

# **Influence of Perceived Information Needs on the Social Psychological wellbeing of Prison Inmates in South West Nigeria**

By

Alarape A.A, PhD, Opeke R.O, PhD & Opele J.K

## **Abstract**

*This study assessed the influence of perceived information need on the socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates in Southwest Nigeria. This study was a survey involving the design and administration of questionnaires to 720 prison inmates in Southwest Nigeria. Data analysis was done by means of both descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings from the study revealed that prison inmates in the zone appeared to have a clear understanding of their information needs but this could not translate into an improved socio-psychological wellbeing. The study concluded that government need to reduce pre-trial detention and prison overcrowding by minimising pre-trial waits, and setting a maximum allowable wait time, implement a population capacity for all prisons based on design capacity; upgrade prison infrastructure, rehabilitate and build facilities to improve the socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates.*

## **Introduction**

Prison sentences have long passed from traditional custodial prison model to modern reformative prison model with great efforts being expended to eliminate the brutality and dehumanization of the traditional custodial prisons Worldwide. The only difference between free citizen and prison inmate under the new dispensation is the freedom of movement the former enjoyed. A prison is supposed to be a place for reformation in behaviour of an individual whose life pattern is not in tandem with accepted norms, values or behaviours in the

society or persons who by omission and commission have violated the criminal laws of the land which attract prison terms. The essence of such punishment is for reformation or correction in behavior of such offender and to also serve as a deterrent to would be offenders of such laws. Prisoners in Nigeria are systematically denied a range of human rights. Stakeholders throughout the Nigerian criminal justice system are culpable for maintaining this situation.

The Nigerian Prison system is said to run contrary to several benchmarks set within the United Nation Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Juveniles are not separated from hardened criminals; there are several reports of arbitrary arrest and detention; maltreatment of inmates was common, abuse frequent, and torture occasional. Most prisons had no toilet facilities, and cells lacked water. Medical facilities were severely limited and food is grossly inadequate. Research have revealed that in countries whose penal philosophy is motivated by the rehabilitative philosophy, inmates are treated first as citizens with certain inalienable rights despite being in prison and not just as criminals who the society is better without.

Prisons in Nigeria are total institutions in the sense that it (Nigeria Prison system) exists with the full complement of legal, vocational, educational, religious and social services. Inmates are locked within their walls, segregated from the outside world, kept under constant scrutiny and surveillance, and forced to obey a strict code of official rules to avoid facing formal sanctions. They must conform to institutional dress and

personal appearance norms. Many human functions are strictly curtailed- heterosexual activity, friendship, family relationship, society, education, and participation in groups became seriously restricted or cut-off.

For effective achievement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's purpose of imprisonment therefore, the strategic role of information should not necessarily be seen as a prerogative of free citizen as there is a clear need for information even by prison inmates; more so that prison sentences have passed a long way from traditional custodial to modern reformatory prison. The typical conditions attached to imprisonment make information essential to connect the prison inmates with the outside world they are segregated from, as well as reinstating them back to their freedom for the purpose of character reformation, the ultimate goal of imprisonment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Information is seen as a critical resource because it does not only expand the possibilities of social, political, educational, and economic development of any country, but it also facilitates awareness and empowerment (Kamba 2009). Today, information is conceived as an important

resource that contributes significantly towards the development of individuals' prison inmates inclusive, especially in this era of information explosion. Information provides the main stay for the development of knowledge, the foundation for innovations, and the resources for an informed citizenry, and as a result, it becomes a key commodity for the progress of any society. Fox (2003) states that, those that are well informed are able to respond positively and appropriately to the demand of their environment. Information also strengthens their social networks. At this junction, it can be said that information, if well-articulated, could eradicate ignorance and provide enlightenment on how to achieve economic, educational, social, political, personal, cultural objectives and social-psychological wellbeing.

### **Information Needs of Prison Inmates**

Information is needed for the proper functioning of individuals, as well as to aid increase in the level of awareness, production, and accelerates community development. Kebede (2002) conceptualizes information needs as the uncertainty that arises in the individual, which they believe can be satisfied through information acquisition. However, for information to

reduce uncertainty of an individual, such an individual must possess the following attributes: believe there is uncertainty; convinced that information can remove that uncertainty; possess ability to determine the kind and sources of information required; acquired skill to access the information sources identified; and finally, ability to interpret and use the information retrieved.

Identifying an information need is the realization that our knowledge is "inadequate to satisfy a goal that [we] have" (Case, 2007). People respond by trying to find answers (Taylor, 1968), possibly in an attempt to reduce their uncertainty (Belkin, 1978) or to make sense of the situation and the world around them (Dervin, 1983). Nicholas Belkin is the proponent of the Anomalous State of Knowledge (ASK) concept for explaining how information needs arise. According to Belkin, (1982). An information need arises when an individual encounter an anomaly in state of knowledge (ASK).

Nacro (2009) categorize prison inmates' information needs or requirement into five broad areas as follows: The information needs concerning prison system and prison regime covers general

information about the prison and its administration or its regime; various departments operating within the prison; facilities available; healthcare and medication; information about further sources of help; information about housing and relinquishing of tenancy are considered to be some of the key areas of concern or information needs on first coming in to prison. Another information need of prison inmates is information needs during sentence that could help to keep them emotionally and psychologically healthy or stable during their sentences. The third information need of prison inmates is information about healthcare and medication especially those with one health challenge or the other could be a huge source of anxiety and distress. The fourth information need of prison inmates is information related to anxiety that is associated with prison inmates when approaching release, the fear and anxiety of “do it alone” upon release that used to characterize the life pattern of most of prisoners after their jail term. The last set of information need of prison inmates is information on equality and diversity. A higher percentage of prison inmates have problems with dyslexia, and so

most of the prison inmates have information needs that could not be met with the available sources and medium (NACRO 2009).

### **Objective**

Paper investigated the perceived information needs and the relationship between ability of prison inmates to identify their information needs and their psychological wellbeing status in south west Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

The paper was a survey study that relies solely on primary data which was collected through the use of a structured questionnaire to elicit information from 790 prison inmates that were randomly selected through proportionate random sampling technique. The instrument was face-validated by experts. Data analysis was done by means of simple percentage distribution with the Product Moment Correlation coefficient, to test the degree of relationship that exists between ability of prison inmates to identify their information need and their socio-psychological wellbeing.

**Result and Discursion**

**Table 1 The Degree to which Prison Inmates Identified their Information Needs**

Prison inmates information needs	Very High Degree [5]	High Degree [4]	Fairly High Degree	Low Degree [2]	None [1]	Mean	Stand. Dev.
Information on right to visitation.	190 (26.4%)	312 (43.3%)	206 (28.6%)	7 (0.9%)	5 (0.6%)	3.93	0.39
Information on how to be in contact with family members, when and how to see them.	212 (29.4%)	311 (43.2%)	115 (15.9%)	30 (41.2%)	52 (7.2%)	3.84	0.60
Information about next court sitting, what to expect in the next hearing	203 (28.2%)	102 (14.2%)	200 (27.8%)	70 (9.7%)	145 (20.1%)	3.76	0.79
Information on right of inmate to file suit against their keeper in case of maltreatment	201 (27.9%)	200 (27.8%)	205 (28.5%)	90 (12.5%)	24 (3.3%)	3.64	0.63
Freedom of religion	210 (29.2%)	153 (21.3%)	157 (21.8%)	55 (7.6%)	145 (20.1%)	3.31	0.69
Information on right of access to correspondence from attorney or family Information	175 (24.3)	200 (27.8%)	128 (17.8%)	75 (10.4%)	142 (19.7%)	3.27	0.65
Information on right to edible food	200 (27.8%)	100 (13.9%)	206 (28.6%)	114 (15.8%)	100 (13.9%)	3.26	0.79
Information on what to expect when leaving the prison	215 (29.9%)	75 (10.4%)	125 (17.4%)	202 (28.1%)	103 (14.3%)	3.13	0.86
Information on how to cope with change after leaving the prison.	140 (19.4%)	205 (28.5%)	35 (4.9%)	290 (40.3%)	50 (6.9%)	3.13	0.87
Information on the right to medical treatment	183 (25.4%)	145 (20.1%)	55 (7.6%)	111 (15.4%)	226 (31.4%)	3.03	0.86
Information on how to deal with stigma, thinking about the effect on the family members.	210 (29.2%)	113 (15.7%)	90 (12.5%)	102 (14.2%)	205 (28.5%)	3.01	0.86
Information on right to clean environment	124 (17.2%)	225 (31.3%)	75 (10.4%)	98 (13.1%)	174 (24.2%)	2.94	0.80
Information on how to deal with psychological and emotional feelings caused by stigmatisation	177 (24.6%)	126 (17.5%)	74 (10.3%)	121 (16.8%)	222 (30.8%)	2.88	0.87
Information about court sentences and what they mean	150 (20.8%)	110 (15.3%)	120 (16.7%)	125 (17.4%)	215 (29.9%)	2.79	0.87
Information on legal and financial assistance available	113 (15.7%)	107 (14.9%)	100 (13.9%)	225 (35.4%)	175 (24.3%)	2.66	0.89
Information about criminal Justice System	105 (14.6%)	275 (38.2%)	25 (3.5%)	110 (15.3%)	205 (28.5%)	2.64	0.97
Information on equal treatment or lack of racial segregation	101 (14.1%)	102 (14.2%)	104 (14.4%)	175 (24.3%)	238 (33.1%)	2.51	0.90
Information on right to procedural due process	111 (15.4%)	70 (9.7%)	21 (2.9%)	209 (29.1%)	309 (42.9%)	2.33	1.01
Information on right of access to legal system	57 (7.9%)	60 (8.3)	40 (5.5%)	261 (36.3%)	302 (41.9%)	2.32	1.09
Information on how to handle media attention most especially if domestic abuse occur to you and or your family member	112 (15.6%)	40 (5.6%)	70 (9.7%)	230 (31.9%)	268 (37.2%)	2.30	1.00
Information on right of access to legal correspondence	65 (90.3%)	120 (16.7%)	16 (2.2%)	223 (30.9%)	290 (40.3%)	2.23	0.98
Information on right to human dignity	107 (14.9%)	55 (7.6%)	45 (6.3%)	111 (15.4%)	302 (41.9%)	1.96	0.90

Table 1 revealed that Prisoners recognized the issue of visitation right as the

area in which their needs for information was highest (mean = 3.93). This was

followed by information on how and when they could contact their family members (mean = 3.84). Next to this were information on next court seating; what they should expect and how they should be prepared (mean = 3.76) as well as how to file suit against their keeper in the case of maltreatment (mean = 3.64). It can further be drawn from the table 4.3 that the prison inmates affirmed the freedom of religion (mean = 3.31); right of access to correspondence from attorney or family (mean = 3.27); right to edible food (mean = 3.26); what to expect when leaving the prison (mean = 3.13); how to cope with change after leaving the prison as other important aspects of their area of

information needs (mean = 3.13). However, least on what the prison inmates perceived as their needs for information was in the area of their right to be treated with dignity (mean = 1.96), right of access to legal correspondence (mean = 2.23); and how to handle media attention most especially if domestic abuse occurs to them and or family members (mean = 2.30). The information from the table further revealed that the weighted average estimated means of perceived prison inmates' information needs of 2.99 is greater than the expected mean of 1.96. Therefore, it can be concluded that overall, prison inmates in South West Nigeria's level of consciousness of their information needs was above average.

**Table 2: Relationship between prison inmates information need and their socio-psychological wellbeing**

Variable	Mean	Standard Dev.	N	r	p-value	Remark
Socio-Psychological Wellbeing of Prison Inmates in South-West, Nigeria	2.58	0.90	720	0.51	0.02	the null hypothesis Rejected is since $p\text{-value} < 0.05$
Information Need by the Prison Inmates in South-West, Nigeria	3.25	0.83				

The result in table 2 shows the correlation coefficient and significance *p-value* of ability to identify information need and socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates in South-West, Nigeria. The result

revealed that there was a negative degree of association between ability to identify information need and socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates in South-West, Nigeria ( $r = 0.51, p\text{-value} = 0.02, N =$

720). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between information need and socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates in South-West, Nigeria. The implication of this result is that, the more the prison inmates are able to identify their information needs the better off they will be in seeking ways of meeting those needs which could eventually lead to an improved socio-psychological wellbeing. This is in line with Harter (1992) who argues that to talk about individual's "information needs" is virtually the same as describing his or her "current psychological state" because need shift stochastically as each relevant piece of information is encountered.

Also other scholars conceived prison as where people are highly secluded from the rest of the world with entirely new order of control. (Goffman, 1961:22) The above conceptualizations as advanced by scholars are limited towards an understanding that a prison is a physical environment, and could be described geographically or spatially. Quite different from the physical conception, there are other schools of thought that are based on function, framework and label. From the functional perspective, a prison is perceived as a place

to punish offenders, where criminals that are removed from the society are dumped to protect the society from further criminal activities of the offenders; and a palace to rehabilitate, and teach offenders to be law abiding and productive after their release. Prisons are also perceived as a total institution, from the perspective of framework (1968).

While Okunola sees a total institution as a place unlike free environment or community that houses those who are socially rejected, insane or mentally retarded (Okunola, 1986), Goffman on the other hand conceptualized total institution as where there is a basic split between a large class of individuals who are restricted contact with the outside world and stereotypical behavioural pattern where social mobility is restricted. So from these points of view it could be conceived that the prison is a place for vagrants, who may pose actual danger to social life in the larger society, which pre-supposes that every person in the prison is a vagrant and irresponsible person (Obioha, 2011).

The ability of prison inmates to identify their information needs, is not significantly the only factor or determinant

of socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates. The low socio-psychological wellbeing could be as a result of exhausted infrastructure state which leads to an horrendous living conditions characterized with inadequacy of basic needs like beds and sanitation that are damaging to the physical and mental well-being of inmates and in many cases constitute clear threats to sound health. Other conditions such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate food and medicines and denial of contact sometimes with families and friends form the order of the day in almost all the Nigeria Prisons facilities.

In many Nigerian prisons, inmates sleep two to a bed or on the floor in filthy cells. Toilets are blocked and overflowing or simply non-existent, and there is no running water. As a result, disease is widespread. The Nigerian prison condition negates the UN Standard Minimum Rules. According to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (SMR), Rule 10: "All accommodation provided for the use of prisoners and in particular all sleeping accommodation shall meet all requirements of health, due regard being paid to climatic conditions and particularly to cubic content of air, minimum floor space, lighting,

heating and ventilation" Most of the people in Nigeria's prisons are too poor to be able to pay lawyers. Although governmental legal aid exists, there are too few legal aid lawyers for all the cases that require representation (Ogwezzy, 2011). The major challenge presently is that there is too much volume of awaiting trial, about 75% inmates; majority of the prisons in the study area, and this has to do with the problem of Criminal Justice System. It is only when the population of awaiting trial inmates reduces that the NPS will be able to properly carry out the rehabilitation and reformation work on inmates. One fact that is clear is that it is difficult for a Prison officer to train somebody who is awaiting trial in the prison, but he will train those convicted and sentenced.

### **Conclusion**

This study concluded that that prison inmates in the zone appeared to have a clear understanding of their information needs but this could not translate into an improved socio-psychological wellbeing. The study concluded that government need to reduce pre-trial detention and prison overcrowding by minimising pre-trial waits, and setting a maximum allowable wait time, implement a population capacity for all prisons based on



design capacity; upgrade prison infrastructure, rehabilitate and build facilities to improve the socio-psychological wellbeing of prison inmates.

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