sharma, 2022). From a legal perspective, Kamber (2022) discussed prison overcrowding within the

framework of the European Convention on Human Rights. The issue has evolved through the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, particularly in the landmark case of *Muršić v. Croatia*. This case introduced the “totality of conditions” approach, which evaluates prison overcrowding based on qualitative aspects rather than relying solely on numerical thresholds (Kamber, 2022). This perspective emphasizes the importance of living conditions, dignity, and overall well-being of inmates. He further explained that the principles established in this case have been consistently applied in subsequent rulings. These legal standards have also influenced broader European jurisprudence, including decisions of the Court of Justice of the European Union. Similarly, Haney (2022) defined prison overcrowding as a condition in which the number of inmates exceeds the physical and operational capacity of a facility. This situation results in compromised living conditions, increased psychological stress, and limited access to rehabilitative services. Meanwhile, Nudd et al. (2024) also highlighted that although no universal definition exists, overcrowding is commonly identified when occupancy rates exceed 100% of capacity. In extreme cases, some prison systems operate at more than 250% capacity. They further noted that overcrowding is often linked to systemic issues such as excessive reliance on pre-trial detention and the underutilization of non-custodial measures (Nudd et al., 2024). These structural factors contribute significantly to the persistence of overcrowding.

MacDonald (2018) added that prison overcrowding remains a persistent global issue, with many facilities operating beyond double their intended capacity. This condition has serious implications for inmate health, contributing to the spread of infectious diseases and deterioration of mental health. Prison overcrowding is a global crisis affecting more than 120 countries, with many prison systems operating at 150% to 300% of their intended capacity. The Global Prison Trends 2024 report indicated that over 11 million people are incarcerated worldwide. It further identified key drivers of overcrowding, including excessive use of pre-trial detention, punitive sentencing laws, and the criminalization of minor offenses (Global Prison Trends, 2024). Supporting this view, Cliquennois (2020) found that prison overcrowding remains a widespread issue across many countries. It is often rooted in punitive criminal justice policies at the national level. These conditions frequently result in violence, inadequate healthcare, poor sanitation, lack of privacy, and limited access to rehabilitation programs. He further added that in response to these challenges, institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights have implemented significant legal interventions. These include compelling member states to adopt reforms aimed at reducing prison populations, such as expanding parole eligibility and decriminalizing certain offenses. The Court has also emphasized the importance of preventive and compensatory mechanisms to improve detention conditions, particularly for individuals in pre-trial custody. Despite skepticism in some academic literature, evidence suggests that these legal and policy interventions have contributed to measurable reductions in prison overcrowding in several European Union member states. On the other hand, Joseph et al. (2020) argued that overcrowding is largely the result of policy failures, particularly the over-reliance on incarceration and the so-called “increase in prison capacity syndrome.” For instance, in Southern Nigeria, prison congestion accounted for approximately 55% of lock-up capacity as of 2016, highlighting the severity of the issue (Joseph et al., 2020).

A 2025 scoping review further revealed that overcrowding is strongly associated with negative health outcomes. These include increased rates of tuberculosis, COVID-19, self-harm, depression, and overall prison mortality. The study also emphasized that overcrowded conditions often violate international human rights standards, particularly the right to health and protection from inhumane treatment. Regional disparities are also evident. Prisons in Africa, Asia, and Latin America frequently operate at double or triple their intended capacity, while some European countries have experienced increases due to political imprisonment (Scoping Review, 2025). These variations demonstrate that overcrowding is both a global and context-specific issue. Efforts to address overcrowding have included the implementation of non-custodial measures, early release programs, and rehabilitation-focused policies. While these strategies have shown promising results, experts emphasize that strong political will and systemic reforms are essential for achieving long-term and sustainable solutions (Global Prison Trends, 2024).

From a human rights perspective, Forero (2023) argued that prison overcrowding may constitute a form of ill-treatment or even torture under international law. He emphasized the importance of establishing minimum standards for living space and developing tools to assess the harm caused by inhumane detention conditions. He also examined emerging jurisprudence that introduces innovative remedies for affected individuals, including early release and sentence reductions as forms of compensation. However, debates continue regarding the scope and limitations of these legal interventions. The study ultimately advocates for more comprehensive and systemic approaches to address structural violence within prison systems. In another study, Geegbee et al. (2022) examined the relationship between incarceration and behavioral change among inmates. The findings revealed a mean score of 2.582, suggesting that imprisonment may contribute to behavioral transformation, particularly after release. The study also assessed the impact of overcrowding on inmates' ability to achieve self-sustainability. Results showed a mean score of 2.713 and a standard deviation of 0.795, indicating that overcrowding significantly affects reintegration and independence. Furthermore, Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a weak but positive relationship between overcrowding and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs at Monrovia Central Prison. This suggests that while overcrowding poses challenges, some rehabilitative outcomes may still occur under constrained conditions. Based on these findings, they recommended that governments prioritize

the physical and mental well-being of inmates. This includes increasing the time prisoners spend outside their cells and promoting access to open-air environments as part of broader rehabilitation efforts.

The Philippines is among the countries significantly affected by prison overcrowding. The confinement of both convicted and non-convicted persons (detainees) is managed by three major government agencies: the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and Department of Justice (DOJ). The DILG supervises the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), while Local Government Units (LGUs) manage provincial jails. The DSWD oversees youth and drug rehabilitation centers. Meanwhile, the DOJ supervises the Board of Pardons and Parole (BPP), Parole and Probation Administration (PPA), and Bureau of Corrections (BuCor) (DILG, 2023; DOJ, 2023). Despite this structured system, prison overcrowding remains a serious concern nationwide. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) reported that the Philippines ranks 11th globally in terms of prison population. From 2015 to 2021, the number of incarcerated individuals increased by approximately 75%, rising from 94,691 to 165,528 (UNODC, 2023). Narag and Jones (2020) described the situation as highly congested, noting that cells designed for ten individuals often house up to 100 inmates. This reflects extreme overcrowding conditions and highlights the severity of the problem in the Philippine context. In terms of capacity, Philippine jails are estimated to accommodate only around 20,746 inmates under ideal conditions (Marcelo, 2017; Rosario, 2017; Rosario, 2018). However, actual populations far exceed this limit, resulting in congestion rates that surpass acceptable standards.

In 2023, the Commission on Audit (COA) urged the BJMP to acquire additional land and expand facilities to address congestion. The report revealed that some detention facilities operate at congestion levels of up to 3000%, which it described as “far beyond acceptable standards” under existing human rights frameworks (COA, 2023). Globally, the Philippines ranks among the most overcrowded prison systems, with congestion rates exceeding 300% in several facilities (DILG, 2023). For instance, the New Bilibid Prison recorded a congestion rate of approximately 377% as of mid-2023, housing more than 30,000 inmates in a facility designed for just over 6,000 (DILG, 2023; BuCor, 2023). The Bureau of Corrections (2023) also reported that the total prison population reached around 165,000, reinforcing the country's position as one of the most overcrowded correctional systems globally.

Beyond statistics, qualitative studies provide deeper insights into inmates' lived experiences. A 2023 phenomenological study titled “Phenomenology of Prison Crowding among Filipino Young Adult Detainees” examined inmates in Legazpi City Jail. The findings revealed themes such as emotional longing, resilience, hope, and the psychological burden of confinement (2023 Study). The study further emphasized that overcrowding significantly affects detainees' mental health, interpersonal relationships, and sense of identity. These experiences are shaped by cultural and social contexts, particularly within Filipino communities (2023 Study). Efforts to address overcrowding have also been initiated at the national level. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime supported the National Decongestion Summit held in December 2023, which gathered over 300 stakeholders to discuss systemic reforms in the Philippine justice system (UNODC, 2023).

One of the key findings highlighted during the summit was that more than 70% of inmates in the Philippines are in pre-trial detention, many of whom are charged with minor drug-related offenses. This significantly contributes to the persistent problem of overcrowding (UNODC, 2023). The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) has also raised concerns regarding the inhumane conditions in detention facilities. In 2023, it supported Senate Bill No. 2031, which aims to enhance safety, monitoring, and accountability in jails and prisons (CHR, 2023).

Furthermore, the CHR emphasized the importance of complying with international human rights standards, particularly the Nelson Mandela Rules. It also advocated for the establishment of a National Preventive Mechanism to ensure regular monitoring of detention facilities and protect the rights of persons deprived of liberty (CHR, 2023).

Prison overcrowding is a critical issue that affects correctional systems worldwide. It poses serious challenges to the health, safety, and dignity of incarcerated individuals (Joseph et al., 2021; Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). According to Joseph et al. (2021), overcrowding leads to poor living conditions such as inadequate food, deteriorating infrastructure, and unsanitary environments. These conditions significantly affect inmates' physical health and well-being. Moreover, overcrowding is considered a violation of international prison standards and may constitute cruel and degrading treatment (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). In connection to this, a scoping review published in BMC Public Health (2025) found that overcrowding is strongly associated with the spread of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and COVID-19. It is also linked to mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and self-harm. These outcomes are worsened by limited healthcare access, poor sanitation, and inadequate nutrition. Beyond physical health, overcrowding also has psychological and behavioral effects. Inmates in congested environments often experience stress, irritability, and hopelessness (Haney, 2022). The Prison Policy Initiative introduced the concept of Post-Incarceration Syndrome, which describes the long-term psychological impact of harsh prison conditions. Research by Edward Gaes further links overcrowding to increased aggression, elevated blood pressure, and higher rates of misconduct (Gaes, as cited in Haney, 2022). These psychological effects may persist after release, negatively affecting reintegration and increasing recidivism. Overcrowding

also compromises institutional safety. A 2025 report by the UK Ministry of Justice found that inmates in overcrowded cells are 19% more likely to be involved in assaults. Such conditions create tension, disrupt routines, and increase violence within facilities (UK Ministry of Justice, 2025).

Correctional staff are likewise affected, experiencing higher levels of stress, burnout, and exposure to violence. MacDonald (2018) emphasized that overcrowded environments make it difficult for staff to maintain order and provide adequate care, resulting in reduced institutional effectiveness. Baggio (2020) examined the relationship between overcrowding and prison violence in a Swiss detention facility. The findings revealed a positive correlation between overcrowding, inmate turnover, and violent incident. This suggests that institutional conditions play a significant role in shaping prison safety. Overcrowding also undermines rehabilitation efforts. The Global Prison Trends 2023 report noted that overcrowded facilities often lack the resources, space, and personnel needed for effective rehabilitation programs (Penal Reform International, 2023). As a result, inmates have limited access to education, vocational training, and mental health services. Similarly, a study in *BMC Psychology* found that overcrowding reduces participation in rehabilitation programs and increases psychological distress, ultimately raising the risk of reoffending (*BMC Psychology*, 2023).

From a human rights perspective, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) recommend adequate living space and humane conditions (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). However, in practice, these standards are often not met due to overcrowding. While some inmates report perceived benefits of shared cells, such as companionship, studies show that these are outweighed by disadvantages, including lack of privacy and increased insecurity (Marco & Garcia-Guerrero, 2020). There is also no universally accepted standard for minimum prison cell space. Guidelines vary, ranging from 5.4 to 10 square meters per inmate, depending on the jurisdiction (Council of Europe, 2018). Despite these recommendations, overcrowding continues to limit compliance with such standards.

Overcrowding also affects broader correctional systems. Dhillon (2023) found that overcrowded prisons in California were associated with increased violent incidents. Similarly, Sudaryono (2020) noted that despite infrastructure expansion in Indonesia, overcrowding persists due to systemic and policy-related issues. Glazener and Nakamura (2020) further observed that overcrowding is associated with increased inmate misconduct, although the relationship may vary depending on institutional conditions. In summary, prison overcrowding has wide-ranging effects on health, safety, and rehabilitation. It compromises inmate well-being, increases violence, burdens correctional staff, and weakens reintegration efforts (Joseph et al., 2021; Penal Reform International, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including alternative sentencing, improved infrastructure, and increased investment in health and rehabilitation services. Without such measures, overcrowding will continue to undermine the effectiveness of correctional systems globally and in the Philippine context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research employed a qualitative methodology known as descriptive phenomenology, a method that became widely recognized through the contributions of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) (Pula, 2021). Phenomenology is a methodological approach aimed at understanding and exploring the everyday life experiences of individuals. Since the study investigated the lived experiences of prisoners on jail overcrowding, particularly delimiting the phenomenon of overcrowding and their coping mechanism, a phenomenological approach was considered the most appropriate fit for the research. In this study, the researchers utilized Colaizzi's phenomenological approach, which served as a lens that focused on the authentic experiences underlying the phenomenon (Gumarang et al., 2021). Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method offered a thorough examination in which each stage remained closely connected to the collected data. This approach ultimately yielded a concise yet comprehensive representation of the phenomenon under investigation, validated by the participants involved in its construction (Morrow & Rodriguez, 2015).

3.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted at the Negros Oriental Detention and Rehabilitation Center (NODRC), a provincial jail facility located in Dumaguete City, the capital of Negros Oriental. Dumaguete City, situated in the southern part of the Philippines, is widely known as the "City of Gentle People" and has an estimated population of approximately 125,000 as of 2024. The NODRC is operated and managed by the Provincial Government of Negros Oriental. It serves as the primary detention facility for Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) coming from various municipalities within the province, thereby covering a broad jurisdictional area. In terms of capacity, the facility is designed to accommodate approximately 250 PDLs. However, similar to many detention facilities in the country, it experiences congestion due to the increasing number of detainees admitted from different parts of the province. This makes NODRC an appropriate setting for examining the lived experiences of inmates under conditions of jail overcrowding.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants of the study were the prisoners from Negros Oriental Detention and Rehabilitation Center (NODRC). Purposive sampling method was used in the selection of participants. For phenomenological study, Polkinghorne (1989) recommended having participants that range from 5-25. The study did not specify the exact number of participants that was included in the interviews to avoid unnecessary biases and early presumptions. The number of participants was dependent on data saturation. Data saturation occurs when no new categories of data emerge or when the "researcher begins to hear the same comments over and over again" (Grady, 1998). Participants were not selected randomly but through pre-specified criteria. In this study, the criteria used in the selection of participants include: (a) the participants must be confined at Negros Oriental Detention and Rehabilitation Center (NODRC); and (b) the participants must be confined for at least six months. The researchers recruited a maximum of 15 respondents to be interviewed. Strict secrecy was adhered to preserve the identities of the participants in this study.

3.4 Research Instrument

This study used a semi-structured interview as the main research instrument. An interview guide with six parts was prepared: (1) general view of life, (2) jail overcrowding, (3) ramifications of jail overcrowding, (4) coping mechanisms, (5) views on the future, and (6) closing. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to freely share their lived experiences without interruption. To strengthen the study, the researcher also kept a reflexive journal during data collection. This journal recorded observations, reflections, and non-verbal cues such as tone, facial expressions, and emotional responses. It also included the researchers' initial impressions and possible biases to support self-awareness and reduce bias in interpretation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked with the audio for accuracy. The reflexive journal was used alongside the transcripts during analysis to provide deeper context and support a more accurate interpretation of the findings.

3.5 Data Gathering Procedure

In this study, the researchers actively sought informed consent from all participants prior to data collection. Each participant was required to sign a consent form before engaging in the face-to-face, in-depth interviews. All interviews were conducted at NODRC. Holding the interviews there provided a familiar, comfortable, and non-threatening environment, which helped facilitate openness and honest sharing of experiences. The participants were also given the autonomy to select an interview schedule that best suited their availability and convenience. The interviews lasted for at least 30 minutes, depending on the participants' willingness to share information and elaborate on their experiences. To elicit richer and more detailed narratives, probing and follow-up questions were used to clarify certain responses and encourage deeper reflection (Creswell, 2007). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The audio files were securely stored on a flash drive accessible only by the researchers. To ensure confidentiality and protect participant anonymity, the researchers personally transcribed all interviews using headphones in a private setting, preventing the recordings from being overheard by others. The researchers and their research consultant reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy and credibility of the data. After transcription and verification, all audio recordings were permanently deleted.

3.6 Data Analysis

The phenomenological analysis procedure developed by Colaizzi (1978) was used in analyzing the transcripts. Firstly, the researchers immersed himself in the data by thoroughly reviewing all participant accounts multiple times (Colaizzi, 1978). To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned code names, designated as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal. Second, significant statements were extracted from the transcriptions. The researchers carefully analyzed each transcript to highlight essential remarks relevant to the phenomenon while removing irrelevant or interpretative statements (Colaizzi, 1978). The third phase involved formulating the meanings of each major statement (Colaizzi, 1978). Fourth, the researchers organized the formulated meanings into thematic clusters, carefully validating these clusters against the original data. Discrepancies were noted to ensure a comprehensive analysis. This thematic organization facilitated clarity in presenting the findings, highlighting the relationships among meanings and emergent themes. Fifth, the researchers compiled all emerging concepts into a comprehensive narrative account that reflected the participants' experiences with jail overcrowding. Lastly, the researchers incorporating all relevant, newly acquired data from the participants' review process to refine the description, ensuring it more authentically portrayed their lived experiences.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher upheld all ethical considerations, which were observed and discussed before, during, and after the conduct of the study. Participation on the interviews were solely based upon the participants' volition. No PDLs were allowed to participate unless they understand the terms of their informed consent and that the informed consent is inked with the participants' signature. To preserve the confidentiality of the recordings and anonymity of the participants, the researcher was the one who personally transcribed the interview recordings. All transcriptions were conducted using headphones so that interviews were not overheard by other people present in a room designated for transcription. Transcripts did not bear identifiable names of the institution and

the persons involved. Codes, Aliases, and Pseudonyms were used instead as identifying information. The researchers reviewed each of the typed transcripts to ensure accuracy. After this, all audio files were destroyed.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Stabilizing the Now

This theme reflects how the respondents are confronted with the relentless pressures of crowding, heat, noise, and limited resources, learned to stabilize daily life through practical acceptance, repetitive routines, and small but meaningful actions. Rather than eliminating hardship, these strategies contained it, hence, creating pockets of predictability and dignity that allowed participants to get through each day. Stabilization was not a one-time act but a continuous practice, often negotiated moment by moment amid shifting conditions and constrained choices. The participants' accounts illustrate how immediate survival needs consistently collided with environmental realities. Many described the early shock of entry and the bodily wear of persistent heat and noise; yet, over time, they assembled micro-habits and prosocial practices that kept the environment livable. Routines like setting resting positions, sharing scarce items, cleaning in cycles, and observing informal rules were not trivial. Participants experienced them as anchors that preserved composure, lessened conflict, and made room for rest and reflection. Through these efforts, the ordinary acts of washing, straightening, and sharing took on a larger moral weight: they were signs that one could still care for oneself and others, even when larger systems felt indifferent or overpowering.

4.1.1 Core Acceptance and Steadying Routines

This captures how participants learned to stabilize their daily lives within an environment marked by crowding, heat, noise, and strict regulation. Acceptance, as described in participants' accounts, did not signify resignation or passivity. Rather, it represented a deliberate cognitive shift in which individuals acknowledged the immovable aspects of confinement and redirected their energy toward what could still be managed. This form of acceptance enabled participants to construct predictable routines that reduced uncertainty, prevented unnecessary conflict, and conserved limited physical and emotional resources. Over time, these routines transformed overwhelming conditions into a sequence of manageable moments, allowing participants to endure daily life with greater composure.

(That's what I'm saying. It's really hard here. I wasn't used to this kind of situation compared to life outside. But from what I've experienced here, this could help me achieve the change I've been hoping for.) (Participant 4)

(When you're inside, you learn good things) (Participant 5)

(This is now my life. I already accepted this fate. However, I utilized my experience here as an instrument for me to learn and to be renewed into a better person.) (Participant 7)

(I got no choice. I must learn here or else I go back again inside the jail in the future. I am learning to control my temper. Not to be angry at small mistakes. I am kind now unlike before that I get into fights most of the times) (Participant 10)

Participants described acceptance as something that developed gradually through experience. Early recognition of environmental limits such as restricted space, fixed schedules, and lack of privacy helped individuals recalibrate expectations and minimize frustration. As days progressed, habituation played a central role in reinforcing acceptance, with participants noting that repeated exposure allowed them to "get used to" conditions that initially felt unbearable. This habituation did not erase discomfort but softened its psychological impact, making it possible to function within the space. The presence of older or more experienced inmates further supported this process, as these individuals often modeled calm behavior, clarified informal rules, and introduced routines that brought a sense of order to the group. In support to this, Khalalia and Faishol (2025) on their study on the self-acceptance among female correctional inmates pointed out that self-acceptance is a key component that affect their mental and emotional well-being most especially in the midst of social stigma, loss of freedom and even psychological tensions. They added that the support from their families plays an important role in the process of accepting their situation. Huang et al. (2020) on their study about psychological resilience, self-acceptance, perceived social support and their associations with mental health of incarcerated offenders in China revealed that self-acceptance, mental health, psychological resilience and even social support among incarcerated individuals are low. Hence, there is truly a need for each and every prisoner to devise self-directed mechanisms to build up acceptance of their situation.

Overall, Core Acceptance and Steadying Routines illustrates how participants constructed order from constraint. Acceptance functioned as the gateway that made routine possible, while routine served as the instrument through which daily life was regulated. Together, they formed a practical system of micro-governance that transformed chaos into coherence. Although these strategies did not resolve the deeper structural problems of confinement, they enabled participants to preserve dignity, reduce

conflict, and sustain themselves through the immediacy of each day, hence, laying the groundwork for coping, reflection, and eventual change.

4.1.2 Insufficient Relief and Makeshift Comforts.

This captures the paradox of living in conditions where every solution is both necessary and not enough. Participants learned quickly that the environment could not be tamed so much as temporarily softened that relief would be thin, contingent, and fragile, and yet still worth cultivating. Heat pressed into the body as a constant, odors lingered, air stagnated, and crowding foiled attempts to rest or breathe freely. In this context, ingenuity was not an optional trait but an essential survival capacity, and its goal was modulation rather than transformation. A rinsing bath could cool the skin, though within minutes the oppressive atmosphere would reassert itself. A better position closer to the door might give a taste of fresher air, but turnover, density, or someone else's greater need would require moving again. People developed not a singular strategy, but a repertoire of small, adaptive acts that recognized the environment's volatility.

(Because of the extreme heat, sir, there are times when we have to go shirtless inside because it's unbearable.) (Participant 11)

(That's really the only thing lacking, sir. You don't get enough air, and you feel short of breath.) (Participant 12)

(It is so hot like you are in the oven. It is hard to breath. We are limited in terms of our movements.) (Participant 13)

(Sometimes I only wear my underwear because of the hot temperature inside. This is how difficult here insisde.) (Participant 14)

The psychological function of these makeshift comforts is as important as their material effect. Participants learned to recalibrate the scale of relief to experience a few degrees' reduction in heat, a short burst of clearer air, or a marginally softer surface as meaningful wins. This recalibration did not deny the reality of deprivation; it attuned attention to the difference between unbearable and bearable, between disorganized discomfort and manageable strain. According to Gaillard et al. (2023), inmates and prisoners are vulnerable. Such vulnerability is rooted in a gamut of reasons such as overcrowded facilities and even limited resources from the government. In a setting where autonomy was rationed, the act of engineering a few minutes of better breathing or a slightly less painful posture was not trivial. It repaired frayed self-efficacy. Even more, when shared, it repaired social fabric: the one who temporarily benefited often yielded the spot to another, translating a personal ease into communal exchange. In this way, makeshift comforts became social goods that could be traded, taught, and adapted recipes for small reliefs that turned survival knowledge into a form of mutual stewardship. This is supported by Alvarez and Dundao (2024) as they pointed out that inmates socialize well as they had shown good relationship among themselves despite occasional conflict.

The moral texture of these improvisations is striking. Participants recounted sharing scarce items or positions even when doing so eroded their own comfort. This was not a performance of martyrdom; it was a practical ethic grounded in the awareness that collective stability depends on each person's modest ease. If one individual monopolizes airflow or fixates on a narrow advantage, the social temperature rises; small advantages then become sites of resentment, and minor frictions expand into conflict. By contrast, when people circulated micro-advantages such as a cloth, a spot, a minute's turn, the group retained a sense of fairness that kept anger from pooling in predictable corners. Relief, then, was not merely about temperature or odor; it was about the distribution of temperature and odor, the fair sequencing of minor comforts in a place where larger comforts did not exist. Participants' descriptions also reveal that makeshift comforts served as temporal markers, dividing the day into intervals punctuated by brief reprieves.

4.1.3 Small Joys and Spatial Limits.

This explores the delicate interplay between the human need for relief and the unyielding constraints of a dense, noisy, thermally stressful space. Participants repeatedly described joy as modest by intention and calibrated by necessity. In rooms where proximity was a constant and privacy scarce, exuberance could feel dangerous; even a benign burst of laughter or a sudden movement risked provoking irritation, stepping on someone's rest, or triggering a cascade of small resentments. The participants therefore developed a shared etiquette for joy.

(That is why, sir, if I just keep myself entertained and continue with what I am doing, I still see it as a blessing. God is also watching over me, sir. When I look at myself now and at the help I have received, I can say that I have already changed. What I used to do before is no longer the same now. At this point, sir, I am already older and have gone through many experiences in life, that is why I am really trying to live properly now.) (Participant 3)

(We also feel embarrassed because we have fellow inmates who do not receive anything at all—no one visits them and no one brings them support. That is why we are still thankful that we have visitors and that we are able to share with others despite my situation,

sir. My wife brings food during Saturdays and Sundays, and my children also bring some, so that the food they bring can last from Sunday until Friday.) (Participant 5)

(We became happy everytime there was somebody who visited us. So happy... Especially if my son visited me, I felt joy in my heart. (Participant 10)

Small joys often followed or nestled within routine tasks. After cleaning a corner or arranging a sleeping area, a simple acknowledgment of "that feels better" could brighten the hour and spread a momentary calm. Completing a microtask offered a sense of efficacy that was otherwise hard to achieve in a heavily regulated environment. For some, the thrill was in timing and catching the slight improvement in airflow when the door opened or sensing the shift from late-night heat to pre-dawn coolness and sharing that discovery with another. This wasn't joy as celebration; it was joy as recognition: recognition of a body's changing comfort, of a space's subtle kindness, of the capacity to notice something good without disturbing someone else's tenuous balance. This is supported by Saguran et al. (2023) as they stated that the PDLs actually go through several challenges such as loss of autonomy, limited mobility and ofcourse restricted access to a myriad of opportunities. Through this study, it was found out that the inmates were treated well by the custodial officers however issues sprung from poor facilities such as ventilation, toilet and detention centers. They cannot even do exercise given the very limited space available. There were also no programs that promote emotional and mental health as well as no dedicated area for any religious activity.

Antojado (2025) revealed how overcrowded dormitories, suffocating heat and lingering body odors combined to redefine their spatial, temporal and psychological realities. Small joys also shaped temporal experience. Days were no longer undifferentiated blocks of hardship but punctuated by moments capable of resetting mood, restoring patience, and reminding people of their capacity to relate. Even when joys were brief, they functioned as markers that divided time into more manageable segments: before the chat and after the chat, before the cooler air and after it, before the wipe-down and after it.

4.2 Regulating the Inner Self

This theme points out the affective burden that the inmates feel as brought about by constant heat, overcrowding and even uncertainties. In effect, this compels them to manage their inner states so that living is possible and conflict is avoided. Most of them, the extreme demand to contain their feelings like anger, fear and restlessness punctuated as the prime task to survive in this dire situation. Beyond momentary irritation, the accumulated weight of rumination, boredom and intrusive worries propel them to feel even more challenged. On this note, one's skills in regulating his inner self served as a protective strategy and a moral commitment. They have learned to notice rising emotions, soften them through self-talk, prayer, breath, or quiet withdrawal, and act in ways that kept the peace for themselves and those around them. The participants face relentless pressure of crowding, heat, noise, and limited resources, but they have learned to embrace these hard realities in their daily toil through practical acceptance, repetitive routines, and small but meaningful actions.

4.2.1 Self-Regulation in Overcrowded Conditions

This describes how participants actively worked to contain and modulate emotional surges in an environment that routinely provoked irritation, fear, and anger. Rather than reacting immediately to discomfort, noise, crowding, or interpersonal tension, individuals learned to pause and internally negotiate their responses.

(In my mind, I really need to be psychologically present, psychologically present. I should be attentive to my actions because there are so many people, with all kinds of different attitudes. I must be careful with my behaviors) (Participant 6)

(Of course, I got no choice. It is hot here. I must control myself or else I will die here in prison. It is very important to be patient here. If you get angry a lot, you cannot go out. Guards will punish you. I do what I need to do to control my motions.) (Participant 8)

(Always stay silent if there is chaos. The room is so hot especially during summer. But i need to be calm amidst the hot weather. Thats how i control myself.) (Participant 9)

(Well, we are all bad guys here. But being bad does not mean we are incapable of change. Patience is the key in here.) (Participant 11)

Shchaslyvyi et al. (2024) demphasize that effective stress management involves refocusing and re-educating one's response to environmental triggers. Their research suggests that by shifting attention away from immediate stressors, individuals can prevent the physiological escalation of anger, much like the participants who utilized counting or controlled breathing to maintain stability. This restraint was expressed through deliberate silence, controlled breathing, brief withdrawal from heated situations, or quiet cognitive reframing. Participants emphasized that these practices were essential for maintaining personal stability, as unregulated

emotional expression could quickly escalate into conflict or disciplinary consequences. Participants' accounts reveal that inner restraint developed gradually, often through repeated exposure to emotionally charged situations. This need for heightened self-awareness in high-density environments is supported by Legodi and Dube (2023), who observe that in overcrowded or confined settings, the environmental pressure necessitates a high degree of self-regulation to avoid interpersonal "bottlenecks" that lead to aggression. Participants' accounts reveal that this restraint developed gradually; over time, they learned to recognize early physical signs of escalation like tightness in the body and intervene before these feelings translated into action. Early in confinement, many struggled with impulsive reactions, particularly when sleep deprivation, heat, or perceived disrespect intensified emotional vulnerability. Over time, however, participants learned to recognize the early signs of emotional escalation such as tightness in the body, racing thoughts, or rising anger and to intervene before these feelings translated into action. Techniques such as prayer, counting silently, focusing attention elsewhere, or reminding oneself of long-term goals became internal safeguards against immediate reaction. By mastering their emotional responses, PDLs maintained a sense of control over themselves even when control over their environment was limited. In this way, inner restraint functioned as a core emotional skill that stabilized daily interactions and contributed to collective calm.

4.2.2 Prevention and Law Deterrence.

This highlights how emotional control became closely tied to rule-conscious behavior and future-oriented thinking. Participants consistently described regulating their actions not only to maintain inner calm but also to prevent situations that could jeopardize their legal standing or lengthen confinement.

(You will really remember, sir, that you should never return to wrongdoing once God gives you another chance and grants you freedom so you can return to your family. You should no longer commit offenses against the government or sins against other people because you will only end up back in prison, where all the suffering exists. It becomes even harder when you no longer have your live-in partner or your children with you because they are very far away, and when your faith in God becomes weak. Your problems will only return again. But if God grants us freedom, that is why I always say this to people: you should avoid getting involved in troubles that will send you to prison because life inside is very difficult based on what I experienced.) (Participant 5)

(That's why I really became afraid of the law. One mistake and you end up just like me.) (Participant 12)

(Because of my situation, I dont have anymore plans to commit another violation. Its so hard in here.) (Participant 13)

Vaughan et al. (2024), argued that self-regulation is a cornerstone of "desistance," the process by which individuals abstain from crime. He stated that when individuals develop the agency to manage their impulses, they are better equipped to navigate environments that would otherwise trigger criminal behavior, effectively linking present self-control to the preservation of future liberty. Emotional restraint was therefore inseparable from prevention, as individuals recognized that even minor altercations could carry serious consequences in a highly surveilled environment. In addition, Malvaso et al. (2021) found that individuals with higher self-regulatory capacities are more likely to respond effectively to the "deterrence" aspect of the law. Their study suggests that self-regulation acts as a mediator; it allows individuals to pause and calculate the long-term costs of their actions such as the risk of losing family connections or facing additional sanctions against the short-term release of an emotional outburst.

4.3 Physical Strain of Overcrowding

This emergent theme reflects the significant embodied burden that heat, stagnant air, noise, crowding, and constant proximity placed on participants such as pressures that repeatedly broke into the body as breathlessness, skin irritation, headaches, cough, and aching fatigue. For many, the sheer physiological cost of enduring the environment especially during congested nights and sweltering afternoons proved to be exhausting. Beyond the headline stressors, compounding factors such as foul odors, interrupted sleep, and the inability to stretch or change posture intensified discomfort and vulnerability, particularly for individuals with limited physical resilience or a history of respiratory issues. In this context, being "inside" was not only a spatial condition but a bodily experience like a daily negotiation with heat, air, and closeness that demanded constant adaptation.

The participants' accounts illustrate how the aspiration to remain well clashed with environmental realities. Some initially managed to cope by moving toward doorways, taking repeated quick-baths, or sharing scarce airflow, only to find these tactics insufficient as density increased or power failed. Others described a cycle in which lost sleep and labored breathing left them depleted during the day, which then made emotional regulation and conflict avoidance more difficult at night wherein a feedback loop in which the body's strain threatened social stability.

4.3.1 Breath in a Burning Room. Participants described days and nights in which the environment felt like a low, steady fever. Heat soaked the concrete and crowded rooms, making breath feel heavy and movements onerous. People spoke of damp skin, dizziness, and waves of fatigue that rose as the air thickened.

(The overcrowding is really the hardest part because it is extremely cramped inside. We are already lying down on the floor, and even though we have several ceiling fans, the heat still does not reach everyone because of how crowded it is. There are so many of us around 91 people in total. With 91 inmates in one cell, it is already unbearably crowded. Some of us have to sleep on the floor. We even feel relieved whenever someone gets released because it slightly reduces the congestion, although at the same time another person usually comes in, and we start feeling distressed again because the overcrowding returns.) (Participant 1)

(We are like toasted chickens here. Only one small fan is not enough. It was so hot. I could barely move, eat, sleep. It is so sad here. (Participant 5)

(I experienced cough, colds, and flu, and those were very common inside. I think it was because of the extreme heat, which affected our respiratory system and made it difficult for us to breathe.) (Participant 9)

This result concurred with Aon et al. (2025) whereby they pointed out that overcrowding in jails resulted to negative health outcomes whereby diseases proliferated at an unprecedented rate. Even small tasks like standing in line, shifting a mat, helping someone to a cooler spot could tip the body into overexertion. To cope, participants developed a repertoire of micro-reliefs: washing repeatedly despite limited water, pressing wet cloths to the face or neck, and rotating nearer to the only available currents. These were not cures but temporary reprieves, ways to carve a few respirable minutes from an atmosphere that regularly pressed in on the chest. Joseph et al. (2021) pointed out that one of the dire effects of jail overcrowding is unhygienic environments as well as susceptibility to extreme conditions such as extreme heat and lack of fresh air. Relief, when found, was sometimes shared in turns an ethic of circulating airflow that transformed a pocket of cooler air into a communal good.

4.3.2 Sleep Lost to Noise and Nearness

Nighttime did not reliably bring rest. Instead, participants described fractured sleep as short, fragile intervals broken by voices, sudden movements, the heat of nearby bodies, or the startle of unexpected events. Sleep was further undermined by the necessity of crowded positioning: lying hip-to-hip or shoulder-to-shoulder, with little room to turn without disturbing someone else.

(It is so hard to sleep at night. We do shifting due to very limited space.) (Participant 4)

(At night, you can hardly sleep. Then in the morning, when you wake up, you already have a headache because of lack of sleep. Because of the overcrowding, our bodies are always pressed against each other and covered in sweat, which causes skin irritations and rashes to appear. That is why we often rush to the nurse for treatment. Those are the effects of living inside. Food was not really the problem because meals were regularly provided. Our main problem was sleeping because the place was extremely crowded. The effect of that is when one person gets a fever, it quickly spreads to others. If someone has a cough, it also spreads immediately. In one cell, diseases easily infect everyone because there is nowhere else to go and all of us are sleeping side by side.) (Participant 7)

(My arthritis was due to the lack of sleep. I am already old. I sleep only two hours during night time.) (Participant 11)

Tussey et al. (2024) posited that on their study 76% among women inmates lack sleep. In effect, they checked the different PTSD symptoms are closely linked to insomnia and poor sleep quality. In addition, they also noted that excessive noise, poor bedding and mental health are the most pressing factors for such. This forced stillness meant that ordinary shifts of posture became negotiated acts; each adjustment risked waking another person and, in turn, invited conflicts that participants worked hard to avoid. In connection, Sheppard and Hogan (2022) highlighted that insomnia is prevalent in prison. The circumstances have generated several risk factors that cause them to go through an inadequate level of sleep. Mornings began with heavier limbs, foggier attention, and a lower threshold for irritation; afternoons were marked by mental blanks and mood swings; evenings demanded the same fight for air and space with even less energy to conduct it. Participants micro-practices did not guarantee sleep, but they protected the possibility of it, and with that possibility came a measure of patience that made the next day bearable. In participants' words, the body needed rest to keep emotions within bounds; without rest, everything else became harder. Wallace et al. (2021) note that when institutional health protections are limited, incarcerated individuals often compensate through peer monitoring, sharing remedies, encouraging hydration, and modifying behavior to reduce risk. Sleeping or sitting in fixed, tight postures created stiffness, numbness, cramps, and pressure marks, outcomes consistent with recent findings that prolonged immobility in confined settings contribute to musculoskeletal pain and sensory disruption (Becker et al., 2021).

In the Philippines, corruption within the broader governance system contributes to weak implementation of decongestion policies. Infrastructure projects is often influence with clientelism (Cueno & Sabijon, 2025). Even though programs exist to reduce overcrowding such as early release mechanisms, plea bargaining, and good conduct allowances, poor implementation, lack of accountability, and misallocation of resources reduce their effectiveness. Funds intended for jail expansion, rehabilitation, and

infrastructure improvements may also be lost or misused, preventing the construction of additional facilities that could ease overcrowding.

4.4 Coping Strategies

Participants frequently narrated a turning point in which hardship became a mirror, reflecting back patterns they wished to change and values they wished to reclaim. They resorted to various coping styles in order to counteract the drawbacks and ill consequences of prison overcrowding. Participants fostered sacred routines and leaned on spirituality amidst hardships.

4.4.1 Fostering Sacred Routines

Amid environmental turbulence, participants crafted sacred routines predictable slots of prayer, reading, quiet reflection, or simple service that steadied attention and layered meaning onto the day.

(In prison, sir, religious groups are very active, and we are really able to listen to them. They inspire and encourage our minds, which is why we become happy whenever religious people come to visit. They bring us joy while we are inside because they help us reflect and repent for the wrong things we did outside, especially the times when we failed to help or care for other people.) (Participant 8)

(I used to have bad thoughts, but after listening to religious talks, I learned to trust God. Now I'm happy and don't feel lonely. I rely on God for strength and protection.) (Participant 12)

(That's it, and it's really very difficult, maybe sir, for me personally. I have faith in God. I trust all my life to him, that is how I cope. Also, if you don't have a family left outside, you can handle it right away. But if you have a family here, and you've left someone outside, it's not that easy, sir, you can't just manage it immediately.) (Participant 14)

Siregar (2025) articulated that aside from moral awakening, religious transformation also took a toll among prisoners. Specifically, they develop a ritualized repentance and spiritual community formation. Meanwhile, it was gleaned that incarceration is not at all punishment but rather an opportunity to commune with the transcendence. Sacred routines also generated social coherence. When practiced communally such as gathering for a study, sharing a verse, offering a short encouragement, they fostered belonging and gentled the unit's tone. Research on spiritual coping emphasizes precisely this cumulative function: even transient experiences of reassurance can buffer despair by restoring hope and emotional equilibrium during recurring episodes of stress (O'Connor et al., 2020). These descriptions echo findings that spirituality functions as an internal regulator, supporting emotional control during peak vulnerability (Clear & Sumter, 2021). In this way, grace became functional, not only existential, it had behavioral fingerprints that showed up in how people treated themselves and others under pressure. On the other hand, contemporary studies similarly show that the anticipation of family reunification encourages restraint and future oriented decision making, even in environments marked by frustration and deprivation (Arditti & Johnson, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The participants' experiences revealed that life inside prison is not shaped by isolated struggles, but by a cascading chain of pressures rooted in structural deprivation. Overcrowding, extreme heat, stagnant air, noise, and constant surveillance formed the foundational conditions from which other challenges emerged. What appeared on the surface as interpersonal conflict, emotional volatility, or physical fatigue was deeply grounded in these environmental constraints. Thus, the carceral setting itself functioned as the central force that generated the physical, psychological, and social difficulties participants faced on a daily basis. As this structural pressure persisted, participants were compelled to reorganize their everyday lives in order to remain functional. The need to simply endure each day reshaped priorities toward immediate survival like maintaining bodily stability, conserving energy, and preventing conflict. The burden of survival extended beyond the physical body and into emotional and mental life. Participants described the ongoing effort required to contain frustration, anxiety, and intrusive thoughts, recognizing that emotional loss of control carried serious consequences. As a result, many learned to deliberately regulate their responses, withdraw from provocation, and discipline their thoughts and actions. This self-regulation was not merely about obedience, but about prevention such as avoiding harm, preserving safety, and protecting the possibility of a future beyond confinement. Emotional restraint thus became a form of self-governance shaped directly by environmental pressure. Overall, the participants' narratives reflect not only struggle, but adaptive resilience. Their experiences reveal confinement as a setting that simultaneously constrains and teaches where bodily endurance, emotional discipline, moral insight, and future-oriented behavior are continuously rehearsed under pressure. While deprivation and loss remain central realities, participants demonstrated acceptance, maturity, and growth in navigating them. Their lived experiences underscore that survival inside confinement is not merely about enduring restriction, but about actively reshaping oneself within it, an ongoing pursuit of stability, meaning, and dignity amid profound constraint.

5. Study Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, participants were confined to a single correctional facility, the Negros Oriental Detention and Rehabilitation Center (NODRC). As such, the findings may not be generalizable to other detention facilities with different conditions, management practices, or inmate populations. Second, the study relied on self-reported data obtained through interviews. These accounts may be influenced by personal biases, memory limitations, or the respondents' willingness to disclose information, which may affect the accuracy of the data. Finally, constraints related to time and participant availability may limit the depth and breadth of data collection. These factors may restrict the comprehensiveness of the findings, although efforts are made to ensure credibility and richness of the data through appropriate qualitative methods.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6988-2820>

References

- [1] Alvarez, J. M. L., & Dundao, N. (2024). Life in Prison: Expectation, Adaptation, Socialization, and Power play among Prisoners. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(2).
- [2] Antojado, D. (2025). Embodied overcrowding and sensory tensions: A carceral autoethnography of Philippine jails. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 83, 100773.
- [3] Aon, M., Oberconz, S., & Brasholt, M. (2025). The association between health and prison overcrowding: A scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 25, Article 2218. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-23340-9>.
- [4] Aquino, M. F., Benedicto, N. E., Figuracion, K. D., Viernes, P. B. & Villarama, J. A. (2025). How Family and Self-View Affect Unvisited Persons Deprived of Liberty. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(7), 286-296. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2025.054>.
- [5] Baffour, F. D., Francis, A. P., Chong, M. D., & Harris, N. (2024). Prison overcrowding and harsh conditions: health and human rights concerns to persons in custody, staff, and the community. *Criminal justice and behavior*, 51(3), 375-400.
- [6] Baggio, S., Peigné, N., Heller, P., Gétaz, L., Liebrez, M., & Wolff, H. (2020). Do overcrowding and turnover cause violence in prison? *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, January 2020.
- [7] Baldonado, N. (2022). Physical activity participation of persons deprived of liberty in Santiago city district jail, Philippines.
- [8] Becker, S., Warmington, S. A., & Cheung, S. S. (2021). Physiological and perceptual strain associated with restricted movement and prolonged immobility. *European Journal of Applied Physiology*, 121(7), 1841–1852.
- [9] Cayabyab, M.J. (2018). 55 detainees have died in overcrowded MPD jails since July 2016. *Phil Star Global*. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2018/06/28/1828475/55-detainees-have-died-overcrowded-mpd-jails-july-2016>.
- [10] Clear, T. R., & Sumter, M. T. (2021). Prison, religion, and meaning making: The role of spirituality in coping with confinement. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 60(3), 453–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12709>.
- [11] Cliquennois, G., & Birch, P. (2020). Prison overcrowding: Examining the problem through the prism of the European Court of Human Rights. In *Prisons and Community Corrections* (pp. 43-56).
- [12] Collins, S. & Thompson, S. (2012). What are we feeding our inmates? *Journal of Correctional Health Care*. 2012 18: 210 originally DOI: 10.1177/1078345812444875.
- [13] Commission on Human Rights. (2023, December 6). CHR supports Senate Bill No. 2031 to improve jail and prison monitoring <https://chr.gov.ph/chr-supports-senate-bill-no-2031-to-improve-jail-and-prison-monitoring/>.
- [14] Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- [15] Cueno, B. & Sabijon, D. (2025). Bridging theory and practice: Delving into the lived realities of local chief executives on Peace and Order Program implementation. *International Journal of Law and Politics Studies*. 7. 01-18. 10.32996/ijlps.2025.7.5.1.
- [16] Department of the Interior and Local Government. (2023). BuCor reports 377% congestion rate in New Bilibid Prison <https://www.dilg.gov.ph/news/BuCor-reports-377-congestion-rate-in-New-Bilibid-Prison/NR-2023-1034>.
- [17] Desai, D., & Yadav, K. V. (2022). Psychological well-being, resilience and guilt among prisoners and non-prisoners: A comparative study. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 13(4), 401-405.
- [18] De Guzman, A. B., Ibarrola, G. M. V., Idolog, C. L. J. I., & Ignacio, A. J. C. (2020). You can run but you can't hide: a grounded theory analysis of suppression among older prisoners in the Philippines. *Educational Gerontology*, 46(5), 303-313.
- [19] De Guzman, A. B., Garcia, A. C. R., Garcia, M. D., & Garcia, R. J. B. (2021). Older Filipino prisoners' fear of other inmates: A grounded theory analysis. *Ageing international*, 46(4), 422-436.
- [20] Dhillon, N. (2023). *Prison overcrowding and violent outcomes* (Master's thesis, California State University, Sacramento).
- [21] Dumaguete.com (n.d.). Dumaguete – the city of gentle people. Retrieved from <https://dumaguete.com/> on November 26, 2018.
- [22] Eager, P.W.(2008). *From freedom fighters to terrorists: Women and political violence*. England. Ashgate Publishing Unlimited.
- [23] Fair, H., & Walmsley, R. (2024). *World prison population list*. ICPR.

- [24] Forero Cuéllar, A. (2023). Prison overcrowding and ill-treatment: sentence reduction as a reparation measure. A view from Latin America and Europe. *Torture Journal: Journal on Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and Prevention of Torture*, 2023, vol. 33, num. 3, p. 18-38.
- [25] Gaillard, J. C., Casing-Baring, E. M., Sacayan, D., Balay-as, M., & Santos, M. (2023). Reducing and managing the risk of disaster in Philippine jails and prisons. *Emerald Open Research*, 1(13).
- [26] Geegbe, D. W., Mbabazize, M., Katuramu, A. O., Barigayomwe, R., & Alloysius, T. (2022). Effects of Prison Overcrowding on the Rehabilitation of Inmates in Liberia: A Study of Monrovia Central Prison. *British Journal of Psychology Research*, 10(1), 1-17.
- [27] Glazener, E., & Nakamura, K. (2020). Examining the link between prison crowding and inmate misconduct: Evidence from prison-level panel data. *Justice Quarterly*, 37(1), 109-131.
- [28] Goodman, H., Papastavrou Brooks, C., Price, O., & Barley, E. A. (2020). Barriers and facilitators to the effective de escalation of conflict behaviours in forensic high secure settings: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 14, Article 59. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-020-00392-5>.
- [29] Grace, A. R. (2014). An assessment of prison overcrowding in Nigeria: Implications for rehabilitation, reformation and reintegration of inmates. *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 19, Issue 3, Ver. VI (Mar. 2014), PP 21-26. e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.*
- [30] Grady, M. (1998). *Qualitative and action research: A practitioner handbook*. United States of America. Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- [31] Haney, C. (2006). The wages of prison overcrowding: Harmful psychological consequences and dysfunctional correctional reactions. *22 Wash. U. J. L. & Pol'y* 265(2006) http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol22/iss1/22.
- [32] Heaslip, V., Dugdale, C., Parker, J., Johnsen, B., & Hean, S. (2023). Experiences of vulnerability in adult male prisoners: an integrative review. *The Prison Journal*, 103(1), 122-153.
- [33] Houghton, D. M. (2024). *Exploring End Users' Comfort and Effectiveness in Prison Architecture: A Qualitative Descriptive Study (Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University)*.
- [34] Huang, Y., Wu, R., Wu, J., Yang, Q., Zheng, S., & Wu, K. (2020). Psychological resilience, self-acceptance, perceived social support and their associations with mental health of incarcerated offenders in China. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52, 102166.
- [35] Huey, M. (2008). *Deprivation, importation, and prison suicide: The combined effects of institutional conditions and inmate composition. A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia.*
- [36] Levins, A. (2023). *The Stains of Imprisonment. The Stains of Imprisonment. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966)*
- [37] Jefferson, A. M., Yin, N. H., Yar, L. T., Gi, N. T., Boilu, B., & Tayza, S. (2025). *The Emotivity of Prison Experience. In Everyday Prison Governance in Myanmar: Understanding Imprisonment Beyond the West (pp. 91-105). Emerald Publishing Limited.*
- [38] Jewkes, Y. & Bennett, J. (2008). *Dictionary of prisons and punishment (Edits). Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group.*
- [39] Joseph, O. E., Femi, A. F., Ogadimma, A., Bamidele, R., Oluwakemisola, O., Akintoyese, O. I., & Jide Joseph, O. (2021). Prison overcrowding trend in Nigeria and policy implications on health. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1), 1956035.
- [40] Kamber, K. (2022). *Prison overcrowding and the developing case-law of the European court of human rights. In Human rights behind bars: Tracing vulnerability in prison populations across continents from a multidisciplinary perspective (pp. 59-80). Cham: Springer International Publishing.*
- [41] Killias, M., & Villetaz, P. (2008). The effects of custodial vs non-custodial sanctions on reoffending: Lessons from a systematic review. *Psicothema*, 20(1), 29–34. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-01077-005>.
- [42] Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilbert, D. T. (2021). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind revisited. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(15), e2102247118.
- [43] Khalalia, N., & Faishol, L. (2025). Self-Acceptance in Female Correctional Inmates in Class II B Kebumen State Prison. *Istisarah: Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Islam*, 1(1), 1-10.
- [44] Landagan, M. D., & Sunga-Vargas, M. A. (2020). Psychological well-being and coping strategies of selected women deprived of liberty: A basis for mindfulness empowerment program. *Journal of Social Health*, 3(2), 1-7.
- [45] Legodi, R., & Dube, M. (2023). Community reintegration of offenders at an overcrowded rural correctional facility: Work experiences of correctional officials. *Social Sciences*, 12(9), 489. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090489>
- [46] Maborang, S. V. (2025). Locked In: A Descriptive Analysis of Social Adversity and Psychological Well-Being Among Persons Deprived of Liberty. *AIDE Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 12, 296-307.
- [47] Macabago, A., Rajan, J., Breboneria, B. J. L., Alsharyah, H. M., Mejia, P. C. G., Belal, S., ... & Feliciano, E. E. (2020). The socio-demographic profile and coping mechanisms of inmates in Lanao del Sur province, Philippines. *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*, 7(3), 17-23.
- [48] Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P. H., & Day, A. (2021). The role of self-regulation in the relationship between childhood trauma and criminal recidivism. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(17-18), 8124-8147.
- [49] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1956). What is phenomenology? *Cross Currents*, 6, 59-70.
- [50] Meyer, J., McDowell, C., Lansing, J., Brower, C., Smith, L., & Tully, M. (2020). Changes in physical activity and sedentary behavior in response to COVID 19 confinement. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 43(4), 541–551.

- [51] Millana, L., Fernández Rodríguez, J. C., & Miralles Muñoz, F. (2020). Conflict resolution in prisons: Education, restorative justice, and prisoner facilitated mediation. In *A Shift in the Security Paradigm* (pp. 235–249). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/9783030432539_14
- [52] Ministry of Justice. (2025, June 19). The impact of overcrowding on assaults in closed adult public prisons <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-overcrowding-on-assaults-in-adult-public-prisons/the-impact-of-overcrowding-on-assaults-in-closed-adult-public-prisons>.
- [53] Morawska, L., Tang, J. W., Bahnfleth, W., Bluysen, P. M., Boerstra, A., Buonanno, G., ... Yao, M. (2020). How can airborne transmission of COVID 19 indoors be minimised? *Environment International*, 142, 105832. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2020.105832>.
- [54] Narag, R. (2018). A humanitarian crisis, a monster in our midst, state of the PH in 2018: Our jails are now world's most congested. Retrieved from <http://pcij.org/stories/ph-jails-detention-centers-now-worlds-most-congested>.
- [55] Narag, R. E., & Jones, C. R. (2017). Understanding Prison Management in the Philippines: A Case for Shared Governance. *The Prison Journal*, 97(1), 3–26 <https://doi.org/10.1177/003288551667936>
- [56] Narag, R. E., & Jones, C. (2020). The Kubol effect: Shared governance and cell dynamics in an overcrowded prison system in the Philippines. *The prison cell: Embodied and everyday spaces of incarceration*, 71-94.
- [57] Nudd, E., Aon, M., Kambanella, K., & Brasholt, M. (2024). Overcrowding in prisons:
- [58] Health and legal implications. *Torture*, 34(3), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v34i3.147571>.
- [59] O'Connor, L. E., Berry, J. W., Weiss, J., & Gilbert, P. (2020). Guilt, shame, and spirituality in psychological adjustment and moral repair. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 76(6), 1156–1172. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22>.
- [60] Paclauna, J. (2024). Desperate Journey: Experiences of Persons Deprived of Liberty in Carcar City Jail. *International Journal of Law and Politics Studies*, 6(4), 57-74.
- [61] Pászti, P. G. (2020). Measuring resilience in prisoners. *Belügyi Szemle*, 68(2. ksz.), 73-86.
- [62] Penal Reform International & Thailand Institute of Justice. (2024). Global prison trends 2024. Penal Reform International. <https://www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2024>.
- [63] Polifroni, C., & Welch, M. (1999). Perspectives on philosophy of science in nursing: An historical and contemporary anthology. Philadelphia. New York. Baltimore. Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins.
- [64] Polit, D. F., and Beck, C. T. (2008). *Nursing research: Generating and assessing evidence for nursing practice*. Philadelphia: Wolters Kluwer. Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins.
- [65] Republic Act 10575. The Bureau of Corrections Act of 2013.
- [66] Rocheleau, A.M. (2013) An empirical exploration of the "pains of imprisonment" and the level of prison misconduct and violence. *Criminal Justice Review*. DOI: 10.1177/0734016813494764.
- [67] Rosario, B. (2017). PH jails overcrowded five times over – COA. *Manila Bulletin*. Retrieved from <https://news.mb.com.ph/2017/06/16/ph-jails-overcrowded-five-times-over-coa>.
- [68] Rosario, B. (2018). COA audit shows huge congestion in jails. In *Manila Bulletin*. Retrieved from <https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/07/03/coa-audit-shows-huge-congestion-in-jails/> on November 13, 2018
- [69] Saleh, A. (2013). Relative deprivation theory, nationalism, ethnicity and identity conflicts. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, Volume: 8, No 4, Winter 2013 PP 156-174.
- [70] Saloner, B., Parish, K., Ward, J. A., DiLaura, G., & Dolovich, S. (2020). COVID 19 cases and deaths in federal and state prisons. *JAMA*, 324(6), 602–603. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.12528>.
- [71] Sari, G. D. P. A., Kurniadi, P., Muslimah, S., Kaloeti, D. V. S., & Sakti, H. (2022, October). The role of social support and resilience in prison inmates: Literature study. In *Proceedings of International Conference on Psychological Studies (ICPSYCHE)* (Vol. 3, pp. 387-395).
- [72] Saguran, J. B., Cano, J. C., Llantos, E. P., Esnardo, J. E., Banac, A. C., Gabon, M. G., & Tagle, A. A. (2023). Behind Locked Doors: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Persons Deprived of Liberty in Detention and Correctional Facilities. *International Journal of Science and Management Studies*, 6(3), 184-199.
- [73] Shamas, V. (2017). Pains of Imprisonment. *The Encyclopedia of Corrections*. Edited by Kent R. Kerley. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. DOI: 10.1002/9781118845387.wbeoc020.
- [74] Sharma, A. (2022). The Critical Case of Prison Overcrowding in India: Causes and Effects. *Issue 6 Indian JL & Legal Rsch.*, 4, 1.
- [75] Sharma, D., Gupta, S., & Nagpal, K. (2022). The Need for Prison Reform throughout the World. *Jus Corpus LJ*, 3, 186.
- [76] Shchaslyvyi, A. Y., Antonenko, S. V., & Telegeev, G. D. (2024). Comprehensive review of chronic stress pathways and the efficacy of behavioral stress reduction programs (BSRPs) in managing diseases. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 21(8), 1077. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21081077>.
- [77] Sheppard, N., & Hogan, L. (2022). Prevalence of insomnia and poor sleep quality in the prison population: A systematic review. *Journal of Sleep Research*, 31(6), e13677.
- [78] Shosha, G. A. (2012). Employment of Colaizzi's strategy in descriptive phenomenology: A reflection of a researcher. *European Scientific Journal*, 8(27), 31-43.

- [79] Siregar, A. B. (2025). Exploring Spiritual Transformation and Moral Awakening in Formerly Incarcerated Individuals: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study.
- [80] Smallwood, J., & Schooler, J. W. (2021). The science of mind wandering: Empirically navigating the stream of consciousness. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72, 487–516.
- [81] Stein, G. (2018). Philippine prisons overflowing with hungry inmates as Duterte's drug war intensifies. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-20/philippine-prisons-overflowing-as-war-on-drugs-intensifies/8959448>.
- [82] Stickney, J., & Budd, C. (2023). "180 prisoners and the noise... it hits you, BANG!": Sensory systems, incarceration and resettlement. In *The Journey from Prison to Community* (pp. 85-102). Routledge.
- [83] Strange, C. C., Cochran, J. C., Wooldredge, J., & Long, J. S. (2024). Jail Utilization and Court Sentencing: Does Jail Overcrowding Influence State Court Sentencing Decisions? *Justice Quarterly*, 41(5), 672–698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2023.2290006>.
- [84] Sudaryono, L. L. (2020). Drivers of prison overcrowding in Indonesia. In *Crime and punishment in Indonesia* (pp. 179-206). Routledge.
- [85] Syafiq, M., & Lukman, Z. M. (2025). Overcrowding in Malaysian Prisons: Are Private Prisons the Answer?. *International Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities (IJRSS)* ISSN: 2582-6220, DOI: 10.47505/IJRSS, 6(2), 43-49.
- [86] Sykes, G. (1958). *The society of captives*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- [87] Trinidad, J. E. (2020). Religion and the creation of normal appearance: Findings from a Philippine prison. *Social Sciences and Missions*, 33(1-2), 105-127.
- [88] Tuholske, C., Lynch, V. D., Spriggs, R., Ahn, Y., Raymond, C., Nigra, A. E., & Parks, R. M. (2024). Hazardous heat exposure among incarcerated people in the United States. *Nature Sustainability*, 7, 394–398.
- [89] Tussey, E. J., Perez, G. R., & Lynch, S. M. (2024). Sleepless behind bars: the connection between mental health, environment, and sleep among women in jail. *Sleep Advances*, 5(1), zpae012.
- [90] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2013). *Vienna handbook on strategies to reduce overcrowding in prisons*. Criminal Justice Handbook Series. United Nations Office at Vienna. New York English Publishing and Library Section.
- [91] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). *Handbook on strategies to reduce overcrowding in prisons*. United Nations.
- [92] Vaughan, B., Devitt, C., & Ring, J. (2024). Agency, self-regulation, and desistance from crime: A longitudinal study of the transition to adulthood. *European Journal of Criminology*, 21(1), 45-63.
- [93] Villafuerte, S. L., Bea, C. M., Florin, M. I., Gadil, J. M., & Lana, M. C. F. (2023). Phenomenology of prison crowding among Filipino young adult detainees <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.23612214.v1>.
- [94] Weinrath, M., Tess, C., & Willows, E. (2021). Prison misconduct and the use of alternative resolutions by correctional officers in therapeutic communities and other custody units. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 68(1), 40–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X211049196>.
- [95] World Prison Brief, Institute for Criminal Policy Research (2018). Highest to lowest – occupancy level (based on Official Capacity). Retrieved from <http://www.prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/occupancylevel>.